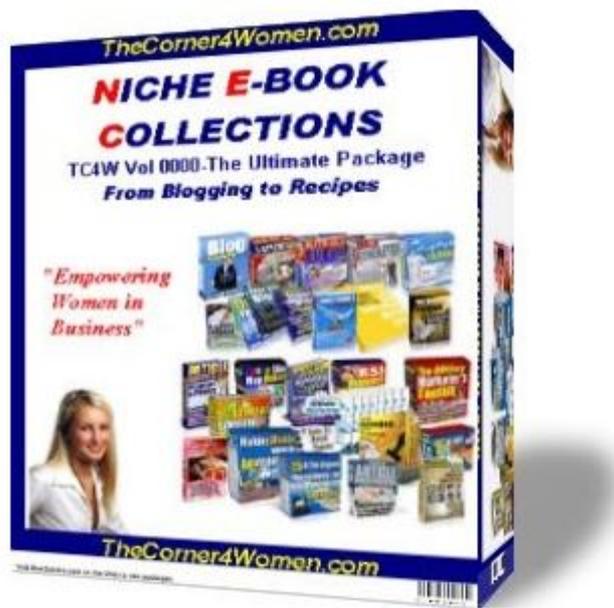


5 NOVELS WITH  
DEMONS, DJINN, WEREWOLVES,  
VAMPIRES, & ROGUE GODS...

BAD MAGIC CAN BE SO GOOD.



# BAD MAGIC



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# BAD MAGIC

5 NOVELS OF DEMONS, DJINN, WITCHES, WARLOCKS,  
VAMPIRES, AND GODS GONE ROGUE



CHRISTINE POPE   PIPPA DACOSTA   C. GOCKEL   A.W. EXLEY   C.J. ARCHER

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## ABOUT THE BOOKS

*Chosen* by Christine Pope

When a fatal fever nearly wipes out the entire world's population, the survivors of what became known as "the Dying" believe the worst is in the past ...

*Wolves* by C. Gockel

When Amy prays for help, Loki the Norse God of Mischief and Chaos isn't the savior she has in mind.

*Hidden Blade* by Pippa DaCosta

Kicked out of the underworld and cursed to walk this Earth for all eternity, Ace Dante is not the hero New York needs, but when Egyptian gods start killing, Ace is the city's only defense.

*The Last Necromancer* by C.J. Archer

For 5 years, Charlie has lived as a boy in the slums, but when she's arrested, her only means of escape lies with raising the dead. Now people are hunting her for her necromancy, but only one man succeeds in capturing her: a man known as Death, as compelling as he is frightening.

*Nefertiti's Heart* by A.W. Exley

1861. In a steam and mechanically powered London, feisty Cara Devon uses her dead father's secret notebook as a guide in her pursuit of powerful ancient artifacts.

Bad Magic

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CHOSEN



## THE DJINN WARS: BOOK 1

By Christine Pope

When a fatal fever nearly wipes out the entire world's population, the survivors of what became known as "the Dying" believe the worst is in the past. Little do they know...

In the aftermath of the Dying, survivor Jessica Monroe searches for sanctuary in a world unlike any she's ever known before. As fear and isolation envelop her, Jessica encounters the sensitive and helpful Jace, who she believes is another survivor. But Jace has a past and secrets of his own that's he not ready to disclose. Soon Jessica realizes that the destruction of humanity might actually be the first step in a larger, more complicated plan -- a plan that may very well involve her. Struggling to discover her role in a terrifying new world where everything has changed, she must decide who she can trust. But is the price for that trust just too high?

*To all those who have been left behind*

## CHAPTER 1



THE DYING BEGAN on my twenty-fourth birthday. Even now I truly believe that was nothing more than a sad coincidence, but if nothing else, the synchronicity helps me to remember when the end began. September twenty-sixth. There was a certain crispness in the air, a bite after the sun went down that told me fall was on the way, and winter soon to follow. We didn't get as cold in Albuquerque as they did in Santa Fe, but we could feel the shift in the seasons even so.

I was out with friends doing tequila shots at Zacatecas when the first reports about a strange illness in New York showed up on the evening news. Maybe I caught a glimpse on the TV in the bar, but I don't think so. To be blunt, I was pretty wasted. Getting plowed like that wasn't in my usual repertoire, but my friend Tori kept ordering round and after round, and since I wasn't driving, I didn't try too hard to stop her. Maybe in the back of my mind I was thinking that this year I was twenty-four, and twenty-five would come sliding along soon enough, and I might as well party with abandon while I still could. Sooner or later I'd have to be a good, responsible adult, but not on my birthday.

The next day was a Saturday. No school or work for me; I was getting my master's in English, mostly because I couldn't really figure out what else to do with myself, and staying in college for as long as possible seemed pretty

attractive compared to what awaited me in the real world. Since I'd been lucky enough to snag a T.A. position teaching lower-division English classes, I didn't have to worry about dragging my sorry hung-over ass into work, either. I had until Monday to recover.

Around noon I finally wandered into the kitchen, after taking a shower so long the hot water began to run out. Good thing we had a separate water heater for the little apartment over the garage where I lived, or I probably would have heard about it from my mother. All right, so I was still living at home, but the apartment gave me at least the illusion of independence, if not the real thing. It also allowed me to pay much lower rent than I would have otherwise. My parents didn't want to charge me anything — well, not my mother, anyway — but I'd insisted. It was a pittance, but it did cover the utilities and helped give them some extra wiggle room.

My mother had the little white TV on the kitchen counter turned on and was frowning as she watched some cable news talking head go on about a new illness that had begun appearing in New York and Los Angeles the day before. Reports were also coming in from up and down both coasts about this unnamed disease, which left its victims hospitalized with extremely high fevers.

“More Ebola?” I asked, blinking against the too-bright light in the kitchen and making a beeline for the fridge, where my mother always kept a pitcher of iced tea, even in the dead of winter.

“No, Jessica,” she said, that little pucker of worry still showing between her brows. “Something else. They don't know what it is.”

“Mmm.” In that moment, I was far more concerned with getting some caffeine into my bloodstream ASAP than worrying about the disease *du jour*. Those sorts of things never seemed to affect us here in Albuquerque. I wouldn't say we were exactly the city that America forgot, but if it weren't for *Breaking Bad*, I doubted most people would have spared my hometown a second thought.

From the side-eye my mother was giving me as I downed the iced tea, I guessed that the makeup I'd carefully applied earlier wasn't doing much to hide the evidence that I'd had, as they say, a gaudy night. But because I hadn't been driving and was more or less ambulatory this morning, she seemed to be giving me a pass.

"Dad have a shift today?" I inquired, after refilling my glass of iced tea and taking a few more gulps. Since I felt fortified enough to eat at that point, I popped the pitcher of tea back into the fridge and got a package of English muffins out of the breadbox.

"Yes." She didn't exactly sigh, but I could tell she wasn't thrilled, either.

My father was an officer with the Albuquerque police department. Still a beat cop after twenty-five years, too. He never had any interest in riding a desk, liked to be out on the streets. How my mother lived with it, day after day, I didn't know. My brother and I generally took our father's occupation in stride, since it had always been a part of our lives. But I knew my father had gone through the academy after he and my mother got married, and so it hadn't been an irretrievable fact of life when they were starting out as a couple. I know she wished he was more interested in becoming a detective so he wouldn't be so much in harm's way every day. That wasn't my father, though — even at fifty-two, he was lean and fit, and could probably put guys half his age through a wall if necessary.

At the time, the department was chronically short-handed, so my father picked up a lot of extra shifts. My mother never protested, since she knew he was doing it for us, putting more money in the bank, but she couldn't help worrying. Sometimes I wondered if my father knew exactly how stressed she was every time he left for work. I didn't think that would've stopped him, though, because as much as he loved her, he also loved his job and thought he was doing some genuine good.

"Well, at least it's a daytime shift," I told her, then put the two halves of the English muffin I'd just broken apart into the toaster oven.

“I know.” The worry line was still there, and it seemed to deepen as she returned her attention to the TV. The talking heads had been replaced by a doctor, a woman in her late forties who probably would have been pretty if she hadn’t look so tired.

“The illness manifests as a very high fever, spiking as high as 106 degrees. We’re having difficulty controlling the fever, even with analgesics and ice packs.” She paused, pushing a strand of dishwater-blonde hair back behind her ear. Obviously, she hadn’t bothered to primp before going to make her statement in front of the cameras. “No other symptoms have been observed at this point. If you or someone in your family comes down with a fever above 103, please call your doctor or go to the local emergency room.”

The camera cut to the reporter interviewing the doctor. “Dr. Leviton, any word on where this illness has come from? Is it connected to the doctors returning from West Africa?”

“No,” Dr. Leviton replied at once, looking almost annoyed. “None of the victims brought in to Mount Sinai or any of the other hospitals in the city appear to have any connection. Most of them haven’t even left New York during the past few months. Of those who have traveled, they’ve returned home from destinations as diverse as Tahiti, Paris, and Australia. Again, there doesn’t seem to be any connection.”

At that moment, a nurse came up and whispered in the doctor’s ear. Her expression shifted from annoyance to outright worry before she said quickly, “I’m sorry — a patient needs me. That’s all I can tell you right now.” And she turned away from the cameras and began hurrying down the hallway almost at a run, the nurse right behind her.

The camera panned back to the reporter, who was wearing what he probably thought was a look of measured concern...but to me, he just looked scared. I wonder what the nurse had said to the doctor.

Whatever it had been, the reporter didn’t mention it. He only said, “That’s the latest from Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. Again, as Dr.

Leviton stated, seek medical assistance immediately if you have a fever in excess of — ”

My mother turned off the TV. I arched an eyebrow at her, and she shook her head. “It’s always something,” she said. “I shouldn’t even have turned it on, I suppose, but I was hoping to catch some weather.”

“You’re not worried?”

“No.” She had her own glass of iced tea sitting on the counter, and she sipped from it as she watched me take the English muffin from the toaster oven and start spreading some butter on it. “Cable news always needs something to feed the monster. And unexplained diseases are a great way to keep people watching for updates.”

That was something I loved about my mother — she wasn’t afraid to call a spade a spade. Critical thinking was very important to her, which made sense, since she taught advanced composition and AP English at the same high school I’d attended. She made my father look like a starry-eyed dreamer.

“True,” I said, munching away at my English muffin. My abused stomach was all too glad of the carbs, which should help to soak up the remnants of the tequila I’d downed the night before. Good thing I only indulged like that every once in a great while. Most of the time I was more a mixed-drink kind of girl.

“They’ll play it up, and then it’ll quietly disappear, just like everything else they try to make a big deal of.” My mother finished the last of her tea and set the glass down on the counter. “Anyway, I’m about to go to the store. Anything you need?”

Mouth full of English muffin, I shook my head.

“Make sure you wipe down the counter when you’re done,” she admonished me, then picked up her purse and went out, apparently not concerned at all by what we’d just watched.

If only she’d been right. But it turned out that the worry of the doctor —

and the scared-looking reporter — was not misplaced.



THE NEXT MORNING, the news was full of reports of people getting sick up and down both coasts, and cases had been reported in the Midwest as well... Chicago...Detroit...St. Louis. And the disease, whatever it was, hadn't confined itself to the borders of the U.S. People were sick in London and Munich and Moscow and Singapore. Hospitals were filling up.

My father sat in his wing chair in the family room and watched the news with narrowed eyes. My mother seemed to be doing her best to ignore the television, and was instead trying to worm the latest details about his football practice schedule out of my brother Devin, who was far more interested in texting with his girlfriend than watching TV or explaining why he would have practice four days this week but five the next. A senior in high school, he was hoping his record as running back for the school's team might help him to eke out a scholarship or two when he went to college next year. We were doing okay, but college was expensive — as I knew only too well, with loans piling up every semester, loans I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to pay back. Supposedly having a master's would put me on a higher rung of the salary ladder when I did have to go out into the real world, but jobs were scarcer than the college counselors wanted us poor schmucks stuck in loan limbo to believe.

“Have you seen any sick people yet?” I asked my father. I was sitting at the game table in the corner of the family room, attempting to give my paper on gender representation in gothic novels a final read-through in hard copy to catch any typos. Unfortunately, my brain was jittering this way and that, worried about the reports on the news, praying they were exaggerating and fearing they were not. I couldn't even say why I was so worried, since most of the time I ignored these sorts of reports, knowing the diseases they

discussed rarely touched us here in our little corner of the Southwest. Something about the speed with which this one had spread bothered me, though. It bothered me a lot.

My father pointed the remote at the TV and turned down the volume, then shook his head. “Not with this thing. I’ve seen meth heads puking in back alleys and heroin addicts with the shakes because they couldn’t get a fix, but this one? I don’t think it’s here.”

The word “yet” hung in the air, unspoken, but no less ominous for that. More and more people were getting sick, and the first deaths had been reported on the East Coast. Not a lot, not yet, but although the news was trying to sugarcoat things, rumors had already begun to swirl across the Internet that no one who contracted this new disease survived. Which was crazy. Even Ebola — hell, even pneumonic plague, which had an insane mortality rate when not treated — wasn’t one-hundred-percent fatal. That just wasn’t possible.

“Maybe it won’t,” I said, although I knew even as I said them that the words were mere wishful thinking. “Maybe it’ll just...blow around us, or burn out before it gets here.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. His eyes wouldn’t meet mine, though, and I knew what he must be thinking.

I knew, because it was the same thing I was thinking. This wasn’t a matter of if, but rather when.



ON MONDAY when I arrived at school, I noticed the parking lot was noticeably less full than a university lot had any right to be this close to the beginning of the semester. And as I got out of my car and locked it, I saw that at least half the students walking around on campus wore surgical masks, the white disposable kind the news reports showed people in China wearing on

days when the smog was particularly bad.

Apparently, I hadn't gotten the memo. Nothing I could do about it now... except hope that a lot of the students in the Writing 1A class I was teaching that semester had decided to bail completely.

Most of them had, except for a couple of the over-achievers. Well, at least the kind of over-achievers I'd get in a Writing 1A class, which wasn't exactly packed full with people who'd gotten 5s on their AP English exams.

I scanned the empty seats and tried not to frown, reminding myself that I'd get my T.A. stipend no matter how many butts were in those chairs on a particular day. "Okay," I said, surprised at the slight tremor in my voice, "on Friday we were just starting to get into the difference between a topic sentence and a thesis statement...."

Taylor Ortiz, who was sitting in the front row, blinked at me in apparent incomprehension. For the first time, I noticed the beads of sweat standing out on her forehead, the way she seemed to be swaying in her seat. Beneath her warm-toned skin, she looked dead pale.

"Taylor, are you all right?" I asked.

She blinked again. "Um...."

Next to her, Troy Lenz lurched to his feet. "Holy shit! She's got it!"

"Troy — " I began, maybe meaning to reprimand him for swearing in class, possibly intending to tell him to sit down, but I was fairly certain neither of those admonishments would have had any effect. All around the class, those few students who'd been brave enough to show up shot straight out of their seats, looking at Taylor as if she'd just started vomiting pea soup or something. Never mind that vomiting was not one of the symptoms of "the Heat" — the street nickname given to the disease because of the extreme fevers it caused.

"Oh, God, get away from her," a girl in the back of the class said, and before I could even open my mouth to speak again, they were all bolting for the door, a couple of them even overturning their desks in their haste.

A few seconds later, I was alone in the classroom with Taylor, who continued to look around blankly, seeming unaware that she'd managed to clear the space in about five seconds flat.

A cowardly part of me wanted to take off as well, but I told myself I couldn't do that — I was the teacher (okay, the T.A.), and I had some sort of responsibility to make sure she was all right. Besides, if she really did have the Heat, then I'd already been exposed, and there wasn't anything I could do about it now.

I approached her and put a hand on her forehead. Jesus Christ. She felt as if she was on fire from within. No wonder she was having a hard time focusing on anything. She was so hot that her brain must be cooking right inside her skull.

The university hospital was all the way across campus. I was stronger than I looked, thanks to a childhood spent hiking and walking and going to the shooting range with my father, but I knew there was no way I could get Taylor all that distance by myself.

Shaking, I went to my desk and pulled my purse out of the drawer where I always stowed it. My fingers trembled as well while I got out my phone. Thank God it wasn't too much work to dial 911.

It rang...and rang...and rang. Panic started to set in. I could feel my heart beginning to pound and my own nervous sweats starting, although I didn't think I was running a fever. Not yet, anyway.

Then, at last: "Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

I cleared my throat. "Hi, my name is Jessica Monroe, and I'm in Building 81 on the UNM campus. One of my students is very sick and unable to walk. I'm pretty sure she needs to go to the hospital."

"Symptoms?"

"A very high fever."

I could have sworn I heard a muttered "shit" at the other end of the line, followed by a long pause. "Ms. Monroe, we are experiencing longer-than-

normal response times for ambulances due to heavy volume. We will get someone out to you, but it may be a while.”

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what that meant. Maybe it was lagging behind, but the Heat had finally come to Albuquerque.



I SAT WITH TAYLOR, since I didn't know what else to do. She held on to the edge of her desk as if it was the only thing keeping her anchored to reality, her head first lolling this way and then that, her glassy dark eyes staring off into the distance, as if fixed on some object only she could see. It was frightening enough just being close to someone who was that sick, but even more frightening was how detached from reality she seemed to be. We Monroes were a healthy lot, and so I didn't have a lot of experience being around sick people. Devin got a horrible stomach flu one year, and we had colds and coughs from time to time, but nothing like this.

Sweat was dripping down Taylor's forehead and staining the tight T-shirt she wore. More rivulets of perspiration ran down into her cleavage, but I doubted anyone would have found the sight particularly sexy. For myself, I could only think of the millions of microbes she must be spreading in every direction each time she shifted in her seat. One time she shook like a dog, and little droplets of sweat sprayed everywhere, a few hitting me right in the face.

It took every ounce of willpower I had not to swear out loud. Belatedly, I realized that I had a partially drunk bottle of water in my purse. I doubted that would do much to help her, but at least it was something. And I had a feeling she was far past worrying about any germs I might have left behind on the bottle.

“Taylor?” I asked. No recognition in those strained dark eyes, which were still staring out at something only visible to her. “How about some water?”

She blinked. Maybe it was the only way she could answer, or maybe it

was simply an involuntary reflex. Either way, it gave me an excuse to get up from the desk next to hers, to go to my purse and fetch the bottle of water. As I approached her, I could almost feel the heat emanating from her, impossibly, inhumanly warm.

What must her temperature be? I had no way of knowing, but I wondered how anyone could stay alive and conscious — even the fragile consciousness she was clinging to right now — while suffering such a high fever.

“Taylor, here’s the water.” She didn’t seem capable of taking the bottle herself, so I held it to her lips. For a second she didn’t move, only let the opening rest against her mouth, and then some lizard-brain function must have kicked in, because she latched onto it and drank greedily while I tilted the rest of the bottle’s contents into her mouth. Within a few seconds, all the water was gone.

“That’s all,” I told her, but she didn’t seem to understand, even lifting one hand to grab at the bottle when I began to pull it away. “Just rest, Taylor. Please. The ambulance will be here soon.”

That, of course, was a lie. I had no idea what “longer-than-normal response times” might mean, since I’d never called an ambulance for anyone in my life. My father might know, but even if I could get a hold of him, which I doubted, he’d probably read me the riot act for not getting out of there the second Taylor started to display symptoms. Or maybe not. He was pretty big on the whole “serve and protect” mentality.

Right now, though, I had a feeling I was on my own.

I pulled my cell phone out of my jeans pocket where I’d stowed it and looked at the time. Fifteen minutes since I’d called 911. It felt roughly ten times that. A quarter-hour response time wasn’t great, but it also didn’t feel too outside what might be considered normal. I might be waiting much, much longer than this. Biting my lip, I went to my contacts list and pushed the button for campus security, since I figured they might be faster than the paramedics, but the line was busy. I ended the call and tried again. Still

nothing. Damn it.

As if finally registering that there was no more water, Taylor slumped back in her seat, head tilting to one side. Her body was twitching feebly. Some kind of convulsion? Again, my lack of experience with any kind of serious illness stymied me. Maybe it would be better for her to lie down, but the linoleum floor had to be far less comfortable than the chair. Since it had been a warm day, nearly eighty degrees, she didn't have a sweater or jacket that I could lay her on, and I hadn't brought one with me, either.

Never before in my life had I felt so useless, standing there and watching as the sweat rolled off her and she continued to jerk helplessly, like her body was being controlled by some unseen puppeteer. I went to the browser on my phone, thinking that maybe I could click over to WebMD or something and see if there was anything else I could do to help her, but no matter how many times I backed out of the browser app and tried to refresh it, I couldn't get the damn thing to connect. It wasn't the first time my phone had acted up like this, but in general I had good connectivity here at school. I had a feeling the phone wasn't the real problem.

But no, I didn't want to think about that. I didn't want to think about what might be going on outside the door to my classroom, what might be happening to my parents or my brother.

*No, I thought fiercely. They're fine. They have to be.*

Just when I was about to give up and dial 911 again, the door burst inward, and two men carrying a stretcher entered the classroom. *Thank God you're here* died on my lips, because they weren't wearing the usual dark jackets and pants of EMTs, but full head-to-toe yellow biohazard suits, the kind of gear I'd seen on TV on doctors and nurses treating people with Ebola.

They went straight to Taylor, extricated her from her desk, and laid her down on the stretcher. Once they were done with that and she was strapped in, one of them turned toward me.

"Name?"

I guessed they were asking about Taylor, not me. “Taylor Ortiz,” I told him. “That’s her purse right there on the floor. It should have her I.D. in it.”

The EMT grabbed her purse by the strap and lifted it from the floor, then extracted her wallet from within. He opened it, glanced at her driver’s license, and then nodded and dropped the wallet back in her purse. “You?”

“Me?” I blinked at him, then responded, “Jessica Monroe. I’m the T.A.”

“How are you feeling?”

*Scared.* “Fine. That is, I don’t feel like I’m running a fever or anything.” Did that even matter? I hadn’t heard what the incubation period was for the Heat, but I assumed it didn’t have instantaneous onset. No disease did...or did it?

“Go straight home,” the EMT said. “No contact with anyone else. If you start to exhibit symptoms, don’t call your doctor. Go straight to the hospital.”

“But....” The word trailed off as I attempted to gather my thoughts. Something about this didn’t feel right. No, wait, scratch that — *nothing* about it felt right. I’d been exposed to someone who obviously had the Heat. Shouldn’t they be quarantining me or something?

The EMT’s hooded head tilted to one side as he waited for me to spit it out.

I said, “If she’s sick, haven’t I been infected, too? Don’t I, I don’t know, have to be isolated or something?”

“We don’t have the facilities for that. Best thing to do is go home and stay away from other people. If you do get sick, get to the hospital. That’s all I can tell you.”

Then he nodded at his compatriot, and they both crouched down and lifted the stretcher, hauling Taylor out of the room. It was only after the door had shut behind them that I realized they’d left her purse behind, as if who she was didn’t matter.

My phone went off then, and I looked down at the text that had just appeared on my home screen. *Due to health emergency, all classes are*

*suspended indefinitely. We ask that all students go to their residences immediately and remain there until further notice.*

So the university's student alert system had finally kicked in.

Too bad that it was already too late.

## CHAPTER 2



THE CAMPUS WAS MOSTLY DESERTED when I emerged from the classroom at a little before noon and locked the door behind me. In a way that was good, as at least I didn't have to play dodge 'em with anyone who looked infected. But there was still a long line of cars waiting to get out of the parking lot, and I sat there, worry mounting as the minutes ticked past.

What did it feel like when the Heat came over you? A sudden spike in temperature? Or was it a slow, gradual burn, until you, like a lobster in a pot, ended up boiling in your own juices?

I didn't know. And all this had happened so quickly that there hadn't been much detail on the news, either. Or maybe they'd repressed what they did know, lest they throw everyone into a panic.

At last I was able to pull out on Central, then headed west. Did I dare take the freeway to get home? All around me, the streets were choked, full of people obviously trying to get to their own homes, so I had a feeling the freeway was a very bad idea. Instead, I ended up zigzagging my way out of the downtown area, finally making it over to 12<sup>th</sup> so I could head north. A few more zigzags, and then I was back in a residential section, although still a few miles from home. There was less traffic here, although I noticed more cars on the streets than there normally would have been in the middle of the day when everyone should have been at work.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips as I pulled up in front of the house and I saw my mother's Escape parked in the driveway. No sign of Dad's Grand Cherokee, or the police cruiser he sometimes brought home. But at least my mother was here.

I scrambled out of the car, then hurried down the driveway to let myself in the back door. We almost never came and went through the front, mostly because my mother was unnecessarily fussy about the Berber carpet in the living room. Better to track dirt through the kitchen, which had abused linoleum she'd been wanting to get rid of for years.

"Mom?" I called out as I came in through the service porch, then on into the kitchen.

"Jess?" she called back. I heard feet approaching from the hallway that ran down the middle of the house. When she came around the corner, I saw that her face was dead white. She let out a little choked sob when she saw me. "Oh, thank God."

At any other time her reaction might have startled me, but not now. Not after what had just happened to Taylor Ortiz. "I'm fine," I said. "Only — "

Her brows drew together. "Only?"

"A girl in my class — she had it. The EMTs came and got her, but they sent me home. It's probably better if you don't come too close."

"Oh, God," she said, this time invoking the name in horror rather than in relief. She appeared to gather herself, voice strained as she went on, "How do you feel?"

I paused to take stock. "Okay, actually," I told her. It was true, too. Yes, I was a little shaken after being that close to someone that sick, and then having to fight my way home through hordes of panicky motorists, but otherwise, I felt fine. No fever. No chills. No sweats.

Despite what I'd just told her about staying away, she took a step closer. Motherly instinct, I supposed. She had to reassure herself that I was all right and not merely take my word for it. But because she was a smart woman, she

only came close enough to see for herself that I wasn't flushed or feverish or sweaty.

After a long pause, she nodded. "I keep flipping through the stations, trying to see if someone is giving out any concrete information. What the incubation period is. How infectious the disease is. The — the mortality rate." She pulled in a breath. "And there's nothing, except that the situation is being handled and that people should stay home whenever possible. What kind of a policy is that?"

I didn't know. I would have assumed that in most cases of infection, the CDC would have send out teams to quarantine people and triage those affected, would do everything possible to keep the disease from spreading any further. Or at least, that was what I'd observed on TV when the news covered outbreaks of bird flu or whatever. But I'd seen no real government presence on my way home today, no squads of experts in biohazard gear, no blacked-out SUVs speeding down the street, no...nothing. It was as if this thing was spreading so quickly the government couldn't begin to contain it.

That thought was too frightening, though, and I quickly pushed it away. Instead, I asked, "Dad? Devin?"

She glanced away from me, her mouth tight. "I can't reach your father. I sent a text to Devin, telling him to come home, but he hasn't answered me. I called the school and got a recording that classes had been canceled and everyone sent home. So my best guess is he's taking the opportunity to have a little unsupervised time with Lori."

Lori was his girlfriend. The two had been joined at the hip since spring break last year, and I had a feeling my mother's guess was all too correct. "Did you try calling her house?"

"Of course I did. No answer. And I don't have her cell number — Devin would never give it to me. At the time, I didn't think it was worth nagging him about it. Now...."

"I'm sure it's fine," I said quickly. No point in having my mother worry

any more than absolutely necessary. “If they’re at Lori’s house, then at least they’re inside and away from other people.”

“True, but....”

I knew she would fret about this until Devin appeared, whenever that was. In that moment, fury flashed through me, that he would be so selfish as to go off and bang his girlfriend or whatever while the rest of us were worried sick about him. Uttering such a thing out loud would just set my mother off that much more, though, so I only said, “Why don’t you have some tea while you’re waiting? I need to go up to my apartment and wash my hands and get straightened up, but I’ll be right back down.”

Her eyes were far away, but she nodded. “That sounds like a good idea.”

I sent her what I hoped was an encouraging smile, then went out the back door and down the driveway to the detached garage. The apartment built over it was small, just a little over four hundred square feet, so there was a tiny living room, a spot under one window for a table and two chairs, a kitchenette, and then the bedroom and bath, which was so small I could reach out from the shower stall and open the door if I had to. But at least it was mine, and it felt good to escape there, to hurry up the stairs and run to the bathroom so I could turn on the water as hot as I could stand it, then let it run over my hands as I scrubbed them again and again with antibacterial soap.

As if that would make a difference. It was better than nothing, though, and I couldn’t think of what else to do. My eyes stared back at me from within the mirror, wide and dark, shadowed with worry. I was pale, but I didn’t look sick.

After blotting my hands on a towel, I reached up and felt my forehead. It didn’t seem overly warm, but I’d always heard you couldn’t really detect your own temperature by doing that. So I opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out the digital thermometer I kept there. After cleaning it off with some rubbing alcohol, I popped it in my mouth and waited.

The seconds went by with agonizing slowness. I wandered out to the

living room and sat down on the futon, wondering whether I should turn on my TV, see if I could find anything worth watching. But then, if my mother had been unable to, what made me think I would have any better luck?

Instead, I stared out the window at the tree outside, a honey locust, its leaves just beginning to turn yellow. It was warm during the day, but the nights were already cold. The tree knew its time was coming.

Did I?

The thermometer beeped, indicating it was done measuring my temperature, and I pulled it out of my mouth. For the longest moment, I only held it, scared to look at what the readout might say. Finally, I forced myself to glance down.

97.6.

My breath whooshed out of me, and I dropped the thermometer on top of the coffee table. No temperature at all. On the low side, actually.

But what did that mean? Once you were infected, how long did it take for your fever to start building?

I didn't know. All I did know was that I wasn't sick. Not yet, anyway. And I'd left my mother alone long enough. Even if I couldn't sit next to her, I would be close enough so we could talk, and that would help to keep her from worrying until Devin came home. Which he would, eventually, after he'd gotten his rocks off. I loved my little brother, but sometimes he wasn't the most considerate of other people's feelings. Well, other people who weren't his girlfriend, that is.

After closing the door to my apartment but not locking it, I went back into the main house, past the washer and dryer and the overflow pantry where my mother put all the big containers of items from Costco, the sort of stuff that was "such a good deal she couldn't pass it up." What in the world we were going to do with that much tomato sauce or rolled oats, I had no idea.

She must have turned the television on, because I could hear it blathering away as I approached. "...everyone is encouraged to stay inside and away

from people with obvious signs of infection. If a fever presents, take analgesics such as aspirin or ibuprofen. Ice packs are also effective. If the fever rises to above 103 degrees Fahrenheit, go to your nearest emergency room....”

I stopped dead at the entrance to the kitchen. Not because I didn't want to get any closer to my mother, but because I knew it really didn't matter whether I was infected or not.

Her body was sprawled on the kitchen floor, limp, one of her low-heeled pumps hanging half off her foot. Panic flashed through me, so quick and sudden that I could actually feel my knees beginning to buckle. I grabbed on to the doorframe for support, telling myself I didn't have time to lose it right now. After swallowing a huge gulp of air, I said, “Mom?”

No reply, but then I heard her breathing, rapid and shallow, like our old dog Sadie after a particularly strenuous walk. We'd lost Sadie last winter.

Stupid of me to be thinking of that now.

I went into the kitchen and knelt down next to my mother, reaching out to touch her shoulder. The skin under the silk blouse she'd worn to work was almost scorching, or at least it felt that way to my shaky fingers. “Mom?”

The faintest of groans. It wasn't much, but it was a sign that she could still hear me, hadn't yet retreated so far that she couldn't even react to outside stimuli.

Obviously, I couldn't leave her here. My parents' bedroom was upstairs, and I quailed at the thought of trying to move her all the way up the flight of stairs that led to the second story. Maybe I could just lay her down on the couch in the family room? At least until my father got home, and then the two of us could get her properly in bed. Even then I knew calling an ambulance was pointless. I couldn't count on anyone to come, so I figured the best thing to do was to get her as comfortable as possible.

I took her by the shoulders, and, as gently as I could, rolled her over so she was facing upward. She whimpered during this procedure, sounding so

unlike herself that I felt a frightened little sob escape my throat. Luckily, she was far enough gone that she couldn't really hear me.

Telling myself that this was the best thing to do, that I couldn't leave her on the floor, I half-carried, half-dragged her into the family room and then somehow manhandled her up onto the couch. The scary thing was that she didn't even protest, didn't try to push back against me or do anything, really. It was like moving a rag doll around — a 130-pound rag doll, anyway.

But at last she was safely on the couch. I took the throw that always lay folded over one arm and spread it out across her. Another one of those little whimpers, as if she thought that would make her too hot, but knew she had to have some sort of covering. Then she subsided, eyes shut tight, chest rising and falling far too rapidly.

All of the first aid supplies were in the medicine cabinet in the upstairs bathroom, the one Devin and I used to share before I moved into the apartment over the garage. After taking another look at my mother and deciding she should be okay for a minute or so, I hurried up the stairs, moving as quickly as I could without actually running. When I got to the bathroom, I opened the cabinet, took out the jumbo container of Kirkland ibuprofen, and shook a couple into my hand. I also took out the thermometer. Yes, it was obvious my mother had a high fever...but *how* high? Past the magic number of 103?

I had to hope not.

I dashed back down the stairs. She hadn't moved, although I noticed she'd pushed the throw off her chest, down to her waist. Her blouse and skirt were getting wrinkled, but I couldn't do much about that. Another thing my father would have to help me with when he got home.

If he got home.

*Don't go there, I told myself. He'll be here. He will.*

I just didn't know what he'd find when he eventually did make it home.

The pills were cool in my palm. I realized then that I'd forgotten to get

any water for my mother to take them with, so I went into the kitchen, filled a glass halfway, and went back out to the family room. She hadn't moved, was lying there twitching and shaking the way Taylor Ortiz had.

"Mom," I said softly. She didn't seem to acknowledge me, so I didn't know if she'd really heard me or not. Maybe my saying her name was to reassure myself as much as it was to let her know I was there. "Here's some water, and some pills for your fever."

I slipped my arm under her shoulders and lifted her a few inches, just enough so I could bring the water to her lips. Like Taylor, she drank greedily, gulping so much that I had to pull the glass away so there would be enough left for her to take the pills.

"Okay, first one," I told her, slipping one of the ibuprofen capsules between her lips. It just sort of sat there on her tongue, so I poured more water into her mouth. Her swallow reflex cut in, and she downed the pill without too much trouble. The second one was a little more difficult, but she did finally take it.

After that procedure, I realized I should've taken her temperature first, that the water might make the reading inaccurate. Since there wasn't anything I could do about it at the moment, I sat down in one of the armchairs, figuring if I waited a few minutes, it would probably be safe to try the thermometer.

Waiting was bad, though. If all I was doing was sitting there and watching my mother shake and shiver on the couch, then I had plenty of time to think...and thinking was the last thing I wanted to do. My thoughts chased one another around and around, worrying at each other, fretting, biting. What if my father never came home? What if Devin had fallen sick at Lori's? What if they were *both* sick?

And above all, *Why isn't anyone helping us?*

I could feel myself starting to shake, but I didn't think it was from a fever. No, I guessed it was just good old-fashioned fear with an extra helping of uncertainty. Clenching my hands together, I willed them to stop trembling.

My mother was probably too out of it to really notice, but I didn't want my fingers shaking when I finally did take her temperature.

Since I couldn't think of anything else to do, I picked up the remote for the TV and switched it on, quickly lowering the volume so it wouldn't disturb my mother. As I flipped from channel to channel, I didn't see anything that was remotely reassuring. More talking heads, discussing self-quarantine procedures and dispensing advice how you shouldn't go out or come into contact with anyone if you had any symptoms, and if you did come down with a fever, to make sure you wore a mask or tied some kind of barrier over your nose and mouth when it came time to go to the emergency room. And all of them looked pale and strained, and were giving the side-eye to one another when they thought the others weren't looking, as if trying to detect signs that one of their fellow newscasters might be starting to show symptoms. On one channel, I caught a pretty young woman who didn't look much older than I sending furtive glances somewhere off-camera, as if at someone who was standing by and monitoring what they were all saying. That couldn't be good.

With all the people being sent to emergency rooms, hospitals had to be overwhelmed. I wondered how many people were sick, and how many were like me, exposed but still asymptomatic. Maybe fifty-fifty? I couldn't even begin to guess. All I did know was that I didn't see how hospitals could even begin to keep up.

Annoyed that all the stations were repeating the same useless information, I turned off the television and picked up the thermometer. My mother really didn't want to take it, but after a bit of wrestling, I got it shoved between her lips and more or less under her tongue. Her skin felt clammy and hot at the same time, which I doubted was a good sign. Maybe two ibuprofen weren't enough. Maybe I should have given her three, or even four.

Or maybe I could have poured the whole damn bottle down her throat, and it still wouldn't have done a bit of good.

Clenching my jaw, I sat and looked out the window at the trees moving in the gentle September breeze, at the sparrow who landed on one branch and cocked his head in my direction, almost as if he could see me sitting inside, watching him. The window in the family room faced out onto the side yard and the fence that separated us from the Montoyas next door. I didn't see any movement over there, which most days wouldn't have been that unusual. It was the middle of the day; both the Montoyas worked full-time, and their kids were in grade school. But the schools were closed, and it seemed as if most places of business were shutting up and sending their employees home as well.

Were they home, but ill? Or well enough, but hiding, not wanting to take the risk of being exposed? I didn't know, and I had my hands full here. If my father came home, I'd probably go over and check on them, but until then....

The thermometer beeped at me, and I gently drew it from my mother's mouth and looked at the readout. Then I squeezed my eyes shut, certain they had to be reading it wrong, that they were tricking me in some way.

I opened them again.

*106.8.*

Was that possible?

I supposed it had to be, since that was what the thermometer was saying. I also had a feeling that two ibuprofen might not be cutting it here. Okay, on the news they were saying to apply cool cloths, so that seemed to be the next step. Well, right after I called 911. Maybe that wouldn't do any good, but right then I was so scared by my mother's temperature that I had to at least try to get help.

After I set the thermometer back down on the coffee table, I got up and went to the kitchen, where my parents still had an old-fashioned corded phone mounted on the wall. Devin and I had both laughed at it, but my father had given us the evil eye and said that land lines were way more reliable than cell phones, and that one day we might be very glad of that old push-button

phone.

I lifted the receiver from its cradle, but when I put it to my ear, all I heard was a fast busy signal, the kind you get when the phone service is out. Scowling, I jiggled the hook, then listened again. Still nothing. So much for good old-fashioned technology.

My cell phone was upstairs in my apartment, still in my purse where I'd dropped it on the floor by the door. I really didn't want to leave my mother alone, but I needed to see if the cell network was functioning any better than the land one.

After peeking into the family room and reassuring myself that she was resting as well as she could be, all things considered, I let myself out and climbed the steps to my apartment two at a time. Since I hadn't locked the door, it only took a few seconds for me to get in, pull the phone out of my purse, and dial 911.

"We're sorry — all circuits are currently busy. Please try again later."

The computer-generated voice sounded positively snotty. Somehow I resisted the urge to fling my cell phone against the wall, since I knew that wouldn't do any good. Instead, I stuffed it into the pocket of my jeans and hurried back to the house. I sure would try again later, but in the meantime, I had to do what I could to take care of my mother.

Her condition didn't seem to have worsened during the couple of minutes I was gone. That was something. I got a few dish towels out of the drawer and dampened them with cold water, then went into the family room and laid them across her forehead. Some of the moisture dripped on her gray silk blouse, leaving damp blotches. I hoped they wouldn't leave stains.

*Seriously, you're worrying about a couple of stains at a time like this?*

I supposed I was fixating on that, just because it was easier to worry about something like ruining my mother's clothes rather than the big-picture stuff, like how none of the phones were working. Yes, I'd heard how that could happen after some kind of disaster, but Albuquerque wasn't really

prone to disasters, whether natural or man-made.

The back door slammed, and my mother started, then began twitching and shaking again. Damn. And I'd just gotten her to a place where she seemed to be more or less resting comfortably. But maybe that slamming door meant my father had come home.

I readjusted the damp towel on my mother's forehead, then got up and went into the kitchen. Devin was getting a glass out of the cupboard as I entered. He looked fine — no flushed cheeks, no sheen of sweat — and in that moment I wasn't sure whether I wanted to hug him in relief or punch him in the arm for making us worry like that about him.

"Where the hell have you been?" I demanded.

"Lori's," he replied, going to the refrigerator and getting some ice and water out of the door.

"Well, you scared the crap out of Mom. She couldn't get a hold of you —

He shrugged. "I sent a text. Maybe it didn't go through. Anyway, they sent us home, and Lori couldn't get in touch with either of her parents, so she was freaking out. So I stayed with her."

"Oh," I said, feeling some of my righteous indignation begin to seep away. Lori was an only child, and a little coddled, so I could see why she'd be more than ordinarily upset at not being able to contact her parents. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, her mom finally got a text through and said she was on her way home, so I thought I'd better get over here." His gaze sharpened on me, and I wondered what he saw. Lord knows, I was starting to feel kind of overloaded. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but Mom isn't," I replied bluntly. Maybe too bluntly, because he almost dropped the glass he was holding.

"She's — she's not sick, is she?"

"Yes. She just got the fever about a half hour ago."

Beneath his end-of-summer tan, my brother's face drained of all color. "She can't be sick!"

Right then he didn't look like the big, broad-shouldered running back, but a scared kid. I wanted to go hug him, but lately he'd been scorning such sisterly displays of emotion, so I wasn't sure how he would react. Instead, I kept my voice calm as I told him, "She had a high fever, but I got her to take some ibuprofen, and she's resting now with some cold cloths on her head. So far, so good."

That sounded very reasonable, very steady. Never mind that I didn't really believe it. If this disease really was at all survivable, that information would've been all over the news by now. The complete radio silence on the actual facts of the disease told me that it was beyond dire...it was catastrophic.

My words didn't seem to reassure Devin. He gave me a stricken look and then went into the family room, where he stopped a few feet away from the couch and stared down at our mother. She seemed to be sleeping, but something seemed off about her face, as if her cheeks and eye sockets had begun to look sunken, far too shadowed.

No, that couldn't be right. It had to be a trick of the lighting in the room; I'd pulled the drapes almost closed so the afternoon light that was beginning to slant into the space wouldn't disturb her. Just some sort of strange optical illusion.

Only I feared that wasn't it at all.

Devin appeared to be of the same mind. He stood there, hands hanging helplessly at his sides, as he stared down at her. Finally, he whispered, "She's going to die, isn't she?"

In that moment, I was furious with him for giving voice to that thought, as if by saying it out loud he could somehow cause it to happen. "No, she's not," I shot back, my voice shaking.

"She is," he insisted, and right then I was glad that she was more or less

comatose. At least that way she couldn't possibly hear what we were saying. "When I was over at Lori's house, we were on the computer, trying to get more information. A lot of the sites we went to were down, but we found one with this guy on video saying that everyone who catches it dies, and that the government is shutting down anyone who tries to spread the truth."

I recalled that one blonde newscaster, and the way her gaze kept flickering nervously to something — or someone — off-screen. FBI...or CIA...or NSA...agents, standing there and watching to make sure the reporters all said the same thing?

At any other time, that would have felt like rank paranoia. Now, though....

"That's crazy," I said, although I didn't sound all that convinced, even to myself. "No disease is one hundred percent fatal."

"That we know of," Devin shot back. Then his face twisted as he looked back down at our mother, at her strangely waxy and sunken features. "Is there anything else we can do? Like, I don't know, ice packs or something?"

"Maybe," I said. It was worth a try. Covering her in ice packs would complete the ruin of her outfit, but I doubted that mattered much at the moment.

Glad to have something to do, Devin and I went to the kitchen and got out some big gallon-sized plastic storage bags and started filling them with ice. That seriously depleted our current ice supply, but I knew the ice-maker would start chugging away in an attempt to make up the deficit.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as we zipped up the last bag.

"Fine," he said. "I mean, I feel...weird...but I don't feel sick."

That about sized it up. Weird, but not sick. The world was tilting beneath us, but neither of us knew what to do about it.

I set the bags I carried down on the coffee table, not worried about whether the cold and the moisture would mar the wooden surface. Such concerns seemed miles away from where we were right now. "I want to

check her temperature again first,” I told Devin, picking up the thermometer and slipping it into our mother’s mouth. She squirmed a bit, but I held firm, and she subsided. We waited as the seconds went by, and when the thermometer beeped, I was pulling it out before it was even done.

When I looked at the readout, I couldn’t believe what it said.

“One hundred and seven point two,” I read as my stomach began to knot. So much for the ibuprofen and the cold towels.

Devin’s dark eyes were practically round, they widened so much. “That’s not possible...is it?”

“Well, it’s possible to have a fever that high,” I replied, then stopped there. It wouldn’t do much good to point out that such an unnaturally high fever could result in brain and organ damage...and that there wasn’t a damn thing we could do to stop it, apparently. I drew in a breath and added, “Let’s get the ice on her. Obviously, the cold compresses weren’t enough.”

He nodded, and I picked up the bags full of ice I’d placed on the coffee table. I wasn’t even sure of the best positioning of the ice packs, but I figured she’d need one on her head, and some up against her sides, maybe on her chest....

The bag in my left hand went on her forehead, and the one in my right down on her chest. She winced, although her eyes didn’t open. The bag I’d put on her chest shifted slightly, and I repositioned it. “Give me yours,” I told Devin, guessing that he wouldn’t feel very comfortable about setting bags full of ice on his mother’s body. From the alacrity with which he handed them off, I had a feeling my guess was correct. I placed those two on either side of her waist, trying to position them in such a way that they’d get maximum contact with her torso. It was the core that needed to get cooled down. Or at least, I thought that was how it worked.

She didn’t like it, I could tell — she kept shifting slightly, trying to get away from the cold, but she was so weak that her movements were ineffectual. Still, if she moved around much more than that, I’d have to find

some way to secure the ice packs in place. There had to be some rope or twine or something like that in the garage.

I wondered if I should send Devin out to fetch it. He was staring down at our mother, glassy-eyed, as if not quite able to take in what was happening to her.

Then I saw the way he swayed on his feet, and a wave of cold that had nothing to do with the ice packs I'd just handled washed over me.

"Devin?" I asked, and it seemed it took him far longer than it should for him to glance over at me.

His pupils appeared to have dilated until they were so large that the black almost swallowed up the warm brown of his irises. "Huh?"

"How do you feel?" I enunciated the words carefully so there would be no chance for him to misunderstand.

"Um...weird."

I went to him and put my hand on his forehead. He didn't flinch away, which told me something was very wrong. Actually, the clammy heat against my palm told me everything I needed to know.

When I spoke, the words sounded as if they were coming from very far away, as if someone other than myself was saying them. "Devin, why don't you go upstairs and get into bed? I'll bet you're tired."

"Yeah, I am kind of tired," he mumbled, then turned with excruciating slowness and began moving toward the hallway and the staircase that led to the second floor. I prayed he'd be able to get there under his own power. My mother had been difficult enough to move. I knew there was no way I'd be able to haul 170 pounds of running back up those stairs.

But somehow he did it, putting one foot hesitatingly after the other, until at last he reached the upstairs hall and stumbled into his room. I followed, giving him his space, and when he collapsed onto his bed, legs hanging off the side, I wanted to let out a sigh of relief...but I didn't.

How could I, when I knew my brother had just been handed a death

sentence?

## CHAPTER 3



I DID GO IN, and untie his shoes and pull them off. Then I waited as he wriggled under the covers.

“Get some rest, Devin,” I told him, and he gave me a bleary nod.

“Kay.”

Maybe he slept after that, or just plain passed out. Part of me was thinking I should go downstairs and fetch the big bottle of ibuprofen, but what was the point? I’d given some to my mother, and it hadn’t made a whit of a difference. In fact, she’d only gotten worse.

I couldn’t linger here, anyway — I had to go check on her. Devin seemed more or less quiescent for the moment, so it seemed safe to go back downstairs.

She hadn’t moved much. The ice packs were more or less in place, except for the one on her forehead, which had slid to one side. I put it back in the proper position, feeling as I did so how quickly the ice had melted, how half the bag was now just cold water. Was that even possible?

Then again, I didn’t have much experience with how quickly a 107-degree fever could melt ice. If her temperature was even still 107. It might have gone up again.

Toward the front of the house, the door slammed, and I jumped. Then joy rushed through me as I realized who it must be. Thank God.

I ran out of the family room and into the hallway, saw my father coming toward me. The relief that spread over his face as he caught sight of me standing there, apparently safe and well, made me feel all warm and happy inside...for about a second. Then I thought of my mother, lying on the couch, silk shirt stained beyond recognition, eyes seeming to sink deeper and deeper into her head with every passing minute, of Devin passed out upstairs, the fever beginning to consume him as well, and not a damn thing I could do about it.

Something in my expression must have changed, because my father stopped dead and asked, “Your mother?”

“She’s in the family room. She — ” And that’s all I got out, because out of nowhere I began to sob noisily, the preternatural calm I’d been able to maintain all day deserting me now that my father was here and I didn’t have to be the strong one anymore.

He came to me and held me for a moment, letting me cry. No words of reassurance, though; I had a feeling he’d seen enough today to know there was nothing remotely reassuring about our situation. Then he said, “I need to see her,” and let go of me.

I didn’t protest. I was his daughter, but she was his wife.

When I paused in the doorway to the family room, I could see my father standing a few feet away from the couch, his head bowed. His hands hung at his sides, clenched into fists.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I gave her some ibuprofen, but that didn’t seem to work. Then I thought maybe the ice — ” I let the words break off there. Nothing was working, and now Devin was sick, too, and right then I didn’t have the ability to pile more bad news on my father. Not with that non-expression on his face, the one I’d seen a few times when he was desperately attempting to keep the world from knowing how badly he really was hurting.

He didn’t move. At first I wasn’t sure he was going to answer me, but then he said, “It’ll slow it down, but it won’t stop it.”

His tone was so final that I couldn't help asking, "How do you know?"

Another one of those short, painful silences. "Because I've been out in it all day. Seeing people collapse in the street. Taking others to the hospital in my cruiser because the ambulances were either busy or already out of commission, their drivers just as incapacitated as everyone else. Even Josh —" His voice didn't exactly break, but from the way he stopped himself, I got the impression it was about to.

Josh was my father's partner. They'd been partners since, well, ever since I could remember. For my father to have seen the man he regarded as a brother come down with this terrible thing.... "I'm sorry, Dad," I said, although I knew the words were completely inadequate.

"I tried to take him to the hospital. He wouldn't go. Said he was going to die with dignity in his own house." Again I heard the faintest waver at the edges of my father's voice before he got control of himself again. "I had to carry him inside. He was already burning up. And after that, I couldn't — I didn't see the point in staying on assignment any longer. Half the force was already sick with this thing and the rest about to come down with it. I knew I had to come home. Home," he repeated, staring down at my mother's limp form.

"I'm sorry," I said again. Just words, but they did something to fill up the silence. "She seemed okay when I got here. But then...." I bit my lip, knowing I had to tell him about Devin. God, I didn't want to, though.

"Then?" he echoed.

"She collapsed. I brought her in here because I couldn't get her upstairs. And Devin...."

"He's sick, too." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. But he's up in his room. He's sleeping."

"Then he's lucky."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what that meant. "So...what do we do now?"

“I’ll take your mother up to our bed.” For the first time, he shifted so he could look back at me. “How do you feel, Jess?”

“Fine,” I said, the automatic response. Then I shook my head, because I knew that was a lie, and I didn’t want to lie to my father. “No, I *feel* terrible. But I’m not sick.”

“I understand. I feel the same way.” He turned toward my mother again, gently lifted the ice packs — which were now mostly water — from her, then slid his arms under her so he could pick her up. Her arms and legs dangled, as limp as if they’d become somehow boneless, but she didn’t move, didn’t even make a whimper of protest. Was that a good sign, or a sign that she was slipping farther and farther away from us?

I crossed my arms and tried to suppress the shiver that went through me. From my father’s expression, I could tell he wanted to be alone to lay her down in the bed they shared, to be with her now even though it was probably too late. I understood that, and yet I still wanted to run up the stairs and be with him, to not feel so alone.

As I stood there, letting my father trudge up the stairs and forcing myself to stay where I was, to give him his privacy, I heard something. The word was only a whisper at the edges of my mind, and yet it seemed to resonate along every nerve ending.

*Beloved...*

Going rigid, I held myself stock still, wondering where on earth that had come from. At first I thought it might have been my father, speaking to my mother, but I’d never heard him call her “beloved.” “Sweetheart,” yes, and “darling” — but never “baby,” since she always said using that epithet only infantilized women. Such a firebrand, my mother.

Although maybe that was the wrong word to be using right now.

Anyway, their bedroom was at the end of the upstairs hall, too far away for me to have heard him unless he’d all but shouted the word. At any rate, it hadn’t sounded like my father’s voice. It was somewhat deep like his, but

more rounded around the edges, with the faintest hint of an accent I couldn't even begin to identify.

"Who's there?" I whispered, feeling like an idiot even as the words left my lips.

No reply, of course. I was only imagining things. No one had ever called me "beloved." Hell, only one person had ever even told me he loved me. Colin, the boyfriend of my junior and senior years of college. It had taken me a while to realize his "love" wasn't the kind I wanted — he said those things to keep me placated, to keep me from noticing that he was banging at least two other girls on the side.

I'd gone to the clinic right after I dumped him and had myself tested for every disease it was possible to be tested for, and I was fine, but that experience had scarred me. I hadn't gotten past a second date ever since. Third dates were when things could start to get serious, when you might end up in the sack together. So I always made sure to end relationships before they got to that stage. No opportunities for anyone to be calling me "beloved," that was for sure.

And then I decided that the stress of the day had gotten to me, and I was hearing things. Or were auditory hallucinations another byproduct of a high fever? I didn't know for sure; apparently, I hadn't spent enough time hanging out on WebMD.

Even though I knew it wouldn't tell me anything concrete, I couldn't help putting my hand up to my forehead. No discernible change in temperature that I could tell, which meant I wasn't running a fever. No tingles or chills or any of the other telltales of my internal temperature being anything other than what it should be.

I decided that standing there and trying to determine whether I was sick or crazy wasn't helping anyone, so I went upstairs to check on Devin. The door to my parents' room was closed, and I knew better than to knock. My father would come out when he was ready. I couldn't begin to imagine what

he'd seen today, and I knew he needed this time alone with his wife. It wasn't a question of if, but when; the human body just couldn't survive at temperatures like that. She should be in a hospital getting IV drips and ice baths and Lord knows what else. An economy-sized bottle of ibuprofen and some half-assed bags of ice from the freezer weren't going to cut it.

Tears began to prick at my eyes, and I blinked them away. I'd already cried once today, and I knew I'd probably have plenty more reasons to weep by the time this was all over. Or maybe by then I'd be sick, too, and I wouldn't know what was happening to me. That was one blessed thing about this entire nightmare — once people got hit by that fever, it scrambled their brains so much they didn't seem to be aware of what was happening to them. Thank God for small mercies.

I opened Devin's door a crack and saw that he had fallen into the fitful phase of the disease — twitching and jerking, his forehead sheened with sweat. Even though I knew it probably wouldn't do any good, I went to the upstairs bathroom and shook three capsules of ibuprofen out of the big bottle in the cabinet there, then pulled a little paper cup from the dispenser and filled it with water.

Just as I was approaching his bed, Devin's leg jerked out and hit my arm, causing the water to splash all down my front, soaking the knit top I wore. I muttered a curse, but he didn't even seem to realize what he'd done, and that was how I knew he must be completely out of it. At any other time, he would've burst out laughing at managing to kick water all over me.

Pulling in a breath, I did an about-face and went back to the bathroom, plucked a towel off the rack, and did the best I could to blot the worst of the moisture from my shirt. Then I refilled the paper cup and went back to my brother's bedroom, approaching with care from the side so he wouldn't catch me unawares again.

That kick seemed to have consumed the last of his strength, because he was lying on his back, one arm flopped over the side of the bed. I went to him

and murmured, “Here’s some medicine for you, Dev.”

The water first, since that had worked well with both Taylor and my mother. He drank, and didn’t protest when I dropped a pill on his tongue and made him swallow, then gave him some more water. I repeated the process two more times, giving him one last sip to empty the cup, my arm under his head to steady him. He did drink, then collapsed against the pillow when he was done.

Was any of that going to do him any good? Or was I just doing something...anything...to make myself feel less helpless?

Probably the latter, although I wasn’t quite ready to admit it to myself.

Since Devin seemed to be sleeping again, I decided I could leave him for a bit. Pulling out the chair and sitting next to him felt a little too much like keeping watch over someone’s deathbed, and I wasn’t ready to do that yet. Also, I’d just realized I was thirsty, too — I hadn’t had anything to drink since I’d come home several hours earlier.

So I slipped out of my brother’s room and went back down the stairs. The door to my parents’ room was still shut, and I felt a completely unworthy stab of irritation. Yes, it must be terrible for my father, but I doubted my mother even knew he was there, whereas I needed him, needed someone to talk to. But I knew I would never disturb him, so I kept going to the kitchen. Once there, I pulled a glass from the cupboard and held it up to the ice dispenser. A few cubes half-heartedly spilled out, and I guessed it was working overtime to replenish what I’d already used in my futile attempt to reduce my mother’s fever.

I sat down on one of the stools at the breakfast bar and stared out the window, not really focusing on anything. Since our house was on a corner, the view included the low juniper hedges planted against the fence, and a fairly unobstructed glimpse of the street beyond. As I watched, a silver car wove its way down the street, listlessly drifting from one side of the narrow residential lane to the other, actually hitting one curb before correcting and

moving toward the one opposite, like the world's biggest and slowest pinball. It finally came to rest halfway up on the sidewalk on the corner across from our property, almost touching the smooth green lawn Mr. D'Ambrosio took such pride in, when most everyone else in the neighborhood had long since given up on grass and had switched over to cactus- and evergreen-studded drought-tolerant landscaping.

No one came out of the D'Ambrosio house to check on the driver, which told me Mr. and Mrs. D'Ambrosio must be as incapacitated as whoever had been driving that Camry. In that moment, I was just glad the driver had only been going twenty miles an hour at the most. Anything else, and they could have caused a lot more damage.

Footsteps coming down the hall made me turn, and I saw my father approaching. His eyes looked red, but otherwise his face was still and calm, as if he'd made his peace with whatever was happening to my mother, to Devin...to the world.

The words made their way to my lips before I even realized I was saying them. "Is she...?"

"No." His gaze shifted to the glass of water sitting on the counter in front of me, and he gave a faint nod. He went and got his own glass from the cupboard, and got some water as well, although I noticed he didn't bother with the ice. Afterward, he sat down next to me on one of the barstools and added, "Not yet, anyway."

"How...how long?"

"I don't know." He drank some water, and I decided I should as well, although it seemed to get jammed halfway down my throat, lodging there as if it was a solid object instead of liquid. "It...varies, from what I've seen and heard."

I didn't know why, but for some reason that bothered me almost as much as anything else that had happened so far. If a disease was going to be this evil, it should at least be predictable.

The question had been torturing me all afternoon, and now I finally had someone I could ask it of. “Dad...why isn’t anyone helping? Why are we being left to deal with this alone?”

A long pause, during which he stared down at his glass of water without meeting my eyes. When he did look up, I almost wished I hadn’t been watching him, waiting for his response. Never in my life had I seen such an expression of despair on my father’s face. Despair...and fury.

“Because there’s no one to help, Jess. What’s happening here in Albuquerque — it’s happening everywhere. New York. Los Angeles. Washington, D.C. and London and Moscow and — everywhere.” His hands, his big, strong, capable hands, now somehow looked limp and broken as they rested on the counter. “There’s no answer at the CDC. Tried calling in the National Guard for help, and nothing. The only good thing about the whole situation is that people are getting sick so quickly, they don’t have time to get into trouble. The fever makes them incapable of violence, of looting. Most collapse where they stand. That’s why I said that Devin was lucky — you got him into bed, and he’s sleeping. The fever doesn’t have him hallucinating and having convulsions or seizures, like I saw happen with some people today.”

“So...that’s it?” I whispered. “We all just sit back and wait to die?”

He scrubbed his hand over his face and glanced away from me. “I don’t know. There’s no way to treat this thing. Either you get it, or you don’t. Or rather, I have yet to see anyone who hasn’t caught it, but...you’re not sick.”

“Yet,” I said flatly, then drank some water.

“Usually, you’d be sick by now, since you’ve been around infected people.”

“You’re not sick, either,” I pointed out, and he gave a grim nod.

“I keep expecting to be, but...” Deliberately, he picked up his glass and drained the water. “I don’t know. It’s possible we could have a hereditary immunity. I just don’t know.” His fingers tightened on the glass, and for a second I thought he was going to pick it up and hurl it at the wall, do

something to express the frustrated anger I saw in his eyes. Instead, he let go of it and pushed it away. “The problem is, I don’t know anything.”

Neither did I, except that I didn’t feel sick, and my father didn’t appear to have any symptoms, either. Maybe there really was something to that notion of hereditary immunity. In looks and build, I favored my mother, with my almost-black hair and dark eyes, traits she claimed came from a great-great-grandmother who was full-blood Ute, while Devin and my father were more alike, hair still dark but not as inky as mine, their eyes a lighter, warmer brown. So why my father and I were the ones with no symptoms, I couldn’t begin to guess. Obviously, appearance didn’t have much to do with this particular quirk of heredity.

“I don’t know anything, either,” I said. “But I guess I’ll start with checking on Devin.”

“And I’ll look in on your mother.” My father got up from his stool, and I followed suit.

Once I was upstairs, I could tell there hadn’t been any real change with my brother. He didn’t even seem to have moved, but still lay there with one arm flopped over the side of his bed, eyes tightly shut. In fact, he was so still that I went over and laid two fingers against his throat, worried that I wouldn’t feel a pulse. It was there, but thready and fast, which couldn’t be a good sign. His hair, cropped short for football season, was damp with sweat.

Something about that thought, the realization that he should be off at football practice right now instead of lying here, fighting a disease so mysterious and strange that it didn’t even have a formal name, made the anger rise up in me again. This shouldn’t be happening. He should be with his teammates, getting sweaty because his coach had made him do a hundred push-ups for being a smart-ass yet again. And an hour from now, we should all be sitting down at the dinner table together, something families hardly ever did anymore, but which my mother insisted on. I’d been skipping those meals on Tuesdays and Thursdays, since I had to teach a six o’clock class,

but I tried to make it when I could.

None of that was happening, though. And it wasn't happening for Devin's girlfriend Lori, or my own friends Elena and Tori and Brittany, or — or *anyone*. All across the city...the country...the world...people were suffering and dying, and no one could stop it.

That realization made the enormity of the whole situation come crashing down on me. I let out a choked little sob and fled my brother's room, running down the stairs to the family room so I could turn on the TV, could reassure myself with the sound of someone else's voice, even if the newscasters were following the commands of people who might already be dead. I had to know a world still existed out there beyond my house, even if it was a world swiftly falling apart.

But when I picked up the remote and turned on the television, nothing came on to reassure me. Some stations blank, others showing a "please stand by" message, others with a test pattern of colored bars. My heart rate sped up as I moved from channel to channel, thinking that there had to be at least one still broadcasting, one that hadn't been abandoned.

AMC seemed to be showing a rerun of *The Walking Dead*, which had to be someone's idea of a sick joke, as I didn't think that show ever ran before nine o'clock at night due to its content. And that wasn't even the worst. Farther up the band, on a channel I didn't recognize, the screen was black, with words in stark white emblazoned across it:

*And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood....*

I wasn't much of a Bible reader, but even I recognized the quote from Revelations.

Making a disgusted sound, I clicked off the TV, then turned when I heard my father come to the door and lean against the frame, his shoulders slumped.

“It is the end of the world,” he said softly.

That couldn't be my father — my hard-nosed, practical father, the one who made sure I knew how to shoot, how to catch a fish and clean it, how to change the oil in my car and swap out a flat tire. Nothing ever fazed him. But now some underlying steel seemed to have given way, his firm jaw somehow loose, his eyes blurred with sorrow.

“Dad?” I said uncertainly.

“She's gone,” he told me, voice flat. “While we were down in the kitchen.”

The words didn't seem to make any sense. Or rather, my mind refused to make sense of them, because if I understood those words, I'd know in that moment my mother was dead, and I just couldn't face that. Not yet.

For the longest moment, I didn't say anything, only stared up at him as I turned the remote I held over and over in my hand, its familiar rectangular shape suddenly alien, cold and hard. Not wanting to hold it any longer, I set it down on the coffee table.

“No,” I said at last.

“Yes,” he said softly. “It doesn't look like she suffered. At least, not like some that I've seen. You'd almost think she was asleep.”

“Maybe she is asleep,” I protested. “Maybe you just thought — just thought she was — ” I couldn't say the word. Not in connection with my mother. If I said it, then it would be true, and I couldn't bear that.

He didn't bother to contradict me, only watched me. Something of the nonsense father I was used to was clear in those eyes. They said, *I don't want to believe it, either. But that doesn't make it less true.*

That hard knot was back in my throat. My eyes burned. For some reason, though, the tears wouldn't fall. They just remained where they were, burning like acid.

Finally, I asked, “What should we do? Should we — ” I couldn't even finish the question. This would have been bad enough under normal

circumstances, but at least then there was a routine to follow. You called the doctor. The doctor called the ambulance, and then eventually someone got in touch with the funeral home. That was how it worked when Grandmother Ivy — my mom's mother — had passed.

Now, though...now you couldn't even get a call through. And if by some miracle you did, it wouldn't matter, because there wouldn't be anyone on the other end to answer it.

My father wouldn't meet my eyes. "We don't need to do anything," he said, that scary monotone back in his voice. "It'll take care of itself."

And something in the way he said those words made me too frightened to ask what in the world he meant.

## CHAPTER 4



HE WENT into the kitchen after that. I didn't follow, but instead just stood there in the family room, my entire body feeling as if it had been encased in ice. One thought kept hammering away in my head, over and over again.

*She's dead. She's dead. Your mother is dead.*

I wished I could cry.

From the kitchen, I heard the clunk of ice dropping from the dispenser, the sound of liquid pouring, although not from the refrigerator door. I had a sinking feeling I knew exactly what it was.

My father was not, unlike a lot of cops, a heavy drinker. He and my mother would have a glass of wine with dinner sometimes, and I'd seen him drink champagne at weddings and have a beer after a morning of washing both his and Mom's cars, but that was about it. But there was a bottle of Scotch he kept high up on a shelf, a bottle that rarely made an appearance. One time when his partner Josh was shot in the leg while breaking up a domestic dispute. Or the time my mother found a lump in her breast and had to go in for a biopsy. It turned out to be nothing, a benign cyst, but we'd all been fearing the worst.

And now the worst had happened, although in a manner none of us could have imagined, and he was sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, drinking Scotch on the rocks.

And I was too scared and shocked to even give him shit about it. If he wanted to seek comfort in a glass of Scotch rather than in me, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Still with that horrible lump lodged firmly in my throat, I went back to the staircase and slowly went up it, each step more and more difficult, as if I were in some horrible alternate dimension that kept strengthening the gravity pulling at me with every movement. Finally, though, I made it up to the landing, then went to Devin's room.

He had shifted and was now lying on his side, half his covers thrown off. They'd probably felt far too hot, but I knew he had to stay warm. I crossed the room and grasped the sheet and blanket, hesitating as my hand paused on the comforter. Maybe that really was a bit too much, since it had been a mild, warm day, and his room wasn't anywhere close to cold yet. I could always put the comforter over him later.

As I began to settle the sheet over his shoulders, though, something felt wrong. At first I couldn't quite figure it out, and then, even as I realized what the problem was, my mind didn't want to acknowledge it. Not this. Not so soon after — well, after.

The last time I'd been this close to him, heat had fairly radiated from his flesh. Now, though, he felt cool, and when I reached down to touch his hand, his fingers were like ice, and somehow already stiff, although logically I knew it was far too early for rigor mortis to have set in.

Then again, what was logical about any of this?

I recoiled, letting go of my dead brother's hand, and backed away from the bed. As my father had told me about my mother's passing, Devin didn't look dead, just asleep. For whatever reason, his face didn't have that sunken look about it that my mother had worn. Maybe his fever hadn't burned as hot?

Not that it mattered, because he was gone, too.

A frightened little sob tore its way out of my throat, and I continued to

back away, creeping out into the hallway and shutting the door behind me. I knew I should go downstairs and tell my father what had happened, but for some reason my feet took me in the opposite direction, toward my parents' bedroom. Before I even knew what I was doing, my hand seemed to have reached out of its own accord and was turning the knob. I'd just seen death. I needed to see my mother's, too, so it would be just as real. Maybe then my brain would be shocked out of its current numb state.

The sun was beginning to set, but my parents' bedroom had a window in the western wall, so a warm, mellow light was flooding the space. It was certainly bright enough for me to see where my mother's body should be lying, propped up against the pillows on her side of the bed.

Only...she wasn't there.

My first thought was that my father must have moved her, but why in the world would he have done that? Besides, there wasn't anyplace he really could have moved her, not unless he put her in the bathtub for some reason.

On second thought, that notion wasn't so strange. He could've put her in an ice-cold bath in an attempt to bring her temperature down.

I rushed into the *en suite* bathroom, but the tub was empty. As I stared down at it, I realized that was a ridiculous notion. Even if my father had put her in the bath, I would have heard the water running, and I'd heard no such thing.

Thoughts racing, first rejecting one idea, and then another, I returned to the bedroom. From this angle, I could now see a pile of fine gray dust marring the surface of the blue and tan striped comforter, the one my father had permitted in the room only because "it wasn't too girly."

Dust? My mother would never allow dust to collect on the furniture, let alone a pile like that right on the bed.

Cold coiled in the pit of my stomach as I stared down at the strange little pile. On a dare from Devin, I'd once peeked inside the urn containing my grandmother's ashes...and they had been almost the exact color and

consistency as the ashes now sitting on my parents' bed.

No, that was impossible.

Then my father's words came back to me: *It'll take care of itself.*

Was this what he'd meant? That somehow after she passed, my mother would simply crumble into a pile of dust?

No, I refused to believe that. There had to be an explanation. Otherwise....

Otherwise, this whole situation had moved from the unexplainable and tragic to the positively Biblical. Whoever heard of bodies turning themselves to ash, unless it was by some strange otherworldly force?

"You see," my father said. He must have come upstairs while I was standing there, staring down at my mother in shock. His speech sounded a little slurred, but at least he hadn't brought the glass of Scotch up with him.

"What — what happened?"

"It's what happens to all of them," he replied. "Usually within an hour of death." Rubbing at his brow, he added, "Very clean, when you think about it. Much better than having all those bodies lying around, don't you think?"

I stared at him in horror. "That's Mom lying there!"

"No," he corrected me. "That's what used to be your mother. The part of her that was really *her* — that's gone. To a better place, I have to hope, but after everything I've seen today, I'm beginning to have my doubts."

His voice was sad, but resigned. And as I looked at him, I noticed the way he wasn't completely steady on his feet, the glisten of sweat on his forehead from the last rays of sun coming in through the window. Maybe my mind had registered them earlier, but had dismissed them as effects of the alcohol. Now, though....

No. Even as my mind recoiled from the thought, I found myself asking, "Dad, are you sick?"

He gave me a sad smile. "I think I am. Finally caught up with me, I suppose." His gaze moved to the bed. "I should probably lie down, but...."

“Go to the guest room,” I said. It used to be my room, but my parents had refitted it as a spare bedroom just the past year.

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “I want to die in here, next to where she slept.”

“But — ” I didn’t have the strength to mention the ashes, all that remained of my mother, but from the way my father was staring at them, he knew all too well what I was thinking.

“Get her vase,” he told me. “The Waterford one I bought her for her fiftieth birthday. She’d like that, I think.” He reached out and grasped the doorframe, as if that was the only thing holding him up right then.

I wanted to protest, but I knew that wouldn’t do any good. Besides, I didn’t know how much time I had until he fell over right there in the doorway. My mother’s collapse had been sudden and shocking, and Devin’s not much better. So I nodded and pushed past him to run down the stairs and go into the living room, where the vase in question stood on one of the end tables.

After grabbing it, I hurried back up to my parents’ bedroom, where my father — through sheer force of will, probably — was still hanging on to the doorframe. I showed him the vase but didn’t stop, instead going to the bed and grasping the comforter, then tilting it so the gray dust would tip into the crystal container. During this operation, I didn’t dare breathe, but the dust was surprisingly heavy and didn’t puff up into the air the way I feared it might. Instead, it slipped down into the vase, filling it approximately halfway. Not letting myself think about what it held, I took it over to the dresser and set it down.

Since there was no way I would put that comforter back where it had come from, I folded it in on itself to trap any remaining dust, and set it on the floor at the foot of the bed. “Okay,” I said, my voice shaking.

My father didn’t seem to notice the tremor in that one little word, but only pushed himself off from the doorframe and then staggered over to the bed.

After pausing to kick off his shoes and remove his belt, complete with holsters and badge, he fell down onto the mattress. That seemed to have taken the last of his strength, because his head fell back against the pillow at once, and his eyes shut. Incongruously, I noted how heavy and thick his lashes were, lying against his flushed cheeks.

“Dad?”

He lifted one hand. “Just tired. I took some ibuprofen on the way up. Not going to do any good, but I didn’t want you to have to get it for me.”

My heart was breaking. I could feel it...literally feel it. One piece torn away for my mother, the next for Devin. And when my father went, did that mean my heart would finally shatter once and for all, gone to dust like everyone else in the world?

Cramming my fist into my mouth to push back another one of those ragged sobs, I went out to the hallway and staggered over to the carved wooden balustrade on the landing. I wrapped my fingers around the rail and hung on as if for my life. No fever scorched its way through me, but I felt as weak as though my temperature was 110 degrees.

*Beloved, it will all be over soon.*

That voice again. It had to be a hallucination, some strange coping mechanism my brain had cooked up, but still I found myself replying out loud.

“Does that mean I’m sick and will soon be dead along with everyone else?”

*No. That is not your fate.*

“What is my fate?”

Silence. Apparently my subconscious or whatever it was that had created the soft, reassuring baritone didn’t quite have the balls to tell me what my future held. Not that you needed to be a fortune-teller for that. Raging fever, and a pile of dust somewhere. Should I go out on the family room couch, or hike my way back up to my apartment when the time came? That seemed like

a lot of unnecessary effort. After all, no one was using the spare bedroom.

I went into the bathroom to get a drink of water and saw the big bottle of ibuprofen sitting on the counter, the cap still off, as if my father hadn't possessed the strength or will to put it back on again. Fingers shaking, I picked it up and twisted it onto the bottle, then put the ibuprofen back in the medicine cabinet. I didn't want to leave a messy house behind.

Messy for whom, I didn't know. From what my father had said, it didn't sound as if anyone was getting out of this alive.

The thermometer was lying on the top rack in the medicine cabinet. I already knew I wasn't sick, but I needed the external reminder. I took it out, opened the bottle of rubbing alcohol, and wiped down one end of the thermometer. Then I stuck it in my mouth and waited.

*98.1.* Up a little from the last time, but still below normal.

I rinsed it off and put it away. Then, moving so slowly I felt as if I were dragging my feet through mud, I went back to my parents' bedroom, half expecting to see a pile of dust there. To my surprise, my father's eyes opened when I came into the room. They were bright with fever and had those telltale dark circles beneath them, but they seemed lucid enough. Maybe he wasn't as far gone as he had thought.

"Dad, I could try some ice — "

A very small shake of his head. "No. Once you have it, you're done." His eyes shut, and I could see how his big frame was wracked with shivers, even though he'd pulled the blanket up to his chin. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I repeated, wondering what he had to be sorry for. "None of this is your fault."

"No — not that." He shifted under the covers, then opened his eyes again. "Sorry that we'll all be gone, and you'll still be here."

Something in his words chilled me. In that moment, I could see how dying along with everyone else might be preferable to being left in a world with no one to talk to, no one to even know I'd somehow managed to survive.

Voice brittle, I replied, "Oh, I'm sure I'm not long for this world, either."

"Fever?"

"No."

He closed his eyes. It seemed as if he didn't have the strength to keep them open and focused on me for more than a few seconds at a time. "You're immune, Jess. Don't know how...or why...."

*That is not your fate.* Despite the stuffiness of the room, I shivered as I thought of those words, spoken gently by someone who wasn't there.

"Write down what's happened. Maybe...there'll be someone left to tell."

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me. "I will."

"Might as well put that English degree to some use."

*Oh, Dad.* Even at the end, he had to make a joke. "All the commas will be in the right place. I promise."

No reply. He could have simply fallen asleep, but I didn't think so. Unlike my mother and Devin, he'd pushed all the way to the end, burned the candle until no more wick was left.

Somehow I put one foot in front of the other, walking slowly until I reached his side of the bed. A finger against his throat, telling me that he had gone, had left this world and was with Mom and Devin. I had to believe that. I'd break apart otherwise.

Since his eyes were closed, I didn't bother to pull the sheet up over his face. Soon it wouldn't matter anyway. He'd be a pile of dust, as no doubt my brother was by now as well.

I didn't recall going downstairs, but the next thing I did remember, I was standing in the kitchen, staring down at my father's half-drunk glass of Scotch. The ice had mostly melted, shifting the color to a pale gold. Without thinking, I lifted the glass and brought it to my lips, poured the liquid within down my throat. It burned, but not as much as I had thought it would.

What did it matter that my father had drunk from that same glass? According to him, I was immune. The thing that had killed him couldn't

touch me.

At last I could feel tears pricking at my eyes, stinging like acid, but I knew I couldn't let them fall. If I did, I knew they would never stop. What was that old song, about some girl's tears drowning the world? That would be me, if I wept now. Then again, maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. Maybe a river, an ocean of tears, would wash away all this death, all the dust of people's lives left behind.

Maybe. In the meantime, I had something I needed to do.

My parents had always loved the big oak tree in the backyard. In the summer, they hung a hammock there, and had a pair of Adirondack chairs they would drag out underneath it so they could sit in the shade and drink iced tea and plan the yearly family vacation, or maybe just a long weekend, so we could do something fun like go hiking up around Angel Fire or visit the museums in Santa Fe, or take the long trip down to Carlsbad Caverns.

All those things we'd done together as a family. Well, I'd make sure my family was together in the end, even if I couldn't be with them. It was the only way I could think of to say goodbye.

My father kept all the gardening tools in a shed next to the garage, since the garage itself was full of camping equipment and tools and the usual crap any family of four tends to accumulate over the years. I went to the shed and got out the shovel, then headed back to the oak tree, staking out the spot where those Adirondack chairs usually sat.

It wouldn't have to be a very deep hole. After all, I was only burying dust, not bodies. The ground was not as hard as I'd feared, mostly because my father had given the old oak one of its bimonthly soakings with the hose only this past weekend. I dug and dug, dirt flying out around me, only stopping when it looked like I was about to hit a big tree root. The hole was far larger than it needed to be, but better than the opposite.

I leaned the shovel against the shed, then went into the kitchen to wash my hands. After that, I got a clean glass from the cupboard and filled it with

water, then drank slowly, deliberately. I knew what was waiting for me upstairs.

There was enough room left in my mother's Waterford vase for the dust my father left behind, so I poured it in on top of my mother's remains. Going back to Devin's room seemed far more difficult, for some reason; maybe it was that I hadn't really been able to say goodbye to him. At least my father and I had shared those last few words.

The sight of the dust didn't shock me anymore, but it was still awful enough to know that my brother had been lying in the same spot only an hour earlier. His MVP trophy from the previous football season seemed about the right size, so I did the same thing I had with my parents' remains, using the bedclothes as a funnel to pour the dust into the receptacle I'd selected. That dust was a dark, cloudy gray, fine as silt, and seemed oddly liquid as I tipped it into the trophy.

I took Devin downstairs first, carefully setting the trophy down on the breakfast bar before returning to the second story to retrieve the Waterford vase. They went into the ground in reverse order, my parents' dust poured into the hole first, followed by Devin's. Grimly, I retrieved the shovel and began piling the dirt back on top of the dust, holding my breath in case any should plume up during the process. At last, though, the hole was more or less filled. I dragged the shovel back and forth, smoothing the surface, attempting to make it as level as possible.

Now was the time to say a few words, but nothing seemed to come to mind. I couldn't even remember the Lord's Prayer, or more than the first few words of the Twenty-third Psalm.

"*The Lord is my shepherd,*" I began, then shook my head. What came next? The lines were all jumbled together in my head, nonsense syllables that sounded like something straight out of "Jabberwocky." And what did it matter, anyway? We weren't a religious family; we went to Christmas Eve services some years and some years not, maybe Easter. I'd gone to Sunday

school when I was really little, but my parents hadn't even bothered with that when Devin came along.

For the longest time I stood there under the oak, the sun disappearing altogether, deep dusk falling upon the yard. Then I moved, and the motion-sensor light mounted to the side of the garage flashed on.

"I love you all," I said finally, then set the Waterford vase and the football trophy on top of their grave.

After that, I went back inside and shut the door behind me. It seemed to echo in the unnatural stillness of the house, and I realized it was hardly ever this quiet — someone always had the TV on in the background, or there was music playing, or somebody talking on the phone. Now the quiet pounded against my eardrums, and I realized how big a three-bedroom, two-thousand-square-foot house could feel when you were the only one in it.

*The only one in the world...*

The thought whispered through my mind, and I did my best to ignore it. Surely if I were immune, and not just having extremely delayed-onset symptoms for some reason, that meant other people had to be immune, too. How many? I couldn't begin to guess. I didn't know the mortality rate of the disease. Even if 99.9% of the population was dead, that would leave around a thousand people still alive in the greater Albuquerque area, if I was doing my mental math correctly.

I turned on the overhead lights in the kitchen, then went through the house, turning on all the lamps. Maybe that wasn't the smartest thing to do — maybe advertising my presence would do more harm than good. But I couldn't sit there in the dark, not after everything I'd been through that day. Besides, when I peeked out through the curtains, I saw mine wasn't the only house on the street that was all lit up. Most likely the others just had their lights on because no one was around to turn them off, but it did make mine seem less conspicuous.

"Are you there?" I asked of the darkness. Even a voice that was only a

product of my imagination was better than this deep, deep silence, the kind of quiet you should never hear if you lived in a big city.

No reply, of course. My gaze shifted to the remote control, still lying where I'd last dropped it on the coffee table. I didn't want to turn on the television, not after what I'd seen the last time around. Would it all be static by now, or would that one station still be showing blaring red text with more quotes from Revelations?

I was too much of a coward to pick up the remote and find out.

But there was still the stereo, and all the CDs my parents wouldn't get rid of, despite Devin and me telling them all that plastic just took up space and that they should just rip all their music off those CDs and then play it through Apple TV or something. And now I had to be grateful for their stubbornness, because that meant I could get up and choose something to blot out the silence. My father liked country, but old country, like Hank Williams and Willie Nelson and Patsy Cline, and my mother preferred classical. That sounded better to me right then, so I found her favorite, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, and put that on.

It actually was better, with the sound of an orchestra and Vladimir Ashkenazy on the piano drowning out that awful stillness. Or at least it was better until I realized that no one would ever play that piece live again, that there would be no more symphony orchestras or Arcade Fire concerts or anything, ever again.

"Oh, God," I gasped, pushing myself up from the couch and running into the kitchen, where I turned on the faucet and splashed cold water in my face. As if that could begin to help. It was all too big to comprehend, so awful and enormous that I could literally feel the horror of it beginning to sink in, like some noxious chemical seeping into my skin.

And then it was as though strong, invisible arms wrapped around me, bringing with them a soothing warmth. Unseen lips brushed against my hair, and I heard the voice again.

*Be strong, my love. Be strong for just a while longer.*

Just as suddenly, the presence was gone. I held on to the tile of the kitchen counter, feeling the cool surface beneath my fingertips. In that moment, I truly wondered if I'd lost my mind.

What other explanation could there be?

## CHAPTER 5



MORE BECAUSE I knew I should eat something than because I had any appetite at all, I gathered myself enough to put a few slices of wheat bread in the toaster. Once they were done, I buttered them and set them on a plate, then headed back out to the living room, where Rachmaninoff still played to the empty space. Just as I was setting my plate down on the coffee table, the lights flickered and went out, and the CD slurred to a halt. Silence reigned once more.

Heart slamming painfully in my chest, I waited a second, then another. Surely this had to be just a glitch. In a second or two, the power would come back on.

But it didn't. How could the power plants run, with no one left to manage them?

The blackness was absolute. From my camping days, I knew how dark, how *very* dark, our desert skies could be. This seemed worse, though, because this wasn't the expected dark of a night out under the stars. I was in the heart of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Luckily, my mother loved candles, and so there were already a pair of pillars in wrought-iron sconces on the mantel, and another pillar candle sitting on a metal leaf-shaped dish on an end table. She kept a long-handled lighter in one of the coffee table's drawers, so I reached in and fumbled

around for a few seconds before locating it. As soon as I pulled it out of the drawer, I pressed the button to activate the flame. That pushed back on the darkness a little, and it got that much better when I lit the candle on the table next to me. Then I had enough illumination that I could get up and light the candles on the mantel.

From there I went into the kitchen and found the sugar cookie-scented jar candle sitting on the breakfast bar, and lit that as well. Upstairs — well, I'd worry about that later. At least now I wasn't blundering around in total darkness...and the candle flames weren't bright enough that they would be seen through the drapes and blinds, all of which I quickly closed.

All the same, I knew there was one thing I really needed to do.

On the ground floor was a study that my parents shared, although in reality it was mostly my mother's space, housing her desk and computer and several shelves full of books. On the opposite wall, though, was my father's gun safe.

I knew the combination. He'd trusted me with that, just as he trusted me to be responsible when we went shooting and to clean the guns I used and follow all the safety rules he'd taught me. I wasn't sure if Devin had known the combination, although I somehow doubted it; my father hadn't given me that information until I turned twenty-one. And even though I might be the only person left alive in Albuquerque, no way was I sitting alone in this house without some means to protect myself.

The lock turned easily, of course. My father took as good care of the safe as he did the guns inside. There were a lot, too — in addition to his service Glock, he owned an AR-15 rifle, two shotguns, a small .22-caliber hunting rifle, a Ruger, a Beretta, and my favorite, the Smith & Wesson .357. Sort of an old-fashioned gun, but my accuracy had always been good with it. Besides, with a revolver, you didn't have to worry about the gun jamming.

I set the candle I'd brought with me down on my mother's desk, then opened the safe. Hanging from one of the sleeves on the door was the .357,

and on the shelf directly opposite the gun, boxes of spare ammo. My father wasn't exactly what you'd call a survivalist type, but he did believe in maintaining his supplies. If necessary, I could waste a lot of bad guys before I ran out. Not that there were probably any bad guys left. This was more for my own peace of mind than anything else.

After lifting the S&W from where it rested, I pushed the latch forward to release the barrel, then moved the latch outward. As I'd suspected, the chambers were empty — my father didn't believe in leaving loaded handguns lying around, even in the safe. One by one, I dropped the bullets into the chambers, then closed the gun back up.

Habit made me shut the door to the gun safe as well, and make sure the lock was fully engaged. Maybe I was the only person left alive in Albuquerque...and maybe not. No matter what the reality of the situation might turn out to be, I didn't think it was a very good idea to leave a fully stocked gun safe accessible to just anyone.

Picking up the candle with my free hand, I went back out to the living room. My toast was stone cold by then, but I made myself eat it, and then drank some more water. I set the gun down on the coffee table, within easy reach should I need it.

And then I leaned against the back of the couch and shut my eyes, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do next. My entire family was gone — I had two grandparents still living, but I had no reason to believe they hadn't suffered the same fate as my parents and brother. Three cousins and an aunt and uncle, all on my mother's side; my father was an only child. Could this strange immunity that seemed to be protecting me have somehow sheltered any of them? Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Susan also lived here in Albuquerque, so it wouldn't be that hard to try checking on them tomorrow, after the sun came up. No way was I venturing outside in the dark.

Maybe it wasn't the best idea — a fool's errand, as my father might have said. But it was the only thing I could think of to try. There were my friends,

too...Tori and Brittany and Elena. I had no reason to believe they hadn't suffered the same fate as everyone else, but again, I would never forgive myself if I didn't try to find out what had happened to them.

*There is no point. They're all gone.*

"Oh, really?" I snapped into the candlelit darkness. "How are you so sure of that?"

*Because they weren't immune.*

"But I am."

*Yes.*

"Why?"

No answer — not that I'd really expected one. It seemed as soon as I asked the hard questions, the voice quickly decamped. Only my subconscious, trying to convince me not to put myself in harm's way? I wouldn't be surprised. Nevertheless, I knew what I had to do the next day.



THE NEXT DAY, a bright sun rose on an empty world. I couldn't bring myself to sleep upstairs, not even in the untouched guest bedroom. Too much death up there, too many reminders of everything I'd lost. Instead, I'd fetched some spare blankets from the linen closet and spread them over me so I could sleep on the living room couch. That, more than anything else, was a sure sign of the apocalypse, since my mother would never have allowed her new sofa to be sullied by someone sleeping on it when she was alive. But the living room faced out on the street, and I reasoned I'd better be able to listen for any signs of life or activity on the road by sleeping there, rather than back in the family room, which was toward the rear of the house.

I got up off the couch, rubbed the kink in my neck, then cautiously pushed the curtains aside so I could get a glimpse of what was going on in the neighborhood. Not much; the sprinklers were on at the D'Ambrosios' house

on the corner opposite ours, but I knew that didn't mean anything, since they were on an automatic timer. As I watched, they seemed to shut themselves off, the bright green grass of the yard glinting in the morning sun. Otherwise, everything was completely still.

No, scratch that — I saw the Munozes' shepherd mix nosing around in the grass in front of their house across the street. She was a wily critter and got out at least once a week, but now I guessed it was because she was hungry. Luckily, she was a sweet dog and knew me. The power was out, and we had some leftovers in the fridge that might as well get eaten before they spoiled.

I let the curtain drop and went to open the front door. The morning air was cool, but carried with it the smell of smoke. Something in the city was burning. Here, though, we seemed to be safe enough, at least for the moment. I'd worry about the fire later.

Crouching down slightly, I called out, "Dutchie! Dutchie!" Hector Munoz had been a professor of Spanish literature at UNM, and I think Dutchie's original name had been Dulcinea. The Munozes' little girl, Jaclyn, couldn't pronounce the name, though, and so Dulcinea had sort of degenerated into "Dutchie." A sharp, knifing pain went through me, though, as I thought of little Jaclyn and her big brown eyes and her endlessly asking "Why?"

I had a feeling she wouldn't be asking any more questions.

The dog lifted her head and looked over at me, one ear cocked slightly. No one was completely sure of Dutchie's heritage. Best guess was part German shepherd, part border collie, and part Lord knows what, but she was a beautiful dog, with a silky black and tan coat, and one blue eye and one brown eye. The blue eye seemed to focus on me particularly.

She gave a little shake and then trotted obediently over to me, pushing her head against my knee and giving the faintest of whines. Poor thing had to be hungry.

"You want some breakfast?" I asked her, and both her ears went up. Just

like our old dog Sadie, who'd passed last winter. Debates had still been raging at my house as to when would be a good time to get another dog...not that it mattered now.

But Sadie had had an extensive vocabulary when it came to anything food-related, and it seemed as if Dutchie was the same way. She padded after me as I tucked the revolver into my waistband, then went into the kitchen, got a bowl from one of the cupboards, and poured her some water.

At least, that was what I intended to do. When I turned the tap, however, nothing happened. A few drops sputtered from the faucet, but that was it. So the water was gone, too.

That fluttery feeling of panic returned, and I forced it down. When we were at home, we got our water from the dispenser in the refrigerator door, but we always kept a couple pallets of bottled water in the pantry for road trips or even just running around town. I wasn't going to die of thirst anytime soon.

I fetched one of the water bottles and poured its contents into the bowl. Dutchie began slurping it up greedily, so while she was occupied, I got out a plate and then retrieved one of the covered storage bowls in the fridge, the one with the leftover roasted chicken from the weekend. Taking out one of the chicken legs and shredding it onto the plate relaxed me a little, made me focus on something other than the dry tap. If I attempted to turn on one of the burners on the stove, would it light? Or was the gas out, too?

Most likely. Which meant there would be no heat. Yesterday had been warmer than normal, but I'd heard that temperatures were supposed to start dipping toward the end of the week. Conditions might become downright uncomfortable.

*Oh, like they're so wonderful right now,* my brain mocked me as I bent down to give Dutchie the plate of chicken. She immediately abandoned the water and wolfed down the bits of chicken leg, then looked up at me with pleading eyes when she was done.

“There’s no more, you little pig,” I said with some affection, reaching to scratch her behind the ears. Her fur was soft and silky, and infinitely reassuring. Somehow everything didn’t seem quite so bad if I could have Dutchie with me.

She whined, and I remembered we still had some dog treats up on the highest shelf in the pantry, left over after Sadie died. I got out the step stool, then climbed up and retrieved them. Dutchie watched the entire procedure, tail wagging, and I gave her one of the biscuits.

“Better?” I asked.

No reply, of course, but I figured the way she was hunkered down on the kitchen rug, munching on the biscuit, tail wagging, told me everything I needed to know.

All right. So I had some companionship. Now I had to take care of myself. My appetite was still nowhere in evidence, but I helped myself to some of the leftover chicken as well, then had a piece of bread and butter, washed down with water from another bottle I took from the pallet. Obviously, a shower was out of the question, but I took some of the water and splashed it on my face. It helped a little.

Carrying the half-full bottle of water, I went out the back door, Dutchie following me, and headed up to my apartment. Everything looked so normal there, so unchanged, and I realized I hadn’t been there since my parents — since Devin — well, *since*. It was no sanctuary, though, no place where I could hide from what had happened.

That wasn’t my reason for being here, though. I set the gun down on the coffee table, got out of my clothes from the day before and stuffed them into the hamper, and then pulled on fresh jeans and socks, and a waffle-weave henley shirt I wore sometimes when I went hiking. My hiking boots were tucked into the far corner of the closet, and I got them out as well and laced them on. I had no idea what I might encounter today, so it seemed smart to be wearing comfortable, serviceable clothes, the kinds of things that wouldn’t

get in my way.

Speaking of which —

I headed into the bathroom, brushed my hair, and pulled it back with an elastic band. Afterward, I brushed my teeth, being as sparing with the bottled water as I could. No point in wearing any makeup, but I put on some colored lip balm because the weather was dry, and they felt parched.

During all this, Dutchie sat in the middle of my tiny living room and watched me. After I had extracted my wallet from my purse and slipped it into my pocket, then tucked the S&W back into my waistband, I paused and asked her, “Am I crazy for doing this?”

She cocked her head to one side, mismatched eyes shining. Apparently, she didn’t have an opinion on my preparations, but was probably hoping for another dog biscuit when we got back to the kitchen.

“Okay,” I told her. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Tail wagging, she ran out the door as soon as I opened it, then practically galloped down the stairs. From what I could tell, she wasn’t exactly pining for her former masters. Or maybe she was just so happy to see someone — anyone — that she was willing to be their new best friend, no matter what.

Once we were back in the kitchen, I gave her another dog biscuit, then hesitated at the key rack by the back door. If I was really going to venture out into deserted Albuquerque, I didn’t think my little Honda was the best choice in vehicles. My mother’s Escape had all-wheel drive, but I knew my father’s Grand Cherokee was the sturdiest car we owned.

My hand shook as I took the key with its leather fob from the rack. My father loved that SUV — washed it every week, changed the oil regularly, conditioned the leather seats, the whole thing. He’d never let me or Devin drive it, and even my mother was only allowed behind the wheel if her own car was in the shop for something. But my father was far past caring about the Cherokee, and I knew it was my best bet for getting where I needed to go.

*There is no point,* the voice in my head said sadly.

“There is a point,” I retorted. “I need to know if they’re alive or dead.”

*You already know the answer to that.*

“No, I don’t. Not for sure.”

*Your heart does.*

I didn’t want to believe him. In fact, I refused to believe him. Voice tight, I asked, “All right — where do *you* think I should go?”

The answer was immediate. *North.*

“North?” I repeated in some incredulity. “You do know that winter is coming, right? If I have to get out of Albuquerque, it would make a lot more sense to go south, to Alamogordo or Las Cruces.” *Or Roswell*, I added mentally. *Maybe I can go there and stick my thumb out, see if the aliens might give me a ride right out of here.*

*North.* The voice sounded implacable.

“Well, I’ll take that under advisement,” I said lightly. “For now, though, I have some friends and family to check on.”

*It is a mistake.*

“Then it’ll be *my* mistake. Come on, Dutchie.”

Had I already descended to arguing with the voices in my head? It sure looked that way.

The dog trotted after me as I went out the back door and over to the driveway. Good thing I’d decided on the Cherokee, as it was blocking my mother’s car anyway. I went around to the passenger side and opened the door. Dutchie didn’t even need an invitation — she jumped right inside, eyes shining, ears up. Her claws slipped a little on the leather seat, and I winced. I had to hope that my father really had gone on to a better place, one where he couldn’t see his prized SUV getting scratches on the seats and, no doubt, dog hair everywhere.

I walked slowly around the back of the vehicle, watching, listening. Since the D’Ambrosios’ sprinklers had shut off — or, more likely, run out of water — besides the cawing of a few crows as they circled overhead, the

neighborhood was completely still. Again, that silence made the skin on the back of my neck prickle, and I hastened to the driver-side door, then got in.

The sound of the engine turning over seemed ear-piercingly loud after all that quiet. At the same time, the radio turned on in a burst of static, and I quickly shut it off, knowing that there wouldn't be anything useful on the radio, any more than there had been on the television. My father had probably been scanning the bands as he came home, looking for a report that would tell him what was going on. Something. Anything.

I paused to slide the gun out of my waistband and into the glove compartment before backing the Cherokee out into the street. On the seat beside me, Dutchie had her head up and was sniffing the air, even though the windows were all the way up. I rolled down the one next to her so she could stick her nose out, then slowed before we'd gone even halfway down the block. I knew what I would find, but I had to check.

The front door to the Munozes' house was locked, but when I went around back, I discovered that the side door which led to their service porch was halfway open. The reason why presented itself soon enough — there was a pile of gray dust just inside, right in front of the dryer. I had a feeling, though, that whoever had gone out there had been looking for more ice, as the Munozes had an upright freezer tucked into one corner, away from the other appliances.

Grimacing, I stepped over the little pile of dust, glad that I'd left Dutchie inside the car. "Professor Munoz?" I called out. "Jaclyn? Maria?"

No answer, of course. In the living room, I saw the reason why — a pile of dust on the sofa, a smaller one next to it. I couldn't know for sure whether it was Maria Munoz or her husband who had expired in the laundry room, or who had been sitting on the couch next to their daughter. I supposed it really didn't matter. They were gone. No wonder Dutchie had started wandering the neighborhood, looking for someone to take care of her.

When I got back inside the Cherokee, I leaned over and gave the dog a

fierce hug. "I'm here, Dutchie," I said. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She licked my cheek and let out a whine, but a questioning one, as if asking whether I was okay.

No, I really was not okay, but I couldn't let myself start to lose it now. I straightened, gave her ears a quick scratch, and then started up the SUV, moving down the street so I could get out onto Rio Grand Boulevard and head over to my friend Elena's house, as she was the one who lived closest to me. After that it would be Tori's, and then my Aunt Susan and Uncle Jeremy's house. And after that....

Well, I'd see how much more I could take after that.

It was slower going than I'd expected, mainly because a lot more abandoned cars choked the streets than I'd thought there would be. In my mind, I'd imagined more people would have made it home before they expired, but that didn't seem to be the case. I had to weave in and out of the stopped vehicles, several times being forced up on the curb to make my way around the blockage. And everything so silent, so still, save for the ceaseless cawing of crows overhead.

*No carrion for you to eat, you bastards*, I thought as I eased the Cherokee off yet another curb.

And in a way, I had to be thankful for that. The Heat might not have killed me to start, but if there had been millions of corpses left behind once the disease had done its work, typhoid fever or cholera surely would have finished the job.

I turned into the residential section where Elena lived, glad to see there were fewer vehicles blocking the streets here. But still I saw no sign of life anywhere, not one person stepping out of a house to flag me down, to let me know at least one other soul had survived the plague that had swept over the world.

Unlike my house, which always had a full driveway and my car parked at the curb, Elena's looked pristine. Then again, her family had more money —

her father was a lawyer — and their house had a three-car garage. It wasn't unusual to see no real evidence of anyone being home.

I stopped the Cherokee, then reached into the glove compartment and retrieved the revolver. Dutchie looked at me, wide-eyed, as if wondering what in the world I needed with a gun.

“Good question, Dutchie,” I said, but I tucked it into my jeans anyway. “You stay here.”

She wagged her tail and didn't try to get out of the car as I exited the vehicle. That was one damn good dog.

After looking around quickly and not seeing anyone, I went up to the front door of Elena's house. Ringing the doorbell was no use, since the power was out all over town. Instead, I knocked, then waited.

No answer, but I hadn't really been expecting one. I put my hand on the latch, and, to my surprise, the door swung inward. It seemed logical enough that the last person to come home had been so ill they hadn't bothered to lock the door behind them, but it unnerved me nonetheless. Swallowing hard, I made myself enter the house.

It was a big Santa Fe-style faux adobe, with tile floors and wood-beamed ceilings. My footsteps echoed through the two-story foyer as I moved toward the center of the building. Something sweet and smoky tickled at my nose. Incense. Elena's mother was a devout Catholic. Maybe she'd burned the incense as she prayed to God to save her, save her family.

Unfortunately, God didn't seem to be listening lately.

The house had built-in art niches, one of which held a shrine to the Madonna. I saw a pile of gray dust immediately in front of it and knew it must be Gabriella Cruz. Limbs trembling, I made myself walk past it, go through the rest of the ground floor: the great room with the kitchen and family room combined, the formal dining room, the living room. No sign of Elena or her father. Which didn't mean all that much. There was still the upstairs.

Pulse pounding painfully in my throat, I mounted the steps. The house had four bedrooms, one of which was an office. In there I found another pile of gray dust, which I guessed must be Eduardo Cruz, Elena's father.

Her bedroom was on the opposite side of the upstairs hallway, two doors down. Truth be told, I'd always envied her that room, with its own bathroom and the little sitting area off the balcony. It felt like a room for a princess, compared to the boxy twelve-by-twelve space that had been mine all through childhood and high school. No wonder Elena had never been too worried about moving out. "I'll go from here to my husband's house," she used to say with a laugh, and the rest of us had pretty much believed her. No one could really imagine Elena trying to scrape by in a tiny one-bedroom apartment, just for a spurious sense of independence.

And it was on the wrought-iron bed, with its filmy topping of mosquito net and matching white embroidered comforter, that I found the third pile of gray dust. For the longest moment, I just stood there, staring down at it, remembering my friend's quick, flashing smile, the annoying way she absolutely could not get through a movie without offering her own running commentary on it. How she'd quietly slipped a wad of money into my hand one day during our senior year so I could get the prom dress I really wanted and not the bargain gown my mother was pushing me into, because "in five years you're just not going to care what you wore."

But I still did care...although mainly because of what Elena had done to help me out, and not the dress itself.

*You see?* the voice said, its tone quiet and sad. *There's no point in you doing this. You can't save them. They're already gone. Mourn them if you must, but your path lies northward.*

I wished then that the voice were real, that it was attached to a real body, so I could grab it by the shoulders and shake it for being so thoughtless. "That's not the point," I said, my own voice trembling. "I need to know...and I need to say goodbye."

It remained silent then...wisely so. I reached out and touched the twisted wrought iron of one of the bedposts, and whispered, "Sleep well." Then I turned away and walked down the hall, descended the steps, and went out the front door, shutting it quietly behind me.

Dutchie's tail thumped happily as I got back in the Cherokee, but I didn't say anything, only reached out to pet her, to feel her silky fur beneath my cold, cold fingers. For a long moment, I just sat there, the key still in my hand, the gun digging uncomfortably into my waistband. Finally, I reached back and pulled it out, returning it to the glove compartment.

Uncle Jeremy and Aunt Susan next. Could I do it? Could I go to the house where I'd spent Thanksgiving and Christmas — Susan was my mother's sister, and they traded holidays so no one family would have to do all the work — and walk in to see my uncle and aunt reduced to dust, and my cousins as well? Well, two of them, anyway. My cousin Shane was in college in California, at Stanford, to be exact, and so he wouldn't be around. He would have died far away from his family.

*If he died, I reminded myself fiercely. He could be immune, too. You don't know.*

No, I didn't know. I just wasn't sure how I would ever find out.

Even so, I put the key in the ignition, then turned it, pointing the vehicle north and east, toward Sandia Heights. It was a longer jog than the one from my house to Elena's, but up here the streets didn't feel quite as crammed with abandoned vehicles. There was plenty of evidence of unexpected death — cars crashed into walls, into trees, into one another. And as I gained some height, I could now see that the smoke I had smelled earlier seemed to be coming from the city center. Downtown itself, maybe, or the university. I couldn't tell for sure from this distance, and it didn't really matter. That was miles from where I was now, miles from my house. It might spread that far, but I had a feeling I'd be long gone by then.

As I drove along Academy Road, I passed a PetSmart and saw the

strangest sight. All kinds of dogs were converging on the store, and right out in front I saw several of them tearing into big bags of dog food, then beginning to feast. More dogs came to join them, but there was no fighting over the food. In fact, I even saw a big pit bull mix move to one side to let a fluffy little dog — a Maltese, I guessed — come in next to him and start eating.

“What the — ” I said aloud, and Dutchie swiveled her head in my direction.

*The animals will be taken care of,* the voice told me.

I’d been so caught up in my own losses, and so relieved to have Dutchie by my side, that I hadn’t even stopped to think what would happen to all those thousands of ownerless pets left with no resources, no one to watch over them.

“They’ll be taken care of?” I demanded. “By whom?”

*They will not suffer. They are innocents.*

This whole situation was getting stranger by the minute. The way all the bodies of the dead had dissolved into dust seemed to tell me something greater than a single rampaging strain of microbe was at work here, and now, seeing the way the animals were all cooperating, hearing the voice reassure me they would be fine — well, I didn’t know what to think.

“Is this a judgment?” I asked. “Some sort of punishment?”

Silence.

“Who’s doing the punishing?” I demanded, voice shaking. “And why wasn’t I punished along with everyone else?”

Again no answer.

I drove on, knowing I would receive no reply to my questions.

## CHAPTER 6



MY AUNT and uncle's house looked intact, Uncle Jeremy's Beemer in the driveway, a little garden flag with an autumn leaf design flapping in the breeze as I got out of the Cherokee. The rest of the neighborhood looked similarly peaceful, but I knew better than to trust that outward appearance of tranquility. I knew what it hid.

Unlike Elena's house, the front door here was locked. I wished I could take that as a sign to turn around and go, but that would be the cowardly way out. Instead, I headed toward the back, to the entrance that opened on the patio. Their backyard wasn't landscaped with grass and trees like ours, but was completely paved over except for some plantings along the edges, with a pergola to protect the area to one side where they had the patio furniture and the barbecue. My hiking boots seemed overly loud as I walked across the flagstones and tested the back door.

Locked. I knocked, then waited. Nothing.

I knocked again, calling out, half in a whisper, "Uncle Jeremy? Aunt Susan?"

No reply, but, to be fair, I wasn't sure if I'd been loud enough for anyone to really hear me inside. Maybe I'd kept my voice down because I wanted an excuse not to know.

I tried peeking inside, but the blinds were closed almost all the way, and

so I couldn't really see anything. The planter next to me was bordered with large rocks; I wondered if I should pick one up and smash a window in. Even if by some miracle someone was alive inside, I didn't think they'd get too angry about me breaking a window to check on them. At least, I hoped they wouldn't.

Bending down, I wrapped my fingers around one of the rocks. At the same time, the voice thundered in my head, *Behind you!*

I whirled, rock still in one hand. Standing a few paces away was probably the last person I'd expected to see — Chris Bowman, who lived next door to my aunt and uncle, and who I had always found extremely creepy. He was a few years older than I but still lived at home, and more than once I'd heard my aunt say “what a shame” it was that his parents had to deal with him, but I never was able to find out exactly what she meant by that. I'd always assumed Chris maybe had a substance abuse problem, or possibly mental health issues. Frankly, I didn't want to get close enough to him to find out, as it seemed that every time my family came to visit, he'd have some excuse to be outside, watering the flower border or getting the mail — anything so he could stand there and watch me with his pale eyes until I disappeared inside my aunt and uncle's house.

Back then, his behavior hadn't worried me too much, because I knew if he actually tried anything, my father would have made sure it never happened again. But now, with the whole world dead except for me and Albuquerque's biggest creep?

My fingers tightened around the rock I held, but I kept it behind me and hoped he hadn't noticed as I picked it up. Hard to say, because I hadn't even heard him approach. He was wearing his typical costume of baggy jeans and an oversized T-shirt — this one emblazoned with a Captain America shield — and his high-topped Converse apparently hadn't made any sound as he crossed the flagstones of the patio.

“Chris?” I finally managed, because one of us had to say something, and

it seemed he was content to just stand there and stare at me with those weird pale blue eyes of his.

Finally, his mouth curved in a smile. His teeth were slightly yellowish, as was his skin and hair. Everything about him seemed vaguely yellow, except his eyes. “You’re immune,” he said, and made the oddest sound, like a choked little giggle.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. “Maybe,” I replied. “Or maybe I just haven’t gotten sick yet.”

“No, you’re immune.” His pale gaze raked me up and down, and I tensed. The clothes I wore were anything but revealing, and yet the way he was looking at me made me feel as if I wasn’t wearing anything at all...that he’d spent way too much time imagining what I looked like naked. “Just like me.”

I wanted to retort, *I am nothing like you*, but something held me back. Yes, I had that rock in my hand. Belatedly, I realized that was all I had, since in my haste to get out of the car and up to my aunt and uncle’s front door, I’d left the gun in the glove compartment of the Cherokee. Shit.

“This is perfect,” he went on, his tone almost dreamy. “Everyone gone except you and me. Just the way I always wanted it.”

Jesus Christ. I could feel the sharp edges of the rock biting into my fingers and palm. If I threw it, would it be enough to knock him out, or at least put him off balance enough for me to bolt to the car? I had no idea. Normally, I’d say I was pretty strong...but was I strong enough?

“Um, Chris,” I said, figuring that ignoring his comment seemed safest in that moment, “what about your parents? Your neighbors on the other side?”

An expression of annoyance crossed his lumpy features. “I *told* you. They’re all gone. Everyone on the whole street. I checked.” A pause, and then he added, “Your aunt and uncle, too, and your cousins. I went in and looked, then locked the door when I came back out. I figured no one else would be going in there.” The annoyed look morphed into one of sly knowing. “So you won’t need that rock to break in. Why don’t you give it to

me?”

I didn't reply. He frowned, taking a step toward me, eyes fixed on my face, greedy, hungry. A pale pink tongue darted out to moisten his lips, and I felt my stomach heave.

*Now, Jessica!*

Without stopping to think, I whipped my arm around and hurled the rock at Chris's head with all the strength I possessed. It hit him square in the temple, and he let out a shocked cry, eyes wide and disbelieving, then backed away from me as blood began to pour through the fingers he put up against the wound.

That was the only opening I would get, I knew. I tore out of there, bolting as if someone had just shot off a starter pistol at a track meet. Behind me, I could hear Chris cursing, calling me a bitch and worse — but he was also coming after me. And though he was soft-looking and most likely out of shape, he was also almost a foot taller than I, which meant his legs could cover the ground a lot more quickly.

If I looked back, I'd be lost. I could only continue to pound my way toward the Cherokee, one hand scrabbling in my pants pocket for the key as I ran. My fingers closed around the fob, and I hit the “unlock” button while I was still a good twenty feet away. The lights flashed, and from the passenger seat I could hear Dutchie bark — not a friendly bark of greeting, but a sharp, strained one, as if warning me.

A cold, clammy hand caught hold of my bicep and spun me around. Chris's washed-out blue eyes, even more blindingly pale now that they were circled by bright red blood flowing down from the gash in his head, bored into me.

“You're going to regret that.”

“Chris, please — ” I thought I'd been scared before, watching my family die, wondering when the fever would rise up to consume me as well, but that was an entirely different species of fear from what I was experiencing now.

This was far more personal, in a way, because I knew all too well what Chris Bowman wanted from me.

“Shut up.” His fingers tightened on my arm, and he began to pull me toward him. Overcome by panic, I struggled against him, tasting the sourness of bile in my mouth, knowing if he touched me in a way that was any more intimate than this, I would be sick. I drove my knee upward the way my father had taught me, and I hoped I could catch Chris in the groin, but he seemed to guess what I had planned and kicked out at me, catching me in the shin and sending me flying to the ground, where I hit the sidewalk with a jolt, pain lancing up through my wrists as I jammed down into them with almost all my weight.

Tears of pain and fury leaped to my eyes, but I couldn't lose it now. I started to crawl toward the SUV, only to feel Chris's hands on me again, this time around my waist. I kicked back at him, but he let go of me with one hand so he could catch my ankle and flip me over.

Then he was looming over me, his horrific bloodstained face getting closer and closer. I knew what he was going to do, and I knew I wouldn't be able to stop him — he was bigger and stronger, and just plain crazy, and I now had at least one, if not two, sprained wrists.

And then...then it was as if a pair of invisible hands caught hold of him, pulling him away from me, flinging him backward as if he weighed nothing, was only a child's toy someone had left out on the lawn. He hit the trunk of the palm tree in my aunt and uncle's yard with a sickening crunch, then slid down, his head hanging at a strange angle. Was his neck broken? No way was I going to get close enough to find out.

I didn't even realize I was saying the words out loud until I heard them coming from my mouth. “What the — ”

The voice sounded stern and sad. *Do you see now why I did not want you to come here?*

“Point taken,” I panted, and got shakily to my feet. Both my wrists were

aching, and I hoped I'd be able to get the Cherokee home. Not that I had much choice. It was the only safe haven I knew.

Wincing, I dug the key out of my pocket and climbed into the SUV, trying to maneuver with my elbows so I wouldn't have to bend my wrists any more than was strictly necessary. Dutchie whined and tried to lick my face.

"I'm okay, sweetie," I told her, more for her sake than because I really believed what I was saying.

Trying to put on the seatbelt would have been excruciating. Besides, with all the wrecks littering the roads, I wouldn't be driving much above twenty-five miles an hour anyway. Somehow I managed to get the car started, then bit my lip in pain as I put the Cherokee in gear. At least I'd been parked at the curb and not in the driveway, so I didn't have to worry about backing out or anything.

The throbbing ache in my wrists prevented me from thinking about anything except getting back to the house. I drove slowly, grinding my teeth whenever I had to maneuver around abandoned cars by going up on the curb. Every jolt and jounce felt magnified a hundredfold.

Finally, though, I made it back to my street and eased the car into the driveway, then turned off the engine. I knew there was no way I could reach across and open the passenger door from the inside, so I slid out and went around the front of the SUV. Dutchie bounded out the second she was free to do so, and I retrieved the gun from the glove compartment before shutting the door behind her and clicking the lock button on the remote.

Limping, since I'd realized in that moment just how much my right knee hurt as well, I went in through the back door and locked it behind me. Then I headed to the front of the house to test the lock there as well. All was as it should be, but I couldn't stop shaking.

Dutchie sat in the living room and watched as I secured the house. Then she tilted her head toward the clock over the fireplace, as if to say, *It's lunchtime, you know.*

Despite everything, I couldn't help giving a rusty chuckle. "Soon, Dutchie. I need to take care of me first."

We had a very well-stocked first aid kit in one of the cupboards in the service porch. It hurt just to reach up and get it down, but I made myself do it. First I attended to the superficial scratches on the palms of my hands, gritting my teeth as I swabbed them with alcohol pads, and then I wrapped both wrists with Ace bandages. They still ached, but not as badly. My knee was banged up, but I hadn't torn my jeans, so I figured any bruises I'd gotten would heal on their own.

Afterward, I limped into the kitchen and got Dutchie some more chicken. Besides the leftover dog biscuits, there was also a partial bag of dry dog food in the pantry that I could feed her, but I figured I might as well get rid of the perishable stuff first.

Then it was some water for me, and a makeshift sandwich of wheat bread and butter and the last of the strawberry jelly. My hand shook as I lifted the sandwich to my mouth, but I made myself eat anyway. That burst of panic, of terror, had used up a lot of my reserves.

The silence in the house seemed to press on my ears. I noticed the voice had been suspiciously quiet since I'd returned.

Finally, I set down my water bottle and snapped, "All right, you want to tell me what the hell *that* was all about? How can a pasty creep like Chris Bowman be immune when everyone else is dead?"

No reply at first. Then it was as if someone sighed quietly, far back in my mind. *We cannot control who is immune, only what happens to them after they have survived.*

"'We'?" I demanded, figuring I'd ask the most pressing question first. "Who is 'we'?"

The resulting silence was so drawn out that I was fairly certain I wouldn't get a reply, that I'd asked exactly the wrong question. Finally, the voice said, *That is not important.*

“It’s important to me.” I hurt all over, and I was tired of the sense I’d begun to have that something huge was behind all this, something I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to understand. “Who are you?”

This time the answer came back almost at once. *I am not at liberty to say.*

That answer only made the impotent rage within me burn all the hotter. This last evasion was about all I could take at the moment. “What the hell is this — a White House press conference?”

*You are upset. This is understandable. But tell me — have I not done whatever I could to protect you?*

I recalled how Chris Bowman had been torn away from me by invisible hands, thrown up against that palm tree as if he weighed nothing, even though he was six feet, two inches of solid pudge. “Was that you?”

*My only wish is for your safety. That is why you need to leave this place and go north.*

So we were back to that again. I had to admit, after this morning’s events, I was a little more open to the idea of getting the hell out of Albuquerque and not looking back. Part of me — the stubborn part — still wanted to go to Tori’s house, to see for myself what had happened to her and her family. But I also knew I was putting myself at risk every time I set foot out the door. A great deal of the population had vanished during the previous three days, but not all of it...and it was those remnants I had to worry about.

“All right,” I said wearily. “I’ll think about it.”

Maybe I was only talking to myself. Right then, I didn’t want to think too hard about the whole insane situation.



THAT AFTERNOON I DOZED A LITTLE, and when I woke up, I actually felt better. My wrists didn’t ache as much, and the abrasions on my hands already looked completely scabbed over. What the hell? Was this part of the “voice”

— I didn't know how else to think of him, or it — watching over me? Did he have some way of making me heal far faster than I normally would?

At any other time, I would have dismissed the notion as crazy, but so many insane things had happened since Monday that I couldn't reject any of them outright. Maybe my particular immunity brought with it certain other benefits, although I couldn't begin to think how that worked. I'd always been a healthy person, so I bounced back from bumps and bruises and sprains fairly quickly — but not this quickly.

Putting that conundrum aside to ponder at a later date, I decided to take stock of what I had in the house, and what else I would need in the way of supplies. We had a good deal of camping gear, so I was set when it came to sleeping bags and Coleman lanterns and all that sort of stuff. The first aid kit was stocked well enough for ordinary scrapes and bruises and strains, but I wondered if I should hit up a few of the local pharmacies and get myself antibiotics, some kind of painkillers, cough and cold medicine...a decent supply of my birth control pills. Not that I was expecting to get laid anytime soon — Chris Bowman's bloodied face flashed into my mind, and I shuddered — but the pills did help to keep my periods manageable. And that was another thing. I'd need sanitary supplies, enough to last me for a while. Making do with rags the way they did in the bad old days was not something I wanted to face quite yet.

Night began to fall again, and I moved around the ground floor, lighting candles. I still didn't want to go upstairs, for some reason felt safer here on the couch. I fed Dutchie the last of the chicken, and snacked on a couple of granola bars, trying to ignore how much my body ached for something more substantial. I wasn't quite at the point of being willing to kill for a cheeseburger, but I could see myself heading down that road in a couple of days.

I spoke into the stillness of the house. "So if I'm supposed to head north, where exactly am I going? Santa Fe? Taos? Colorado?"

*Go north, and I will guide you where you need to go.*

“That’s not an answer.”

*It’s all the answer you require.*

“You’re a real pain in the ass, you know that?”

Something that might have been a chuckle. *I have been told that on occasion, if not in those precise words.*

“But you’re still not going to tell me where I’m going.”

*No.*

Well, at least he was being honest. I’d begun thinking of the voice as “him,” although it still could have been merely a product of my fevered imagination, of a mind that couldn’t handle all the death and destruction around it, and so had slipped into a nice, cozy form of psychosis.

Maybe so, but that didn’t explain the way Chris Bowman had been torn away from me, as if some invisible giant had grabbed him and thrown him across the yard.

Telekinesis? Some kind of delayed-onset *X-Men* action?

Okay, now I was beginning to sound ridiculous even to myself.

“All right,” I said. “I’m convinced. Mostly because I’m not sure that creeper doesn’t know where I live...if he’s still alive.” A pause then, while I waited for the voice to break in and tell me that oh, yes, Chris Bowman was dead, and I needn’t worry about him any longer.

But I heard no such thing, just a silence that began to echo in my ears. Great. So apparently Mr. Bowman wasn’t exactly down for the count.

I took in a breath and plunged ahead. “And anyway, staying here is starting to sound less and less attractive. I’ll head out in the morning after I get some more supplies.”

*You won’t need them.*

This was said flatly, as if he didn’t expect me to contradict him. “Well, sorry, but since you won’t tell me where I’m going or how long the journey is going to take, I need to be prepared. And that means getting a few things. I’ll

be careful.”

*The way you were careful at your aunt and uncle’s house?*

Bristling, I replied, “Okay, I was caught off guard. That’s not going to happen again.”

No reply. I wasn’t sure whether that meant the voice had run out of arguments to give me, or whether it was simply tired of me throwing up roadblocks. I decided to take its silence as tacit agreement with my plan. And really, it shouldn’t be that big a deal. The Walgreens I frequented was less than a mile from my house. I’d pack everything else I needed in advance, then go there on my way out of town. Surely the voice couldn’t have any real problem with that?

It probably could, but unless it woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me everything I was doing wrong, I was going with it.



FALLING asleep that night was difficult. The silence rattled me; every creak and sigh of the house contracting as the night air grew colder made me startle, thinking Chris the Creeper had returned to finish what he’d started outside my aunt and uncle’s house. Well, the joke would be on him — I had the revolver right next to me on the coffee table, and had gotten the shotgun from the gun safe and was lying with it propped up against the arm of the sofa near my head. He’d be a red smear on the wall before he had time to blink.

But the guns didn’t reassure me as much as I’d thought they would. Maybe it was more that I’d begun to pick at what the voice had said to me, how he’d said that “we” — meaning him and others like him, I supposed, whatever or whoever they were — hadn’t controlled who lived and who died of the Heat, but that they did have some say in what happened to the survivors. That was a frightening thought. True, everything he’d done so far

seemed to have been for my benefit...but why?

I realized he hadn't called me "beloved" for a while. Was that an oversight, or had all my questions and my ignoring of his advice annoyed him enough that I wasn't quite so beloved anymore? The thought bothered me a little...but not as much as contemplating what it might mean to be the beloved of some incorporeal being who spoke to me only in my thoughts.

If he was even real. I really could just be imagining the whole thing. After all, there were accounts of mothers going ballistic and lifting trucks off their toddlers or whatever. Wasn't it possible that I'd been the one to fling Chris Bowman away from me, and my mind had just embellished the event so it seemed as if some kind of supernatural force was involved?

I didn't know. And the worst part was, I had no one to talk to about my situation, except a disembodied voice that might or might not be merely a figment of my imagination. For most of the day, I'd managed to push to one side the pain of losing my family, my friends, but now as I sat there in the dark, one candle flickering on the coffee table, it all seemed to come back in a rush, like a great, gaping wound in my middle where my heart had been torn out. I was twenty-four years old, but right then all I wanted was my mother. I wanted her to hug me and tell me it was all going to be okay.

And then I felt him there, as I had earlier, like a wash of warmth moving over me, strong arms around me, the touch of an unseen mouth against my tumbled hair. *Ah, beloved, you do not believe me now, but it will get better. Sleep now, and leave the pain for another day.*

I opened my mouth to speak, but I found I didn't have the strength to form any words. Instead, darkness washed over me, taking me along with it. In that moment, I knew I lacked the strength to fight the inevitable.

## CHAPTER 7



DUTCHIE'S GROWLING WOKE ME. I startled awake, sitting bolt upright and blinking against the darkness. Only it wasn't completely dark, as the pillar candle still burned bravely in its dish on the coffee table. Thank God for that, because the dog was sitting in front of the door, teeth bared in a snarl, a deep, bone-rattling growl rumbling within her throat.

Without thinking, I pushed back the blankets that covered me and grabbed the shotgun. Yes, the .357 had great stopping power, but I knew anything I hit with that shotgun would go down and stay down. Well, except for the parts that got splattered on any nearby walls. And if I did somehow manage to miss, that Remington would make a pretty decent club.

My heart was hammering away in my chest, but I made myself go to the peephole in the front door and attempt to peer out. Fat lot of good that did — the night outside was pitch black, with not a hint of a moon. I couldn't even see the rose of Sharon bushes on either side of the doorway.

But the whole time Dutchie didn't stop growling, although as I backed away from the door, shotgun still clenched in my right hand, she moved as well, padding toward the back of the house.

Great. The front door was much bigger and heavier than the back door. Anyone sufficiently motivated could kick in the door off the service porch.

I had a feeling that if he was still ambulatory, Chris Bowman would be

feeling really motivated right around now. Maybe I was just being paranoid, since I had no idea how he could have even found me. We weren't exactly what you could call listed in the phone book; cops tended to be circumspect about that sort of thing. Then again, Chris seemed like the type who might have mastered the finer points of hacking into secure databases, and considering his apparent obsession with me....

Shit.

Dutchie trotted ahead of me. Her ears were up, nose pointed directly toward the service porch at the rear of the kitchen. And that was when I heard it, too — a faint scratching noise coming from the back door. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought it was one of the other neighborhood dogs trying to get in. But after seeing that whole "peaceable kingdom" bit at the PetSmart up in Sandia Heights, I knew Dutchie wouldn't be growling like that if it was simply another dog on the other side of that door.

I'd already loaded the shotgun before I lay down to sleep, so all I had to do was pump it to bring a shell into the chamber. Even though I could feel my heart still wailing away in my chest, I managed to call out in what sounded like a reasonably steady voice, "Whoever that is, back away. I'm armed, and I will not hesitate to shoot."

There. My father would've been proud, if he'd been around to hear that.

No reply, of course. Dutchie sat down on her haunches, then looked up at me and gave a questioning whine. It seemed obvious she thought she'd done her job in warning me that something was out there, and now it was my turn to do something about it.

Not unreasonable of her, but no way was I going to reach out and open that door. If I had to stay here all night with the shotgun pointed at the back entrance to the house, I would.

That odd scratching noise started up again. I gritted my teeth, wondering if I should send off a warning shot. But all that would do was mess up the back door, and what if that scratching noise was coming from an ambitious

rat or something? I'd look like an idiot, and worse, I would've completely compromised my home's security.

I dragged out the step stool and sat down on it, shotgun still pointed toward the back door. Dutchie stayed where she was, although she did send me an inquiring look over one shoulder. I shook my head at her, and she settled down in a sphinx-like position, still at attention, snout in a direct line with the doorknob. In that moment, I wondered whether I should even be trusting Dutchie's instincts. Obviously, she was a very good dog, but she wasn't *my* dog. I didn't know if she was a great watch dog or the type to go off half-cocked at every random sound. Yes, there was something outside, but it didn't necessarily have to be anything threatening. For all I knew, it could have been a branch from the willow bush just outside the back stoop scratching on the doorframe or something.

But then the door creaked open, and my breath caught in my throat. Standing there was Chris Bowman, face puffed and bruised, pale eyes glaring at me. Something glinted in one hand, reflecting the faint light from the jar candle I'd left lit in the kitchen.

Lock picks. Son of a bitch. Trust a maladjusted bastard like Chris the Creep to know how to pick locks.

Slowly, I got to my feet, the gun still trained on him. "Get out, Chris."

His eyes were still fixed on my face, as if he hadn't even registered the Remington pump-action shotgun in my hands. "No. We're the only survivors. We're meant to be together."

My finger was resting on the trigger. Just the slightest squeeze, and he'd be splatter on the doorframe. Could I kill someone, though, just like that? Before, when I'd thrown the rock at his head, I'd only meant to slow him down, to give myself enough time to get safely away. The shotgun was an entirely different story.

"I don't want to hurt you, Chris," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady, just as I willed my hands not to shake as I gripped the shotgun. "The

two of us being immune? It's just an accident of biology. It doesn't mean anything. So please, go back home."

For the first time, he glanced away from my eyes, down at the gun I held. A look of almost comical confusion passed over his puffy features. "But I *want* you."

My stomach twisted, and right then I was glad I hadn't eaten anything more than that bread and jelly sandwich a few hours earlier...or whenever it had been. I wasn't wearing a watch, and of course the digital clocks on the appliances in the kitchen had died along with everything else when the power went out.

"But I don't want you, Chris," I said, and right then my voice did contain a betraying tremor that I hated, although I couldn't do anything about it. "I told you, I don't want to hurt you. But I will. My dad was a cop, and he taught me how to use this. And I will."

During this little speech, Chris's eyes grew narrower and narrower, as if he was finally processing my rejection of him. His lip curled, and he said, "You don't have the guts," right before he lunged at me.

Without thinking, I let my finger jerk on the trigger. At the same time, it was as if a powerful hand had grasped the barrel, pointing it away from Chris so all I did was blow a hole in the ceiling, destroying the combination light/fan fixture there and raining drywall everywhere. I blinked, sure the creep was going to come after me, now that I'd missed so heinously, but instead something seemed to grab him by the neck, squeezing so his eyes began to bulge and his feet scrabbled helplessly against the linoleum of the laundry room floor.

A few gurgling moans came from his throat, and then once again he was flung away from me, this time with so much force that he flew across the backyard, hitting the corner of the garage before tumbling in a heap into the irises that still half-heartedly grew there. Shaking, I tightened my hold on the shotgun and started down the back steps toward him, only to hear the voice

say,

*Stop, Jessica. There is no need.*

I paused on the bottom stair. “That — that was you?”

Yes.

“And he’s — ”

*Yes. I did what I should have done back at your aunt and uncle’s house.*

My breath seemed to go out of me in a *whoosh*, and I found myself sitting down hard on the step, the concrete cold even through my jeans. Thank God at least I’d gone to bed fully dressed, except for my hiking boots. I looked over at the gun I still held.

“I wouldn’t have missed, would I?”

*No. You would have killed him, had I not pushed the gun away. I did not want that on your conscience.*

So...a being who would go out of his way to protect me, but didn’t think twice about killing someone else. Not that Chris Bowman was exactly a wonderful specimen of humanity, one worth saving.

“Are you an angel?” I asked abruptly.

Another of those low chuckles. *Hardly. But you are safe now, so you should go back inside and try to sleep.*

“You seriously expect me to sleep after that?”

*Yes. You are safe now. No one else knows of your presence in this house. You can sleep here, and then leave tomorrow morning.*

I knew I’d exhausted all my arguments. After pushing myself to my feet, I glanced over toward where Chris Bowman’s body lay, twisted and limp in the ruin of what was once my mother’s prized bed of irises.

*I will take care of that. Go to sleep, Jessica.*

Bowing my head, I nodded, then went back inside and locked the door. Even though the voice had told me I was safe, I still took the step stool and wedged it up under the knob of the back door. Maybe it was a foolish gesture, but it made me feel a little bit better.

Dutchie looked up at me and wagged her tail, teeth showing in a doggy smile. “Okay,” I said. “You get a treat for the warning.” I got out a dog biscuit and gave it to her before heading back to my makeshift bed on the living room couch, where I leaned the shotgun up against the sofa’s arm once more. Maybe I wouldn’t need it, but I knew I’d sleep better if it was there.

Assuming I slept at all, of course.



I DID, finally, and awoke to bright sunshine peeking around the edges of the living room curtains. The clock above the fireplace was battery-operated, and so had no problem telling me that the time was ten minutes until eight.

When I’d laid my head down on the sofa pillow the night before, I had no idea I’d sleep in that much. The confrontation with Chris Bowman must have taken more out of me than I thought. Speaking of which....

After pushing the blankets covering me off to one side, I rose and padded in sock feet to the back door. The step stool was still there, shoved up under the doorknob. I removed it and set it to lean against the wall, then opened the door and looked outside, toward the garage. The bright morning sunlight clearly revealed the clump of smashed iris plants where Chris Bowman had landed the night before, but his body was gone. No blood, no nothing.

If I looked more closely, would there be a pile of ashes half hidden among the blade-like iris leaves? But no, he’d died from severe head trauma, not the Heat. The body had been simply...taken away.

Deciding it was best not to contemplate exactly how that had happened... or what had been done with him...I went back inside and poured Dutchie some fresh water from one of the bottles in the pantry, and gave her a good helping of dry dog food. She wolfed it down, tail wagging the whole time, so obviously she hadn’t been irrevocably scarred by the events of the night before.

I wasn't sure I could say the same for myself, but I had other things I needed to focus on. The day before, I'd told the voice I would pack up and leave this morning, so that's what I needed to do — assess what I would take with me, based on how much I could fit into the Cherokee. With the back seats folded down, I really could haul a good deal of gear, so I didn't think space would be too much of a problem.

More bread and butter for breakfast, supplemented with some dried apricots I found smashed into one corner of the pantry. My mother had been a very organized woman, but Devin was a source of chaos that could defeat even the most orderly person. I started stacking what was salvageable on the breakfast bar: the rest of that bag of apricots, a pile of granola bars, an unopened bag of blue corn chips, the remnants of the dry food and the dog biscuits for Dutchie. That would get us started, and I figured I could always stock up on a few more things in the food section of the Walgreens.

*Truly, you do not need that much.* The voice sounded almost amused this time.

“Well, until you're telling me how far I'm driving, I'm going to over-pack,” I said, setting the half-used flat of bottled water next to the dog food.

*Jessica, do you not like surprises?*

“Not particularly, no.” I surveyed the meager pile and thought I really wasn't overdoing it by anyone's standards. True, I could start piling up the economy-sized cans of tomato sauce and beans my mother had bought at Costco, but I could get that stuff anywhere if necessary. It wasn't as if there was going to be a lot of competition for the enormous stockpiles of canned food left behind by the mostly deceased people of New Mexico.

*Well, I think you will like this surprise.*

Since that reply just annoyed me — what was I, five? — I made a noncommittal sound in my throat and headed out the back door, up to my apartment. This time, Dutchie didn't seem too inclined to follow me. I guessed the reason why when I saw her nose around the backyard, then squat

to pee. The second movement, so to speak, would probably follow shortly, but I didn't see any need to hang around for that.

Like an idiot, I'd left the door to my apartment unlocked, but, as far as I could tell, Chris hadn't made it up here. It was possible that he'd detected the faint glow of the candles from inside the main house and realized that was where I'd bunked down. Just as well, because I didn't know if I could have brought any of my belongings with me if I'd known he'd pawed through them.

In my closet I had one of those airline-regulation hard-sided suitcases, the kind with wheels, as well as two largish duffle bags. I filled one of the duffle bags with underwear and bras and socks, along with a couple of sleep shirts. The other duffle bag got shoe-carrying duty — which turned out not to be much, since I only packed my trail shoes, a pair of knee-high boots with rubber soles, and one pair of flip-flops. And...well, I didn't see where I would ever wear them again, but I didn't want to leave behind my pretty black flats with the scallop detail, or the high-heeled sandals with the jeweled embellishment. Maybe I could just take them out from time to time and fondle them. I loved those sandals.

I filled up the remainder of the duffle bag with my toiletries, although I left behind all the hair-prep tools. What was the point, when there was no more electricity? Maybe if I got really bored I'd invent a solar-powered blow dryer, but in the meantime, that was a whole lot of stuff I didn't need to drag along.

I took the same no-nonsense approach with my clothes: jeans and T-shirts in both short- and long-sleeved varieties, a flannel shirt I'd inherited from my ex-boyfriend (he was an ass, but that shirt was soooo soft), the all-weather anorak I used when going on hikes. If I really was going north, I'd need some protection, so I added my dark green plaid cashmere scarf and lined leather gloves to the pile, along with the black knitted cap that Elena had once complained made me look like I was about to hold up a liquor store.

Getting it all to fit was a challenge, although leaving out the anorak helped. I could always lay it down in the back of the SUV. When my gaze traveled back to the closet, where all my “fun” clothes still hung, looking a bit forlorn and abandoned, it lingered on the black dress I’d worn out for drinks on my birthday. All right, I knew there was no reason I’d ever need to wear that dress again, but I loved the way it fit, the way it seemed to follow all the curves of my body without clinging too much. But it was made of knit fabric and wouldn’t take up that much room.

Off the hanger, it did roll up into a surprisingly small ball. I tucked the dress into a corner of the suitcase and then zipped the thing closed. A sound outside on the landing made me start, but it was only Dutchie, coming up to investigate what I was doing.

“Just about done,” I told her, lugging the suitcase off the bed and picking up the lighter of the two duffle bags, the one with my underthings in it. I’d come back for the other duffle bag and my coat.

The dog ran ahead of me down the stairs, tail wagging. It seemed she knew what these preparations meant — that I’d be going in the Cherokee soon, and that meant she’d be going along as well.

I set the luggage down by the breakfast bar, then returned to my apartment and gathered up the rest of my things. Sitting on the small side table next to the couch was a wedding photo of my parents, my mother with impossible big ’80s hair but looking beautiful even so, and next to it a snapshot taken last year of the whole family at a football game, Devin wearing his shoulder pads, sweaty and grinning proudly. My heart clenched when I looked at their faces, and yet I knew I couldn’t leave them behind. What if I began to forget what they looked like?

Fighting back tears, I shoved the pictures, frames and all, into my oversized purple purse; I wasn’t sure why I was bringing it, since the backpack I was taking with the rest of the camping equipment was a lot more practical. But that purse seemed to be the last reminder of the “old” me I had

— the cell phone, useless now, although a few days earlier I would have said I couldn't have lasted more than a few hours without it; the tube of lip gloss; my wallet; stubs from movies I'd seen over the last few months; a pen and some tissue, because my mother told me I should always carry a pen and Kleenex.

And my keys. I went out onto the landing, closed the door behind me, and then locked it. I couldn't really say why, as I doubted any survivors — if there were more besides me and the late Chris Bowman — would bother coming all the way back here to loot the apartment. Our house was one of the more modest ones on the street; there were plenty of better pickings elsewhere.

But that thought only served to depress me, as if the things my parents had worked so hard for had turned out to be worth very little in the end. The first stinging pinpricks of tears told me I'd better abandon that line of thought, as I still had a lot to do.

And maybe, just maybe, I'd feel better once I was gone and away from the place that now only served to remind me of everything I'd lost.



IN THE END, the Cherokee was full but not filled. I put two bottles of water in the cup holders, patted the passenger seat so Dutchie would know it was time to get in, and shut the door behind her. After that, I climbed in behind the wheel and closed my own door.

All the exertion had made my wrists start to ache again, but only slightly, which just proved some sort of supernatural healing must be going on. Not that I was going to argue. Heading out into the world while even partly incapacitated wasn't a very good idea.

So...had my unseen guardian speeded up my healing process so my injuries wouldn't slow down my departure?

I didn't know how I should feel about that.

No point in brooding over it now, though. I was just glad that I was able to back out of the driveway without my wrists or hands hurting too much. Today, although the sky was mainly blue, I could see clouds beginning to drift in from the northeast. I hoped they didn't indicate some kind of weather was on the way; bad enough that the voice expected me to head out of town in a direction of his choosing without having to handle driving in heavy rain as well.

He — or it — had been conspicuously silent so far this morning. It could simply be that he had no reason to intervene while I was packing, since I was already doing his bidding by prepping to get out of Albuquerque.

The local Walgreens was around a half mile from my house. Its parking lot backed up to a middle school, and it felt stranger than strange to get out of the SUV and not see a bunch of kids running around on the soccer field and the track. At least it was far enough away that I couldn't tell if those fields had little piles of gray dust scattered around on them. No, I realized they probably wouldn't, as the schools had been closed down fairly quickly...not that it had made much of a difference in the end.

As I approached the drugstore, I saw that the front doors had been smashed in. Glass was strewn everywhere. My hackles went up, and I almost reached back and pulled out the Glock, which I'd tucked into my waistband. The whole incident with Chris Bowman had put me more than a little on edge, and I'd decided to drive with the gun on me. The S&W was way too big for that, though, so I'd gone with the Glock. It would still flatten someone, especially if I hit them with multiple rounds.

But as I entered the store, glass crunching under my hiking boots, it seemed the place was deserted enough. Dark, too — I supposed I should have been expecting that, but in my mind's eye the Walgreens was always brightly lit, blazing with fluorescent illumination. I paused by the checkout counter, which was close enough to the door that I could see what I was doing, and

plucked one of the keychain flashlights off the display there. Not as good as my father's Maglite, which was buried deep in the cargo area of the car, but it would do.

I turned on the flashlight, grabbed a cart, and made my way to the back of the store where the pharmacy was located. All around me, I could see evidence of looting — empty shelves, racks overturned, aisles filled with discarded bags of Doritos, rolls of toilet paper, kids' toys. My heart sank. If so much had been taken, what would be left for me to collect?

As it turned out, not a heck of a lot.

There were still some generic medications left in the first aid aisle — ibuprofen, allergy remedies, sore throat lozenges. I grabbed boxes haphazardly and threw them into the cart I'd picked up at the front of the store, figuring something was better than nothing. All was chaos behind the pharmacy counter. I didn't know if all those items had been taken by people who were sick and trying desperately to alleviate their symptoms, or whether any survivors had realized there was a lot of heavy-duty stuff here just ripe for the picking.

Pretty much anything with an opiate in it was gone, I realized as I ran the flashlight's beam over the shelves. I could forget about easing the pain of armageddon with a little Oxycontin. All of the high-powered stuff was gone, except for one bottle of codeine-laced cough syrup high on a shelf. I took that, figuring it might come in handy.

The antibiotics were also ransacked, although I found a couple of bottles of tetracycline. Old school, but it would still work just fine for an infected wound or a bout of bronchitis. They got added to the growing pile in the cart.

A lot of the medications had names I didn't even recognize, so I passed all those by. What I really wanted was the birth control pills, and I found those when I went around a corner, on a set of shelves that were a little disorganized but mainly intact. It made sense; most people probably weren't thinking of family planning when they were being beaten down by the

modern-day equivalent of a Biblical plague.

A small sigh of relief escaped my lips when I found the Ortho-Novum, and I gathered up every little packet they had. Enough to last me for a year, from the looks of it. After that, well...I'd worry about that then.

*Like you're really going to be alive a year from now.*

I pushed that thought out of my head. Two days ago, I was sure I'd be dead along with everyone else, and yet here I still was. Never say die.

That had been a favorite phrase of my mother's. How woefully inappropriate.

Mouth tightening, I moved the flashlight I carried over the shelves once more to make sure I wasn't missing anything. The problem was, I didn't get sick all that often, and even when I did, regular over-the-counter stuff worked just fine for me. I could be leaving something valuable behind here and wouldn't even know it.

*You can't take everything,* I told myself. Anyway, it was creepy in here, blundering around in the dark with only a single small flashlight to relieve the gloom. Better for me to just cut my losses and get out. It wasn't as if there wouldn't be more drugstores between here and...wherever I was going.

That thought reassured me somewhat, so I stepped out from behind the counter and made my way two aisles over, where the feminine products were located. I didn't pay attention to brand or type, but just tossed boxes of tampons and packages of maxi pads into the cart until I was almost out of room. That should do me for a while, and I still needed to see if anything edible had been left behind.

I began walking toward the far left of the store, where I knew the food was located. Anything in the refrigerated case would be spoiled — and I was glad the doors were all shut, as otherwise the smell probably would have been nasty as hell — but there could still be chips and crackers and cookies, probably some beef jerky and other things of that ilk as well.

Not the healthiest of diets, but sometimes you had to take what you could

get.

Figuring I should try to pick up some food for Dutchie as well, I stopped at the aisle where the drugstore usually stocked dog treats and a few brands of dry and canned food — not the stuff I would have chosen to feed her under ideal circumstances, but it would have been better than nothing. However, for some strange reason, those shelves were completely picked over. I even skidded on some scattered pellets of dry food before I regained my balance and glanced down to see that a big bag of Purina had been torn open, its contents scattered across the floor.

Muttering a curse, I left that aisle and went to the snack food section, which was in slightly better shape, and started gathering up what I could. By the time I'd dropped a couple of packets of beef jerky and a box of Ritz crackers on top of the pile in my basket, it was full, and I figured I needed to get going. It was almost noon, according to the watch I'd fished out of my nightstand and strapped on my wrist. A while back I'd almost stopped wearing watches, since I could just look at my phone, but now the watch was the only thing telling me what time it actually was. Yes, I had the clock in the Cherokee, but that only helped when I was driving.

I'd just passed the checkout counter — trying to quash my very real sensation of guilt over walking out with a bunch of stuff I hadn't paid for — when a shadow filled the doorway. Almost without thinking, I reached back for the Glock tucked into my waistband. Yes, Chris Bowman was still dead and gone, but all sorts of predators could still be out there. Or at least as many as the Heat had allowed to survive.

Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw the shadow was that of a man, probably in his late forties, smiling at me nervously.

"I'm sorry I startled you," he said, seeming to take note of how I remained rooted in the spot where I'd stopped by the checkout. "It's just — I haven't seen anyone else alive for two days. I thought I was the only one."

"There are a couple of us, I think," I responded. He looked pretty

harmless, with his thinning dark hair and worried eyes, but I was still wary. “I never heard anything about the mortality rate. Everything went so...fast.”

He nodded, his gaze traveling to the cart in front of me and then back up to my face. I stiffened, worried I’d see the same sort of predatory stare that Chris Bowman had given me, but this stranger only seemed relieved that he wasn’t the only living person left in Albuquerque. “It was 99.8 percent. Or at least that was what the reports said.”

“Reports?” I asked. “What reports?”

“Not on the news,” he said. “I worked in the emergency-management bureau downtown. Those were the latest figures we got before everything just...stopped. By then there were only two of us left out of a team of twenty-seven, and Lydia died soon afterward. There was no way to let anyone know...not that there was anyone left to know, I suppose.”

“There were a few of us.” I had to stop then, the enormity of it threatening to overwhelm me. With a mortality rate like that, it meant there were maybe two thousand people left in Albuquerque. That sounded like a lot, until you realized there used to be almost a million people living in and around the city center. “But you’re right — I suppose it wouldn’t have made much of a difference. It’s not as if we could have stopped it.”

“No,” he agreed, his features drooping even more.

“So...” I went on, not sure where I was supposed to go from here. It was pretty clear that the voice meant for me to leave Albuquerque alone, but now that I’d met a survivor, could I simply leave him behind? He appeared to be harmless. “Do you live around here?”

The man gave a vague gesture over his shoulder, toward the west. “Off Chavez Road.”

That wasn’t too far from where we stood. No wonder he’d come foraging over here. “Your first time out and around...after?”

A nod. “I didn’t know if it would be safe, but I started to run out of things, and this was the closest store....”

“There’s plenty left,” I assured him. “The looters kind of tore the place up, but they didn’t steal all the Doritos. I’d probably go to a grocery store if you really want something decent to eat, though.”

“That was my plan after this, but I could walk here, so I figured I’d come here first.” For the first time his eyes took on a certain glint, one I wasn’t sure I liked. “That your Cherokee out there?”

There wasn’t any point in denying it. For all I knew, he’d seen me pull up and get out of the SUV. “Yes.”

“Leaving town?”

A flicker of unease went over me. “I was thinking about it,” I hedged.

To my surprise, he didn’t seem that put off by my reply. “That might be a good idea. It might be safer where there aren’t as many survivors. People are going to get desperate.”

*They already have*, I thought, recalling the way Chris Bowman had broken into my house. Then again, that was a special case of one highly obsessed nut job. The survivors in Albuquerque would probably be a lot more interested in getting supplies than getting into my pants.

“So what are you going to do?” I asked, trying to shift the conversation away from me and my plans.

“I’m not sure. I figured food was the first step. After that?” He shrugged, then offered me a faint smile. “Right now, it’s just kind of good to hear another voice.”

I almost agreed with him, except I had been hearing a man’s voice in my head for the past few days. So what if the jury was still out as to whether that voice was real or not?

“Well, I don’t want to leave my dog sitting in the car too long,” I said, since it seemed to me that the man wouldn’t mind standing here and chatting all day, if it meant he didn’t have to be by himself.

He looked startled by the *non sequitur*, but then nodded. “Oh, of course. It is starting to warm up. You have a good day.” The way he said it made it

sound as if he wasn't sure such a thing was possible anymore.

Since there wasn't much else I could do, I smiled slightly, then moved toward the exit. For a second or two, I was worried he might put out an arm to stop me, but he only stepped out of the way and headed into the store.

I allowed myself a small sigh of relief before going to the Cherokee and unlocking it, then quickly unloading the loot from my cart into the rear cargo area. From the front seat, Dutchie whined, but I wasn't sure why. It was a little warm in the car, but nothing too bad — I'd made sure to crack the windows before I locked up the vehicle.

When I turned around, though, I almost dropped the car key. The stranger was standing there, holding a pistol pointed straight at me. His expression was no longer mild, but greedy. Not the kind of greed I'd seen in Chris Bowman, though. This man's gaze wasn't fixed on me, but the SUV I'd just closed up.

Without blinking, he said, "Give me the key. Now."

## CHAPTER 8



AT FIRST I could only stand there, gaping at him. From the way he held the gun, a small .22, I could tell he didn't have much experience. One part of my mind began to coolly calculate whether I was fast enough to get that Glock out of my waistband before he fired on me. My father had taken me to the indoor range many times, and shooting up in the hills around town even more, and he'd made me practice pulling the gun from a holster as well as the waistband of my pants. I knew I had far more experience than the man who faced me. But...was it enough?

Stalling for time, I stammered, "W-what?"

"You heard me." He waved the pistol in what he probably thought was a threatening manner. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want the car."

"But — " I kept my hands out where he could see them, knowing that he was probably nervous enough just handling the gun that he might do something really stupid if I made any sudden movements. "There are plenty of abandoned vehicles all over the city. You don't need mine."

"Yes, I do." His gaze shifted from the rear door of the Cherokee to my face, and I could see the desperation in his watery brown eyes. "I don't have to hunt for the key, and it's a four-wheel drive loaded with supplies. I doubt I'm going to find anything better."

Well, when he put it that way.... "It needs gas, though. Do you know how

to siphon gas?”

His bemused expression told me he didn't.

“Look,” I went on, knowing there was no way in hell I was going to let him have my dad's SUV, “it's been a horrible week. I get that you feel desperate. But you don't need to do this. There are plenty of alterna — ”

*BLAM!* The pistol went off — not pointed at me, thank God, but somewhere over my shoulder and just above the roof line of the Cherokee. Even so, I jumped enough that I could feel the backs of my thighs hit the SUV's rear bumper.

“I'm not negotiating,” he said. The look on his face shifted from confused to crafty. “But maybe you could come along. You say you know how to siphon gas?”

I actually hadn't said that I did, but the truth was, my father had showed me and Devin once, when Devin ran out of gas while driving Mom's Escape. It wasn't that difficult, really, as long as you selected a vehicle without a locking gas cap. In the back of the Cherokee, along with the rest of my supplies, was a long rubber tube I'd brought along for that very purpose. With the power out, it would simply be easier to siphon gas from abandoned vehicles rather than attempt to switch the pumps at a gas station over to manual.

“Maybe I do,” I hedged, my pulse beginning to escalate.

“You seem like you might be...useful,” the man said, and this time his watery gaze remained fixed on my face. It was clear his thoughts were beginning to run in other directions than merely stealing my car.

*Dude, I could put you through a wall,* I thought, but that inner remark was more bravado than anything else. Yes, he looked like the quintessential wimpy office worker. On the other hand, he'd still managed to sneak up on me, so I wasn't about to underestimate him.

Since I couldn't trust myself to speak without giving myself away, I only shrugged. At the same time, I let my hands drop to my sides, my right hand

beginning to move slowly backward, toward the reassuring weight of the Glock in my waistband. Thank God the shirt I was wearing hung loosely enough that the man didn't seem to have noticed he wasn't the only armed person in this little convo.

He stepped closer. Now I could smell the stink of perspiration and fear on him. Maybe I hadn't had a decent shower since before the Heat began, either, but at least I'd tried to wash up as best I could, and made sure to put on deodorant before I got dressed each morning. I couldn't say the same for this useless specimen of humanity.

Were only the weak, the crazy, or the unscrupulous left? And if that was the case, what the hell did that say about me?

I decided I'd think about that later. In the meantime, I had bigger things to worry about. I needed to get away from this guy. Shooting him was not a particularly appealing prospect, but I would if I had to.

No wonder the voice had been urging me to get out of Albuquerque. I wished I hadn't dragged my feet quite so much about that. If I'd left straight away, as he'd told me to do, I would never have run into Chris Bowman... wouldn't be standing here now, with this milquetoast former bureaucrat holding his puny .22 on me and thinking he was Dirty Harry.

And where the hell was the voice? He had saved me from Chris the Creep twice, but was conspicuously absent at the moment. Did he think I could handle this guy on my own?

Time to find out, I supposed.

"Oh, I'm very useful," I snapped, reaching the rest of the way so I could pull the Glock out of the waistband of my Levi's and point it straight at the stranger's face.

He blinked and took a step backward. The gun wavered in his hands, and then he tightened his grip. "You didn't need to do that."

"Well, I kind of did, since you were holding a gun on me." Unlike him, I didn't move, didn't blink. "By the way, my father was a police officer. He

made sure I knew how to shoot this thing. So don't think for a second that I'm holding this gun up for show, because I'm not. I know what I'm doing. The best thing you can do is back off and go find a car someplace else. There are thousands in the city up for grabs right now."

No response at first. His mouth opened and closed once, making him look like a fish on a hook. I got the distinct impression he didn't know what he should do — shoot, or turn tail and flee. That made him all the more dangerous, in my eyes, because I really didn't know how he was going to react. I doubted he was someone who'd been inclined toward criminal acts in his past life. But he'd been pushed to the limit by all the death he'd seen, and that made him volatile. Unpredictable.

"Please," I said softly. "Just go."

The gun shook in his hands. I remained motionless, the Glock still pointed directly at his face, my stance square and solid, just the way my father had taught me. Then I saw him twitch, and thought,

*Oh, shit.*

A bang, louder than I'd anticipated. Smoke puffed out from the chamber of the .22, and I knew the bullet was going to hit me. How could he miss at such close range?

Time slowed down, or possibly my thought processes sped up. I wasn't quite sure, but it was almost as if I could see the silvery-gray shape of the bullet speeding toward me. My entire body clenched, waiting for the shock of impact. At the same time, my finger clenched on the trigger of the Glock, and it went off with a much more impressive *bang* than the one that had issued from the .22. My ears began to ring. That was the first time I'd ever shot a gun without wearing earplugs, and damn, it was louder than I'd expected.

Two things happened then — first, it seemed as if the air in front of me shimmered, and the bullet the stranger had fired at me bounced away as if it had hit a pane of bulletproof glass. He had no such protection, however, and the shot I'd fired hit him in the chest, sending him flying backward, blood

beginning to run down the front of the sweat-stained dress shirt he wore.

His head hit the pavement with a sharp *crack*, and I winced. But even as I did so, I realized I was all right. It should have been me lying there on the ground with dark blood trickling from my chest, but it wasn't.

*Are you ready to leave now?* the voice asked. For some reason, he sounded tired. Well, that made two of us.

I finally lowered the gun. "That was you?"

*I told you I would protect you.*

"Couldn't you have stopped him before he fired at me?" It seemed the voice was falling down a bit in the omnipotence department.

*I cannot see everything. Your fear called me to you, just as it called to me last night when that creature broke into your house. When I saw what was happening, I put up the barrier to keep the bullet from touching you.*

Just like that. What kind of powers did the voice control, to be able to construct an invisible shield that would deflect a bullet?

Obviously something far, far beyond anything I'd ever heard of.

But then, I'd already sort of gathered that.

Pulling in a breath, I flipped the Glock's safety back on, then stuck the gun into my waistband once again. After that, I looked over to where the stranger lay groaning on the asphalt. From the amount of blood that had pooled beneath him, I guessed he didn't have much longer to live. Should I be feeling guilty for that? I didn't know. At the moment, all I felt was a sort of bone-deep weariness...and the day wasn't even half over yet.

I approached him, then crouched down near his head. His eyes flickered open and fixed on me, pleading and scared. "I didn't want to do that," I said quietly. "You should have just left me alone. There's plenty in this city for everyone."

A strangled sound came from his throat, possibly one of protest. I couldn't tell for sure, since he was obviously beyond forming actual words.

Although I knew I'd acted in self-defense, hadn't even squeezed the

trigger until he'd shot at me, it was still hard to see him like this, knowing I couldn't do anything for his pain. "I'm sorry," I said at last, then straightened up and headed back to the Cherokee. The best thing I could do now was get the hell out of here.

I got in the car, shut the door, and pulled out of the parking space. As I drove away, I didn't look back.



*HEAD NORTH*, the voice said once I was a few blocks from the Walgreens. *Get on the freeway.*

"Are you kidding?" I asked, hands tight on the steering wheel. Right then, I wasn't sure whether I had a death grip on the thing because of all the vehicles choking the roads, or because I was still shaking from that confrontation back in the parking lot. Maybe a little bit of both. "The freeway is going to be worse than the surface streets."

*No, it isn't. Trust me.*

Considering he'd just saved me from a speeding bullet, I decided to trust him.

The closest on-ramp was at Paseo del Norte, so I headed in that direction, keeping my speed below twenty-five miles an hour, and sometimes even slower than that, depending on how congested the street around me was. When I got to the on-ramp, I actually had to drive onto the shoulder to get around two vehicles that seemed to have crashed head-on into one another. Now it was impossible to tell whether they'd both been trying to get on the freeway at the same time, or whether the drivers had been so ill that they'd basically plowed into each other at the worst possible spot.

After that, though, the connector was clear enough, and I eased up onto I-25, keeping my speed down. The voice had been right, though — yes, there were still abandoned vehicles here, but they tended to have either crashed

into the center divider or drifted over to the shoulder. The middle two lanes were fairly clear, although I still had to slow down from time to time to get around a car or truck that had stopped in the center of the highway.

In fact, the going was easy enough that I thought it safe to risk opening one of the water bottles so I could get a drink. My throat was parched, and I drank half the contents of the bottle without even stopping. In the passenger seat, Dutchie cocked her head and looked at me.

“I’ll take care of you when we stop, girl,” I told her. Along with the camping gear, I’d stowed a set of collapsible dog dishes in the back of the Cherokee, relics of the times when we used to take Sadie on day trips with us. My father never got rid of anything — which was why none of our cars ever actually lived in the garage — and I’d found the dishes when I was scrounging some of the other stuff.

Dutchie wagged her tail, then sort of collapsed onto the seat, curling up in a smaller ball than I would have thought possible. Up until then, she’d been sitting up and looking out the window, but, truth be told, once you were on the freeway, the sights and smells really weren’t that interesting.

“So where are we going?” I asked of the general air around me. Judging by his delayed reaction to the man who’d assaulted me back at Walgreens, the voice wasn’t necessarily around at all times. In this case, since I was asking a direct question, I had to hope he was close enough that he would hear me and respond.

*North.*

“Besides that,” I snapped, irritated now. I’d done what he asked — Albuquerque was dropping farther and farther behind me, since I’d started out from the more northern end of the city sprawl anyway. At this point, I really couldn’t see the reason behind the continuing games of evasion. “It’s a little early for ski season.”

*That is all you need to know for now. I will tell you when it is time to get off the freeway.*

I might have growled. But since I knew there was no point in pressing the issue, I took another swig of water and kept my gaze focused on the road. I actually hadn't been about to run out of gas; the tank was nearly full. I'd just hoped that lying about the gas situation would convince the stranger at Walgreens to choose some other prey. So much for that brilliant idea.

At any rate, I knew I wouldn't have to stop for gas for some time. Maybe not at all, depending on how far I was going. What I had in the Cherokee right now was probably enough to get me to the Colorado border, although I sincerely hoped I wasn't going quite that far.

So I continued to drive north on the freeway, pushing my speed closer to forty miles an hour as I left Albuquerque behind, and the vehicles littering the road gradually grew fewer and farther between. Not to say that the highway was completely empty, but it was open enough that I felt safe going a little faster. Wherever I was headed, I wanted to get there as quickly, albeit as safely, as I could.

An hour passed. Dutchie slept in the passenger seat, and I could feel my stomach begin to growl. If I'd been thinking clearly, I would've gotten some of the food out of the back and brought it up here with me, but shooting someone at point-blank range does tend to rattle your logic centers a bit. Ever since I'd left Albuquerque, I'd been telling myself that there was nothing else I could have done, that he'd shot at me first...but those kinds of reassurances only go so far when you're trying to wrestle with the realization that you'd killed someone earlier that day.

*It was not your fault.* The voice was soothing, its earlier weariness apparently gone. I must have been really broadcasting my angst, because in general, the voice only answered direct questions and didn't respond to my inner thoughts. *He forced the issue. You should not blame yourself.*

I knew that intellectually. But I also knew that killing, even in self-defense, carried its own weight of emotional consequences. When I was in high school, my father had shot someone while on duty — a drug dealer

who'd drawn a .38 Special when he was pulled over for running a red light. My father didn't have much choice but to shoot. Even so, he was in counseling for months after that, coming to terms with what he'd done. Taking a human life was not something to be dismissed lightly. And how much heavier was the burden of doing something like that when so few people were even left alive?

I wasn't sure, but at the moment it felt pretty damn heavy.

*The world has changed, the voice told me. So you must change with it.*

"So I'm supposed to not care?" That didn't sound right at all. What was the point of surviving all this, if the only way to do it was to become a person I didn't like very much?

*I did not say that. But there are certain realities you must face. There is nothing wrong with killing, if that is the only way for you to stay alive.*

In other words, I shouldn't feel bad about acting in self-defense. Maybe someday I'd get to that point, but at the moment I'd had too many shocks in too short a period of time. I really just wanted to curl up in a ball somewhere and pretend the world didn't exist for a while.

*Here, the voice told me. Take the turnoff for 84 north.*

"Santa Fe?" I asked in some surprise. For some reason, I'd thought I'd be going much farther than that.

*Yes, Santa Fe.*

Well, thank God for small favors. I did as instructed and pulled onto the highway, which was more that in name than anything else, since in reality it was just a four-lane road cutting through town, with shops and schools on either side. Here I had to slow down again, as there was a good deal of stalled traffic once more. Not enough that I couldn't get around it when necessary, even if I had to pull up onto the island at the center of the street, but it was still nerve-wracking.

*Then turn here, on Cerrillos.*

So we were heading into the heart of the town? I knew Santa Fe, although

not intimately; my family had come here from time to time, mainly when my mother was tired of camping and hiking, and wanted us to get some culture. And I'd visited the town with Elena and Tori a couple of times, generally when Elena borrowed her parents' timeshare so we could get out of Albuquerque and let our hair down for a few days. Even then, though, I hadn't been the one driving. We always took Elena's car, because she had a Porsche Cayenne, which was a lot more impressive than my eight-year-old Honda or Tori's Ford pickup.

But I did know enough to realize if I stayed on my current route, I'd be heading toward the old town square and the touristy areas around it. Sort of a strange choice, if the voice was really that intent on keeping me out of population centers.

I slowed even more, as the road was getting narrower, and I knew I was about to enter the maze of one-way streets that twisted around Santa Fe's central square. Oddly, there weren't as many abandoned vehicles here. But this was a touristy area — maybe everyone had bugged out for home as soon as the infection began to spread.

*And now down Alameda.*

“So I'm not going to the center of town?”

*No.*

“Is it far?”

*Not that far.*

Good, because I knew I was going to need a bathroom fairly soon. I just had to hope that my destination included those sorts of civilized comforts, even if I wouldn't be able to flush after the first time.

I angled the Cherokee down Alameda, stopping every so often to go up on the curb to avoid yet another abandoned car. Luckily, the south side of the road ran along an open greenbelt, so there were no businesses located there, which meant no parked cars, either. To either side, the trees were brave with fluttering leaves of yellow and orange, but no one was around to admire their

autumn finery, and I was too focused on my route to give them more than a passing glance.

The street continued in this way for some time, until I was out of the downtown area and in a more residential district, still heading steadily eastward. Since the voice had given me no further commands, I kept going.

*And right here*, it said, just when I thought I was going to be on Alameda forever.

I turned as instructed, moving onto Canyon Road. As I did so, I couldn't help wondering just where the heck I was going. This was still a residential area, but with the houses spaced farther apart. The upside was that I didn't have nearly as many stray cars to maneuver around.

*Follow the curve*, the voice said then.

Veering off to the left, I found myself now on Upper Canyon Road. It narrowed further, but even in my current focused state, I couldn't help being impressed by some of the compounds I passed. They had high adobe walls that seemed to stretch on for a full block. Just the kind of thing for people with fat wallets and a serious need for privacy.

The road wound on and on, steadily rising. It became more rutted, littered with gravel. I slowed down, although I didn't think it was quite time to engage the four-wheel drive. There was still pavement under my tires, albeit pavement that hadn't been very well maintained.

Eventually, though, even that rutted and gravelly pavement disappeared, and the road turned to dirt. I brought the Cherokee to a crawl, put it in neutral, and then engaged the four-wheel drive. After I felt it catch, I sped up again, but cautiously, knowing I should keep it around twenty-five for safety's sake.

Even up here there were scattered home sites, and I wondered if I would be told to turn off at one of them. But then the voice said, *This road*, indicating a dirt track that branched off from Upper Canyon, heading even farther into the hills.

I slowed down a little bit more, jolting and bouncing along the unpaved surface, which now was only wide enough to allow a single car through. Good thing I probably didn't have to worry about someone coming this way from the other direction.

Dutchie, who'd been dozing for the past hour or more, blinked and got to her feet, pressing her nose to the window. She left quite a smudge, and I winced. Even though I knew my father was far past caring about what happened to the Cherokee, I still couldn't help experiencing some discomfort at knowing the SUV wouldn't exactly be in showroom condition by the time I got to my destination...whatever the hell that might be, out here in the middle of nowhere.

The track kept snaking farther and farther back into the hills. At least I'd had some experience driving off-road, so the rocky, rutted surface beneath the car didn't bother me too much. What did bother me was how far away from civilization this place must be. Had the voice lured me out here to....

*To what?* I asked myself with some scorn. *If he wanted to kill you or do anything else, he could have done it already. What would be the point in sending you out to the back of beyond like this?*

No point at all that I could tell.

Which didn't mean much.

At least the voice couldn't seem to hear my interior monologue. A minute or so later, it said, *Here*.

Another dirt track, even narrower than this one. It split off from the main road — if you could call it that — and wound up the side of a hill. Around the crest of that hill, I thought I spied a flash of shimmering gold leaves. Aspen trees?

I turned where the voice had directed, crawling along. Nothing about this hill seemed all that different from all the others I had passed. It was studded with juniper trees and yucca, with dry yellow grass in between. Yes, there was something of a road, but leading to what?

A few minutes later, I had my answer. Almost hidden until you came upon it, a compound of some sort was built just below the top of the hill. From what I could see, there was a main building and several smaller structures clumped around it. A high adobe wall appeared to circle the entire property. There was a metal gate with, of all things, the same Zia sun symbols as seen on the New Mexico flag adorning its four quadrants. At the moment, that gate stood wide open.

I brought the Cherokee to a stop. The voice said, *It is all right. There is no one here.*

“Why is the gate open?”

*I opened it for you.*

Not sure what I should do about that particular statement, I swallowed, then nudged the gas. The SUV moved forward slowly, and in a few more seconds, I was inside the compound. Almost as soon as the rear bumper had cleared the gate, it closed behind me.

“You again?” I asked, hoping I’d kept most of the worry out of my voice.

*Yes.*

Since there was nothing else to do, I took a quick survey of my surroundings. There seemed to be a large house, built in the typical Santa Fe style with sheer walls of thick adobe and a flat roof. Aspen trees surrounded it, their golden leaves fluttering in the afternoon breeze. Just past the house was an outbuilding that appeared to be a large garage with four bays, and beyond that something that looked like an extensive greenhouse.

Everything was very tidy, very neat, except for some fallen aspen leaves on the ground. Here, the driveway was crushed gravel, which crunched under the wheels of the Cherokee as I slowly inched it toward the garage. When I approached, the door to the bay farthest on the left rolled up and out of the way.

This time it wasn’t entirely unexpected, but I still felt the skin along the back of my neck prickle as I pulled into the garage. The bay was quite wide,

almost big enough for two cars, so I had plenty of room to park and then climb out. It was scrupulously clean, the walls finished. Overhead, a light bulb glowed.

I blinked at it, wondering if I was imagining things. Or maybe that was just more of the voice flexing its power. “Is that you?” I asked.

*No. Look out, past the house.*

I did as instructed, ignoring Dutchie’s whines to be let out. She could hang on a minute longer. As I paused at the entrance to the garage, I saw that the property was very large, probably at least four or five acres, all enclosed within that high adobe wall. The other structure I’d glimpsed was in fact a greenhouse, but beyond that was a small solar farm, and beyond that still I spied a windmill whirling away.

“There’s power here?” I had to fight the words past the lump in my throat; crazy how the mere thought of having electricity could get me so worked up.

*That, and so much more. Come — let me show you.*

I nodded, but then hurried over to open the passenger door. Dutchie sprang out, tail wagging, and promptly christened the place by squatting down on a patch of grass next to the garage. Despite everything, I couldn’t help grinning and shaking my head.

But then I turned away from her so I could follow the flagstone path that led from the garage to the front door of the house. It was painted blue, and shaded by a long colonnaded façade, with heavy wood beams supporting the roof. Again, typical New Mexico architecture, but it looked heavy and solid. Safe.

I put my hand on the latch. The door was unlocked, and swung inward.

It was all I could do not to let out a gasp. The house was, as Elena might have put it, amazeballs.

Red tiled floors. Wooden viga ceilings overhead. A kiva fireplace in one corner. Big, heavy ranch-style furniture. Navajo rugs.

I stepped inside, Dutchie on my heels, then carefully closed the door behind me. My footsteps echoed off the shining floor as I moved farther into the house. It was the sort of place I might have seen in a magazine, with doorways of sculpted adobe, Mexican star lights made of pierced tin hanging in the entry, every piece seemingly selected for one particular spot and that spot only, unique and beautiful.

“What is this place?” I breathed, after I’d recovered myself enough to move from the living room into the dining room, which was dominated by a copper-topped table big enough for twelve and sturdy chairs of dark wood with leather seats and nail-head accents. Landscapes of the area around Santa Fe hung on the walls.

*It was built by a real estate developer from Phoenix who wanted to make sure he would survive the end of the world in comfort. Unfortunately, his plans did not take disease into account, only war and civil unrest.*

What was I supposed to say to that?

Shaking my head, I went into the kitchen, which was roughly twice the size of my little over-the-garage apartment. I heard a faint humming noise and wondered what it might be, then realized it was the refrigerator. Strange how only a few days without those sorts of background noises could render them unfamiliar, alien.

I had to know. I walked over to the refrigerator and opened the door. Inside, it was stocked with items that wouldn’t spoil easily — cheese, sausage, lunch meats. A six-pack of Kilt Lifter ale sat on the bottom shelf. When I peeked inside the freezer section, it seemed as if it was full of other similar “guy food” sorts of items: frozen pizza, tamales, taquitos. A box of Hot Pockets. A couple of bags of frozen chicken breasts from Trader Joe’s.

Dutchie cocked her head, tongue lolling out. I wondered if she’d gotten a whiff of the cheese or sausages in the deli section of the fridge.

“It looks like the owner just stepped out,” I said, my tone only partly accusing. “Are you sure no one’s been here?”

*Quite sure. The developer died two days ago, and the man he hired to watch over this place passed away yesterday, only three days after the last time he checked in here. You'll find more food in the pantry, and a storeroom in the basement with canned goods, flour, sugar...that sort of thing. The greenhouse has tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, strawberries, and more.*

Basically, pretty much anything I would need to keep on living for a good deal longer. And while doing it basically in the lap of luxury.

“How did you find this place?” I asked. I sort of doubted it was the kind of property that popped up on Trulia.

*I knew you would need a sanctuary. So I...looked around.*

A sanctuary. Yes, that was what this place felt like. More questions bubbled to my mind, but I wasn't sure the voice would answer any of them.

And in the end, what did it matter? I was here, and I was safe. No one left alive even knew this place existed, and I could hide here for...months. Years, probably. Never mind that I didn't really want to contemplate what it would be like to be out here for years and years with only a disembodied voice and a dog for company.

Well, I didn't have to think about that now. I had other things to do.

“Come on, Dutchie,” I said. “Time to unpack the car.

“We're home.”

## CHAPTER 9



IN THE KITCHEN CUPBOARDS, I found brightly colored Fiesta ware, and heavy blown-glass tumblers and goblets that I thought must have come from Mexico. I poured water — yes, the taps worked, thanks to a well out back that was powered by the windmill — into a bowl for Dutchie, and then tipped some of the Blue Buffalo dry food I'd brought from home into another bowl. She set to, lapping at the water greedily, crunching away at the dog food. I could tell she thought she was home, too. At some point I'd have to see about replenishing her food supply, but that could wait a while. Based on the amount of kibble left in the bag, she'd need some more in about a week. In a pinch, I could defrost some of those frozen chicken breasts and cook them up for her, but it would probably be smarter to head into Santa Fe and go foraging there for some real dog food.

For the moment, though, I was content to explore the rest of the house. It was very large, probably at least four thousand square feet, although I'd be the first to admit that I wasn't very good at judging those sorts of things. But there were three bedrooms, as well as an office, a sitting room, and a family room, in addition to the living room and kitchen. Off the back of the house was another covered patio, and surprisingly lush plantings of various native trees. In a secluded corner, a solar-powered fountain bubbled away. It felt tranquil, sheltered, so far removed from the horrors I'd seen in Albuquerque

that I might as well have been on another planet.

Here, I thought I might be able to heal.

After I'd taken care of Dutchie and put all my things away, stowing the guns on a shelf in the master bedroom closet, I treated myself to a long, hot shower. And it was hot, thanks to the solar water heater. The storms I'd feared might be moving in had never materialized, and the day was sun and shadow, but with enough sunlight to keep everything in the house running. I soaked in that shower, letting the water run over me, allowing it to wash away the terror and fear and tragedy I'd left in a place I could no longer think of as home. I would never be able to forget any of it, but now, for the first time, I thought I might be able to focus on what lay ahead, instead of what was behind me.

The softest rugs in the world had been laid down over the tile in the bathroom, and I got out and dried myself off, using the equally soft towels hanging from the rack. If the owner of this place truly had been a real estate developer, it was obvious that he'd spared no expense in outfitting his survival getaway. I had to wonder if he'd actually ever been here, or merely hired people to build and decorate the place to his specifications. Something about it did feel...well, not exactly soulless, because it was too warm and inviting for that, but staged, maybe, as if an interior designer had done all the heavy lifting in making the decorating decisions. And had the developer intended to bring someone with him to share the world after the apocalypse, or had he planned to live in all this luxury alone?

Whatever the case, it was certainly far, far more than I ever could have expected might be awaiting me at the end of my journey. I blotted my hair, found a hair dryer in one of the drawers in the vanity area, and experienced the luxury of actually being able to blow-dry my hair, something I'd thought I'd never be able to do again. I put on clean clothes and my flats, since I wasn't planning to go hiking anytime soon. The next day, I'd roam around and explore the property thoroughly, but for now I was content to cocoon

indoors.

When I emerged into the family room, the voice asked, *Are you feeling better now?*

“Much,” I replied, although I couldn’t help wondering how much it could see. Had it been spying on me in the shower?

No, that was ridiculous. And it had been polite enough to wait to address me until I was in one of the more public areas of the house.

“I’m going to make some dinner,” I added. “You want anything?”

Another one of those sounds that might have been a chuckle. *No, thank you. But do enjoy exploring the kitchen.*

In that moment, it seemed as if the voice had gone again...if it could ever be said to actually be *here* in the corporeal sense of the word.

I went on into the kitchen, where Dutchie greeted me with a thumping tail. Had she been here the whole time, waiting to see if I would come back and make some people food?

Apparently so, because the second I opened one package of sausages, her tail began wagging even more fiercely.

“This is not for dogs,” I told her in the severest tones I could muster, but she only smiled up at me and cocked her head. Well, that had never worked on my old dog Sadie, either.

I could have nuked the sausages, but for some reason it felt better to rustle out a skillet and cook them the old-fashioned way. The savory smell filled the kitchen, and my stomach rumbled. After digging around in the freezer, I located some frozen home-style potatoes and added them to the mix. Yes, I really needed some fresh fruit or vegetables, but right then I was suddenly too tired to bother with going out to the greenhouse. It could wait another day.

What I did find, tucked under one of the counters, was a wine refrigerator. “Thank you, Mr. Real Estate Developer,” I breathed, looking at the gleaming bottles, all chilled to a perfect fifty-four degrees. Not that I knew the first thing about wine, but I did know about needing a drink, and

boy, did I need one.

I selected a Black Mesa Montepulciano. I had no idea what a Montepulciano even was, but it sounded exotic. Probably far too exotic for my prosy meal of sausages and potatoes, which were still happily sizzling away on the stove top, but I doubted anyone from *Wine Spectator* magazine was going to drop in and grade me on my wine pairings.

There was a drawer seemingly dedicated only to wine openers and related gadgets — stoppers, little metal collars with padding inside to keep wine from dripping down the side of a bottle after it had been opened. I'd never been able to manage a waiter-style corkscrew, but there was also one of those “jumping jack”-style openers, and I selected that and went to work on the wine bottle, keeping an eye on the potatoes and sausages the whole time.

The sound of a cork coming out a wine bottle has to be one of the happiest sounds in the world, and I thought I could use a little happiness right then. I pulled one of the heavy blown-glass goblets out of the cupboard and filled it approximately halfway. Everything I'd read and heard said you were supposed to let wine breathe, but I wasn't going to bother with that. I took a sip and closed my eyes. No, I hadn't been much of a wine drinker, had always ordered mixed drinks or tequila shots when I was out with my friends. Now, though, I started to understand the appeal of wine, the smooth darkness of it on my lips, the gentle warmth it seemed to spread through my limbs.

I allowed myself another sip, then went back to the stove so I could turn over the sausages and stir the potatoes around a little. They were basically done, so I scrounged in the cupboard for a plate and dumped everything onto it. Dutchie's tail began to wag frantically, and I couldn't help smiling.

“Okay, we'll see if there's anything left over,” I told her, then got out a knife and fork, picked up my goblet of wine, and went into the family room. No way was I going to be the only person sitting down at that massive copper dining room table.

But the family room was a much cozier space, and I settled myself on the

couch and placed the plate of food and my wine glass on the coffee table. A flat-screen TV hung on one wall, although it wasn't going to do me much good unless the real estate developer had a stash of DVDs hidden somewhere. He probably did, but in that moment I was too hungry to worry about it. As with so many other things, I'd go exploring later.

There was also a kiva-style fireplace in one corner, with a nice stack of wood in a basket next to it. After I was done eating, I thought I might light a fire and allow myself to simply sit here for a while, quiet, letting my food digest. Hell, maybe I'd even drink that whole bottle of wine. After everything I'd been through, getting drunk sounded like it might not be a half-bad idea.

But no...I knew I wouldn't do that. Just the glass, and maybe half of one afterward. The voice had reassured me I was safe here, and had closed the gate to the compound behind me, but until I'd slept a few nights unmolested, I wasn't about to let my guard down like that. Dutchie had proven to be a good watchdog, and I had a feeling a place like this had some decent built-in security, but even so, being careless seemed like a good way to get myself killed.

Instead, I drank the wine slowly, taking small sips in between bites of my food, until my glass was empty and my plate almost so. There were a few potatoes and the end of one sausage left, and I put the plate down on the floor so Dutchie could have the rest of it. Who cared if that wasn't the most hygienic thing in the world to do? She was deliriously happy about getting some table scraps, and as far as I was concerned, she'd earned them.

Once she'd polished the plate clean, I picked it up, as well as my wine glass, and went back to the kitchen. The plate went in the dishwasher, and I poured enough wine into my goblet to get it to a little below the halfway mark. In the drawer with all the other wine accoutrements, I found a stopper, so I jammed that into the open bottle, figuring I'd finish it off the next day.

And although I was bone-tired, sitting in front of the fire didn't seem so appealing after all. I might as well get more of a handle on this place that was

now supposed to be my home. Going back to the family room, I discovered that the large carved cabinet placed up against one wall did in fact hold the real estate developer's Blu-Ray collection. Most of it was fairly typical new-release stuff, with some action classics thrown in. There was also an entire shelf of porn, and I just had to laugh when I looked at it. It was pretty obvious what he'd intended to do with at least some of his time after surviving the zombie apocalypse, or whatever.

I closed the cabinet with one hand, lifted the wine goblet with the other so I could take a drink, and wandered off down the hallway that led to the bedrooms and the office. That was the space which really interested me the most. After flicking on the light — and marveling at how easy that was — I went into the room and took a quick survey. Again, the furniture here was dark distressed oak, a perfect match to the hacienda-style feel of the rest of the house. One wall was mainly window, covered in wooden shutters. Against another wall was a large desk with what looked like a brand-new iMac sitting on it.

There was also a gun safe. I set down my wine glass on the desk, then went over to the safe and tested the lock. I suppose it was silly to think that the thing would have been open, but I couldn't help experiencing a stab of disappointment when the doors wouldn't budge. My father had trained me not to leave guns lying around, and although I was sure they would be fine where I'd put them on the shelf in the closet, I'd feel even better if I could lock them up.

Sitting next to the desk was a file cabinet, and I opened that, quickly rifling through its contents. This was a trove — I found manuals for the computer, the drip setup in the greenhouse, all the appliances, the security system. That seemed to feed into the iMac, so I touched the space bar on the keyboard, waking it up from its sleep. Thank God it didn't seem to be password protected; I was able to find the security program easily enough, which brought up a feed from a number of cameras. At the moment it was

showing a grid of all nine of them, although it appeared that I could also expand one image and then rotate through them if I preferred.

Not that it mattered one way or another, as far as I could tell. By then it was completely dark, and the cameras didn't show much of anything. I supposed it made sense not to have security lights blaring around the exterior of the house and the perimeter of the property; that would only serve as a beacon to show that someone was living out here. And actually, after I toggled around a bit, I realized that no lights were needed, as the cameras switched into infrared mode in the dark. Pretty high-tech.

How much had the developer spent building this place? I couldn't begin to guess, but it had to be at least a million dollars. And all for nothing...well, at least where he was concerned. I was more than grateful that the house existed, and that the voice had found it for me, but it still seemed somewhat ironic that so much money had been spent to defend against something which ended up having no defense.

That thought sobered me, and I picked up my goblet and took a large swallow of wine. Dutchie had followed me in here, settling down on the floor in a little ball. There was something almost resigned about her posture, as if she knew that once a human being started mucking around on a computer, they were going to be useless for a good number of hours.

But that wasn't why I'd come in here. I only wanted to know what the room held, and now that I'd seen the kind of security that was protecting this place, I felt a good deal better. Had the system been on when I got here, and the voice had simply disengaged it to allow me to enter, or had he switched it on once I was safely inside the compound? He'd clearly intended for me to come here all along, so I had a feeling it was probably the former. There hadn't been much chance of someone accidentally stumbling across this place, but even so, better safe than otherwise.

Among the manuals was the guide that had come with the gun safe. I flipped through it with one hand, sipping from my wine glass at the same

time. When I got to the last page, I saw that some numbers had been written down along the edge of that leaf. The combination?

Only one way to find out.

I put down the wine glass and went over to the safe, then slowly spun the dial around to match the sequence of numbers I'd found inside the manual. There was a soft click, and the door opened outward.

Even though I'd grown up around my father's arsenal, I couldn't help letting out a gasp at what I found. There was — well, an arsenal worthy of holding off an entire horde of zombies. Shotguns and rifles and a parade of handguns, along with box after box of ammo. The problem wouldn't be defending this place if necessary, but deciding which gun to use to do it.

Well, that and trying to squeeze my own meager collection in here.

I closed the safe, reclaimed my wine glass, and finished the rest of it with one swallow. After that, I took the empty glass with me and performed a quick inspection of the other rooms. Nothing out of the ordinary, just bedrooms decorated with the same taste and flair as the rest of the house. Another bathroom, not quite as luxurious as the one in the master suite, but still large enough that two people could comfortably brush their teeth in there or perform other bathroom prep as necessary. It seemed sort of a shame to waste all this space on me, but truthfully, so far I hadn't come across any survivors I'd be willing to share this house with. Yes, there had to be some good people who'd made it through the Heat unscathed. I sure hadn't seen them yet, though.

Suddenly feeling even more tired, I headed back to the kitchen so I could rinse out my wine glass and set it on the counter. For the first time, I noticed a door off to one side; I opened it and saw it concealed the laundry room, which was large and well laid out as well, with a state-of-the-art washer and dryer combo, as well as plenty of storage and a separate wash tub for scrubbing out stubborn stains, or whatever. Inside the cupboards I found what looked like a lifetime supply of detergent, along with all the spare towels and

sheets for the various bathrooms and bedrooms. It seemed clear that the developer hadn't been worried about the appliances using up too much of the power the solar farm produced.

Well, if he hadn't worried about it, then I wouldn't worry, either, when the time came. Right now I had enough clothes to last me another week, so laundry wasn't exactly a concern.

The master bedroom had its own kiva fireplace, and I decided it would be better to have a fire there. Having a fireplace in my own bedroom felt deliciously decadent, and the thought of having the flames there to warm me through the night seemed extra appealing.

So I brushed my teeth but didn't worry about my face, since I'd taken a shower only a few hours earlier, and then got some logs from the basket on the floor near the hearth and made a stack the way my father had shown me. There was a lighter on a shelf nearby, so I used that to get things going. Dutchie watched all this with some bemusement, but once the fire got crackling away and began to spread its heat through the room, she let out a contented little sigh and curled up on the rug, her eyes closing almost immediately.

*I know how you feel, Dutchie*, I thought. Even so, something in me was reluctant to turn off the bedside lamp, as if, once I had done so, I'd never be able to get the light back. Silly, I knew. It wouldn't even be fully dark with the lamp shut off, as the fire was certainly adequate to illuminate the room.

Still, I sat there on the bed for a long time, looking at the glow of the lamp on the bedroom's warm terra-cotta-painted walls, at the gold leaf detailing on the wall where the door was located. Everything felt cozy and quiet and safe, and yet for some reason I couldn't bring myself to reach over to the lamp and turn the knob. Finally, I got up off the bed, went to the closet, and retrieved the Smith and Wesson revolver from the shelf. I laid it on the table next to the bed, then took a deep breath and shut off the lamp.

It wasn't dark. The room danced with firelight, and wasn't even

completely silent, between the crackling of the logs and Dutchie's soft snores. I settled my head against the pillow, breathing in the indefinable scent of clean linens. Had the caretaker put fresh sheets on the bed when he'd come by a few days earlier? It certainly seemed that way.

But I didn't want to think about that, because then I'd think about how he was dead, and the man who'd built this house, and Elena and Tori and my aunt and uncle...my mother and father. Devin. Even as I tried to push those thoughts away, I could feel the telltale lump in my throat that meant I was dangerously close to bursting into sobs.

*Don't cry, I told myself. Don't. It won't bring them back. All you can do is keep living, so there'll still be someone around to remember them.*

At first glance, that notion might not have seemed very reassuring. Somehow, though, it did calm me, and I found myself falling asleep, succumbing at last to the weariness of the day and the softness of the bed in which I lay. The last thing I heard was a soft *pop* from the hearth as a log split and settled down on top of the others.

I'd never been much for dreaming. That is, I knew I must dream, because everyone did, but I hardly ever remembered any of those dreams. I was never the one recounting in excruciating detail my crazy dreams about flying or driving my car up the side of a building, or whatever. And I certainly never had *those* kinds of dreams, the kind you awake from all hot and bothered.

But I did that night.

I dreamed I lay in that bed, with the warm glow of the fire flickering against the walls and the comforting scent of wood smoke in the air. The strange thing was, I dreamed that I slept, and that I awoke to strong arms around me, holding me close, and someone kissing me. In my dream, I didn't think that was strange at all. I opened my mouth to this dream man, tasted the sweetness of his lips, felt him release me from the embrace so he could caress my body, even as I reached over to touch him, to feel his arousal.

And it seemed so natural for him to press me down into the bed, to push

himself into me so that we were moving together, my legs wrapped around him, driving him farther into me. This was all done in complete silence; only when the orgasm hit did I finally cry out, but softly. And he said nothing at all, although I could feel the climax shudder through him as well. We stilled, lying in bed, our breaths filling the silence. Then his lips brushed against my cheek, and I heard him whisper, *Beloved*.

I sat up in bed then, heart racing, and pressed my palms flat against the mattress. Shaking, I put one hand to my chest. Unlike in the dream, I was still dressed, wearing the sleep shirt I'd put on before I went in to brush my teeth. My mouth tasted of mint, not...him. And I could tell that no one had touched me. Things didn't...feel...any different.

Just a dream. A horribly vivid dream. In a way, I could even understand it. I was feeling alone, and the voice had been my only real companion for the past few days. All right, I had Dutchie, but that wasn't exactly the same thing. Was it so strange for my subconscious mind to turn that disembodied voice into a sort of dream lover, someone to make me feel as if I weren't the only person left alive on the planet?

Maybe not, but I still felt shaken to my core. I pushed back the sheets and blankets and duvet, then crawled out of bed and went to the bathroom. There, I splashed water on my face, trying to calm myself, and telling myself I should be glad that I was someplace where I had the luxury of running water.

That no-nonsense thought did help me to regain my composure somewhat, and I headed into the bedroom after that, pausing to put another couple of logs on the fire and stir it up a bit with the poker before finally returning to bed. Through all of this, Dutchie had slept peacefully, apparently not discommoded at all by my wandering around.

I got back in bed, then pulled in a deep breath, and another. After everything I'd been through, was I really going to let a dream rattle me? I told myself that I needed to let it go, that everything would be fine.

I just wasn't sure whether I believed those reassurances.

## CHAPTER 10



I SPENT the next few days really getting myself accustomed to the property and everything on it — the greenhouse, the solar farm, even the garage, which was hiding a Polaris ATV in the farthest bay. When I found that, it somehow made me miss my father even more. He'd always wanted one, but a vehicle intended solely for off-roading was a luxury that just hadn't been in the family budget.

As the voice had told me, there was a good deal of food stored in the basement. Scratch that; there was enough food down there to satisfy the most rabid prepper, shelf after shelf of canned goods and staples such as flour and sugar and cooking oil, and enough spices that I could probably bake something different every day for the next year and still not use everything up. In fact, the basement was so extensive that I got the impression it was actually bigger than the house itself, spreading beyond the walls of the structure directly above it.

The greenhouse was set up on a drip system, one supplied by the same well that gave the house its water. I found a good deal of produce that was at its peak or even just past it, so I harvested that as best I could, eating what needed to be consumed right away and putting the rest in the refrigerator. On the bookshelves in the office, there were a number of reference books on all sorts of topics of interest to the homesteader or survivalist — home canning,

sewing, weaving, butchering...even how to make your own bullets. In fact, I found the molds for that very activity down in the basement, along with a quantity of black powder and other supplies. I had to hope none of it would explode and send Dutchie and me sky-high one day.

Although having every conceivable supply on hand should have made me feel better, in truth it only depressed me. I thought of being here so long that I would have to start canning food or sewing my own clothes, of having to go out in the ATV to hunt deer or elk. Even though my father had taken me hunting a few times, I'd never had the heart to pull the trigger. Maybe if I were starving I'd feel differently about the whole thing, but until then I couldn't conceive of killing something so beautiful.

The one thing the compound didn't have was dog food. I wasn't sure what to make of that; maybe Mr. Real Estate Developer wasn't a dog person, although you'd think he would've factored dogs into his survival plan, just because they were good to have around in case things got dicey. Whatever the reason, I was down to about a day's worth of dry food left for Dutchie, which meant I needed to go foraging.

For some reason, the voice had been fairly scarce the past couple of days. I wondered at its absence, thinking that maybe it believed its work was done, since it had gotten me here safely. All the same, I thought I'd better telegraph my plans, let it know I was leaving the compound for a few hours.

"Dutchie's almost out of food," I said as I got the shotgun out of the gun safe. I already wore a gleaming Ruger in a holster on my hip, said armament courtesy of the trove I'd found within that safe. Possibly it would have made better sense to take along a gun I was more familiar with, but I couldn't resist the chrome-plated allure of that Ruger. My father would have known how much it cost, but I didn't have a clue. A lot, that's for sure.

Silence met my announcement, so I went on, "I'm going down into Santa Fe for a few hours. Can I assume the coast is clear?"

Nothing again, and I frowned. But since I'd seen more clouds massing up

to the northeast, I didn't want to dilly-dally. Maybe twenty minutes in and twenty minutes out; I'd actually seen a PetSmart down a side street as I was making my way along Cerrillos Road when I came into town, so at least I wouldn't have to waste a lot of time looking for a pet store. Having no cell service and no way to look anything up on the Internet definitely made what should have been easy tasks a lot more difficult.

With a shrug, I closed the safe and locked it, then headed out to the kitchen. I really didn't need anything else in the way of supplies, although the chilliness of the nights even now, in early October, told me that the cold-weather gear I'd brought along might not be sufficient for a full-blown Santa Fe winter. Well, if I had time to poke around, I'd see if I could find something.

As I was getting ready, I debated whether to bring Dutchie along, and then decided against it. She was safe here, and I knew I'd move faster if I didn't have her along. Besides, I needed someplace to stow the shotgun. I wasn't sure if she'd take kindly to being relegated to the back seat so the shotgun could...ride shotgun.

I patted her head, got her some fresh water, and then told her I'd be going out but would be back soon. Since she'd gotten used to me coming and going between the house and the garage or the kitchen and the greenhouse, she took this announcement in stride, lapping up some of the water I'd just poured before she settled down on the rug in front of the oven. That was one of her new favorite spots, which made things sort of difficult when I was trying to cook.

Smiling, I went out the back door and made my way along the flagstone walk to the garage. In my explorations, I'd found the remotes for the garage and the front gate, so technically I didn't need the voice to let me in and out. Still, I couldn't help wondering where he'd gotten to.

With a shrug, I opened the garage door, then climbed into the Cherokee. I leaned the shotgun against the passenger seat, checked the fuel gauge, and

backed out, glad that I wouldn't have to worry about getting more gas anytime soon. This place felt like it was out in the middle of nowhere — and it was — but I doubted it was more than five miles one way from here to the city center. I could go back and forth at least twenty more times before I had to bother with fueling up.

The dirt track hadn't improved any since the last time I'd driven over it, and I gritted my teeth as I bounced and jounced along at a steady twenty miles an hour. It was a relief to hit the actual road, even though it wasn't in the greatest shape, either. But at least here I could increase my speed to thirty, slowing occasionally to go around an abandoned truck or car.

Nothing had changed. I wasn't sure why I'd expected it to, except I supposed that was a normal, human thing to think — the world around us had never been static, people and cars coming and going, shifting their positions. Here, though, there were no more people left to change anything. Or rather, so few of them probably remained that it would take some doing to run into any of them. I was a little hazy on the population of Santa Fe before the Heat laid everything waste, but I had a feeling there couldn't be more than a hundred or so people left in the general area, if even that much.

Eventually, I backtracked my way to Cerrillos, then drove some distance down the street before I spotted the PetSmart off to my left. I turned — going wide to avoid a Ford Explorer sitting right in the middle of the intersection — and pulled into the store parking lot. There weren't that many vehicles here, most likely because people had been thinking about other things than feeding their pets when the doomsday disease swept through town.

When I went inside, my father's heavy police-issue flashlight in one hand, I was relieved to see that all the live small animals — the rats and mice and gerbils, the birds and lizards and snakes — had apparently flown the coop. How they'd gotten out, I had no idea, unless this was another example of "being taken care of," as the voice had assured me back in Albuquerque. There was evidence of the food being tampered with, but although anything

within reach of a large dog's muzzle seemed to be either gone or half-eaten, there were still bags and bags on the upper shelves. I got a shopping cart and loaded it up, took it to the Cherokee, and dumped the bags there, then repeated the process until my arms ached and I wouldn't be able to see out the back window if I kept it up any longer. That would be enough to see Dutchie through the winter, and after that — well, I'd just come foraging again.

I also grabbed a miscellany of dog treats and dog toys from the displays at the front of the store, and wedged those in and around the big twenty-pound bags of dog food. Dutchie was definitely going to be one spoiled doggie, but I thought she deserved it.

During this whole process, which I estimated took me about twenty minutes or so, I didn't see any evidence of anyone else being around. True, a pet store probably wasn't the sort of place where survivors hung out, but I felt myself relax a little. Maybe this was why the voice had let me alone — it had known I had nothing to fear on this particular trip.

Humming to myself, I got back in the SUV and pointed it northward, back along the way I'd come. When I got to the intersection where I should have turned on Alameda to head back up into the hills, though, I found myself slowing down, and then cutting left so I could drive up Don Gaspar.

Almost at once, I heard the voice in my head. *Jessica, what are you doing?*

Relief flooded through me. So I hadn't been completely abandoned. "I want to see."

*See what?*

"The center of town. I want to see if it's all right."

*Why should that matter?*

"Because it matters," I said, an edge of irritation in my voice. "It was a cultural center. Lots of museums, historical sites. What can it hurt to look?"

Silence for a few seconds. *You may not like what you see.*

Ice etched its way down my spine, but I attempted to ignore it, instead asking, “So where the hell have you been, anyway? The Bahamas?”

He didn’t answer directly, but said, *You missed me?*

Did I want to admit that I had? Probably not. Hedging, I replied, “Well, I love Dutchie, but she’s not the world’s greatest conversationalist.”

I heard one of those low chuckles. *You may be right in that.*

Despite what he’d just said about my not liking what I would see, I couldn’t help smiling. That smile faded abruptly, though, as I came around the corner to Santa Fe’s famous plaza. In good weather — and even not-so-good weather — the plaza was usually full of people, whether tourists, musicians, vendors, or locals out to get some air. I’d expected it to be empty. What I hadn’t expected to see were the obvious signs of looting, of storefronts smashed in, merchandise scattered across the sidewalk.

Mouth grim, I parked the Cherokee in a place that would have been heinously illegal a few days earlier, straddling the curb at the intersection of Palace Avenue and San Francisco Street. There really wasn’t anyplace else, as cars still lined the streets, their meters run out long ago. I didn’t bother to look and see if there were piles of gray dust inside those cars. If their owners had died outside, the wind would’ve blown their remains away days earlier.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Why would people loot here? Food or medical supplies I can understand, but expensive jewelry and art?”

*I don’t know for certain. Perhaps they were attempting to assert some control over their environment as everything was falling apart.*

That was one way of looking at it. My hiking boot hit something that clinked against the sidewalk, and I looked down to see that it was a heavy gold cuff bracelet studded with sapphires and diamonds. I thought I even knew which store it had come from, because it was a place where Elena and Tori and I had pressed our noses to the window and gawked at the wares inside, trying to figure out how anyone would pay almost fifty grand for a pair of earrings, even if said earrings were huge drops of tanzanite and

diamond that looked as if they should be at the Academy Awards, not a shop window in Santa Fe.

Without thinking, I bent down and picked up the bracelet, then slid it onto my wrist. It was cold against my skin; the day had turned cloudy and dark, the temperature dropping with it. I even thought I felt the first spatter of a raindrop or two against my face.

Or maybe those were tears.

I saw other items scattered around — a lone earring, a trinket box of carved stone. For some reason, I began to pick them up, gathering everything I could find and then taking it into the nearest store, a shop that seemed to have specialized in high-end western gear. It had been hit, too, but not as badly as the jewelry stores.

Again the voice asked, *Jessica, what are you doing?*

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I asked angrily. “I’m cleaning this up.”

A long pause. *Why?*

“Because — because someone loved these things once. Someone made them, and someone chose them to sell in their store, and I don’t want them lying all over the place like garbage. They deserve better than that.” As I spoke, I realized that tears were running down my cheeks, dripping bitter salt into my mouth.

When it spoke again, the voice was very gentle. *My dear, they are just things.*

“I know that!” I raged. “But I also know they’re the only things *left!* So I’m not going to leave them here!”

Silence again. Then, *Jessica, do not distress yourself so. I will take care of it.*

I don’t even know how to describe what happened next. A wind came swirling out of nowhere, seeming to come in and pick up all the detritus in the square — baskets and rugs and loose bits of jewelry and hats and

paintings and pots, everything that had been scattered on the ground during the looting. It coalesced into a cloud of debris, snaking through the air and rushing into the open door of a shop, then slamming it shut.

Blinking, I stared at the streets around me, saw how they were clear of everything except a few scattered leaves, all evidence of chaos gone as if it had never existed. Somehow, I managed to find my voice. “That — that was you?”

*Yes.*

“But...why?”

*I do not like seeing you in distress.*

What could I possibly say to that? I swallowed, my throat dry. The air around me was still once more, heavy and cold. Again I felt the stinging touch of rain sharp against my face.

“Thank you,” I managed at last.

*Go home, beloved.*

I nodded, then made myself turn around and go back to the Cherokee, to climb behind the wheel and turn the key in the ignition. Perhaps there was more damage beyond the plaza, but I didn’t want to look. I’d seen enough for one day.

The trip home was uneventful, though, and in a way it felt good to busy myself with hauling all those bags of dog food out of the back of the SUV and storing them in the basement, save for one that I shoved into a corner of the pantry. I also got out a chewy treat and gave it to Dutchie, who wagged her tail ecstatically and settled down on her rug to start masticating.

It wasn’t until later, when I’d put away the Ruger I hadn’t needed and similarly stowed the shotgun, then sat down to catch my breath, that I stared down at the heavy gold bracelet on my wrist. How much was it worth?

Wrong question, in this time when a pound of beef was probably worth a lot more than a pound of gold. The more accurate question to ask would be, *What did this cost?*

I didn't know. I'd had a small collection of costume jewelry and a few pieces of Native American work, mostly turquoise. When I packed my belongings and left Albuquerque, I hadn't brought any of it along, save the small silver hoops I was already wearing. Just hadn't seen the point.

But this thing, which should have been adorning the wrist of some movie star on the red carpet? Who knows. Probably as much as the Grand Cherokee had cost my father when he bought it brand new.

I twisted the bracelet around and around, and then became aware of something sharp sticking into my left hip bone. Puzzled, I reached into the pocket of my jeans, thinking that maybe I'd stuck something in there earlier and forgotten about it.

My fingers closed around two cool, heavy objects. I drew them out, then opened my hand to see what the hell they were.

For a second or two, I just stared down at them. Then, because I couldn't think of what else to do, I began to laugh.

In my hand were the tanzanite and diamond earrings Elena and Tori and I had admired on our last trip to Santa Fe.



I DIDN'T BRING up the subject of the earrings. How could I? That would mean I'd have to ask how the voice knew I'd seen those earrings and fallen partly in love with them, even though I'd known I would never in a million years be able to afford something like that.

No, I'd stowed them in the drawer of my nightstand and tried to put the incident out of my mind. And since in the days that followed, I didn't need to leave the compound, I didn't hear from the voice much. If I was trying to find a certain item, like a screwdriver, I'd ask where it might be located, and the voice would always answer. Otherwise, though, it seemed to be leaving me alone again, allowing me to find some equilibrium in my new life here.

There was, surprisingly, enough to keep me busy. As I'd promised my father, I wrote down as much as I could about the way the Heat had come to Albuquerque, and what the city had looked like when I left. That was a spare and painful narrative, though, and so I also wrote down random memories, just so I wouldn't forget them — the surprise party my father had thrown my mother for her fiftieth birthday. Devin's touchdown at the homecoming game last year. The crazy artist who'd approached me on one of our girls' Santa Fe trips and told me I had an amazing face and that he wanted to paint me. Things like that...bright pieces of a world now gone forever.

In addition to all that, I tended the plants in the greenhouse and puttered around the house and took Dutchie for long walks, which also helped me inspect the perimeter of the property. The wall was in perfect condition, as far as I could tell, and a good barrier against wild animals, of which there were plenty in the area. I could hear the coyotes calling at night sometimes, and one time the snarl of a cougar or bobcat. Needless to say, I hadn't ventured out to investigate, although Dutchie had gone nuts, growling and barking as she moved from window to window, presumably following along as the wild cat moved along the wall that bordered the property.

But none of those animals had gotten close enough to trigger the security system, which was why I almost had a heart attack one afternoon, about ten days after I'd come to Santa Fe, when all of a sudden the house was filled with a shrill alarm. I'd been sitting in the breakfast nook in the kitchen, keeping one eye on the book I was reading and another on the loaf of bread I had in the oven. Bread-making was a new venture for me, but really, what else did I have to do with my time?

I shot a quick glance at the timer and saw the loaf still had around a half hour to go, then bolted from the kitchen so I could bring up the security feed on the computer in the office. After I jiggled the mouse to wake up the iMac, I saw the grid with its images from all nine security cameras, including the one at the front gate.

Someone was standing there, staring up at the house. From the way his mouth was moving, it sounded as if he was calling out, but the security system didn't have audio, only video. And because it was a chilly day, threatening rain just like the time I'd had my meltdown in the plaza, all the windows were shut.

Should I ignore him? Wait it out and hope he would go away? If he'd meant to sneak in and wreak havoc, he probably wouldn't have been shouting for attention at the front gate. Still....

This was the first living soul I'd seen in two weeks. The camera didn't show a huge amount of detail, because the sun was at his back and all I could see was his silhouette, but I hadn't seen any evidence of a gun or any other weapon. Not that that meant much.

Deciding to compromise, I got the shotgun out of the gun safe and then headed out the front door, Dutchie tagging along at my heels. She hadn't barked yet, but maybe that was only because she hadn't yet caught a whiff of the stranger.

I walked down the driveway and paused about six feet from the gate. Because the drive sloped up the hill toward the house and the garage, I had something of a vantage point, could see that this unwelcome visitor was a young man probably around my age or maybe a few years older. Black hair pulled back into a ponytail, warm brown skin, black almond-shaped eyes. Definitely Native American.

And...gorgeous. Like, the kind of gorgeous I would've had a hard time not staring at if I'd been in a club or out with my friends at a restaurant or the movies or the mall. Having someone who looked like that turn up on my doorstep, when I hadn't seen anyone since the man I'd shot outside Walgreens?

Well, let's just say it was a little overwhelming.

But not so much I forgot that I was here alone, sitting on top of a stockpile of supplies that were a damn good incentive for murder, as far as I

was concerned. I hefted the shotgun so he could see it, but didn't bring it up to eye level.

"Who are you?" I demanded, while Dutchie sat beside me, wagging her tail. So much for looking intimidating.

"Jason Little River," he said, eyeing the shotgun but clearly attempting to keep a pleasant expression on his face. "My friends call me Jace."

"So, Jason," I said, emphasizing his full name, "how did you find this place?"

He paused, clearly a little disconcerted by the hostility in my tone. "The tire tracks," he replied, pointing at the rutted road that led to the compound. Since it had started raining on the way back from my last trip into town, the tracks I'd left were fairly defined. Damn. I hadn't even thought of that.

But those obvious tire tracks didn't explain everything. "You still had to get a good way out of town to even see where this road started."

"True. I had a friend who lived on Upper Canyon. I came here to Santa Fe — well, I came here hoping he might still be okay. Stupid, I know." Jason paused, gaze lingering on the shotgun before returning to my face. "And when I went to his house...." Under the heavy backpack he wore, the kind of metal-framed thing serious hikers used, his shoulders lifted. "No one there, of course. I was sort of walking around, trying to figure out what to do next, and I saw the tracks on the road going up the hill past his property. I figured I might as well check it out. The tracks seemed too fresh to have been made before...well, before."

I didn't bother to ask him what he meant by "before." For all of us survivors, our lives would forever be divided between "before" and "after." "You say you came here to Santa Fe. Where from?"

"Taos. I lived on the pueblo there." A disarming grin, one that under different circumstances might have made my knees melt. "Well, part-time. I also had an apartment in town. You?"

It was on my lips to say I was the one asking the questions here, but that

sounded awfully rude, even under the current circumstances. “Albuquerque.”

His eyebrows went up. “How’d you manage to get here, of all places?”

I hefted the shotgun. “I don’t think that matters. I’m here now.”

He didn’t miss the way I’d shifted the gun, just enough to show I wasn’t thrilled by his questions. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s just — I haven’t seen anyone for almost two weeks. I’m probably a little off.”

*You and me both, honey.* Relenting a little, I asked, “So no one was left in Taos?”

A shadow seemed to pass over his face, but his voice was level as he replied, “No one in the pueblo. When I went into town, I didn’t see anyone, except one woman lurking around one of the hotels. She took one look at me and ran off screaming.” He shrugged. “Since I could tell she wasn’t open to conversation, I didn’t bother to go after her. She could have been armed.”

“And you weren’t?”

Again I saw his eyes flicker toward the gun I held. “No. Well, not besides this.” His hand went to his hip, where I could see he wore some kind of leather scabbard, about the size to conceal a hunting knife.

“Let me see it.”

From this distance, I couldn’t really hear him sigh, but I could tell his patience was starting to run thin. Holding my gaze, he undid the snap that kept the knife in place, then pulled it out of its sheath. As I’d thought, it was a big piece clearly designed for hunting, with a serrated edge. My father had owned one not unlike it.

“And that’s all?” I asked.

He nodded, then went on, “Hey, I have a peace offering.”

“What?” Saying my tone was guarded would have been an understatement.

“I’m going to get something out of my backpack,” he said, laying the knife down in the dirt in front of him. “Okay?”

“Depends what it is,” I told him.

A grin, one that showed off a dazzling set of white teeth. I had a feeling he'd used that smile to good effect a number of times in the past, but I had to make it seem as if it wasn't affecting me, even though I could feel a not-unpleasant shiver go through me at the way the smile lit up his dark eyes.

"I think you'll like this."

He unslung the backpack, setting it on the ground before unzipping it and spending a few seconds going through its contents. His back was to me, so I couldn't see exactly what he was doing. Almost at once, though, he turned around. In each hand he held a wine bottle.

"Very nice, but I've got a pretty stocked cellar up there," I said, jerking my chin back toward the house.

"Ah, but this is La Chiripada cabernet sauvignon. New Mexico wine. You have any of that?"

I really didn't have any idea. Besides the wine refrigerator in the kitchen, I'd discovered another trove in the basement, cases and cases of wine, most of it from California and France, from what I could tell, and some odd bits from South America and Arizona. I hadn't noticed anything from New Mexico, but then again, I hadn't exactly been looking for it, either.

As I hesitated, not sure how to respond, I heard the voice in my head.

*He is safe.*

"What?" I murmured under my breath, hoping the stranger wouldn't notice me muttering to myself.

*He is safe. There is no reason to keep him out.*

"Wait...you actually *want* me to let him in?"

*Yes.*

To say I was flummoxed would be an understatement. Here it seemed the voice had done everything to keep me safe, to have me avoid other survivors because of the dangers involved, and now he wanted me to allow a strange man to simply walk into my sanctuary here?

"What happens if he *isn't* safe?"

*He is safe. I promise you.*

Even with the voice stating his opinion so flatly, I couldn't help hesitating. True, he had always protected me, argued with me when I wanted to do things he found too dangerous. So I supposed I should be trusting his judgment here.

I sent a sidelong glance in the stranger's direction. He was still standing there, a bottle in each hand, a half hopeful, half anxious expression on his face. There was something so goofy about the combination, so oddly adorable, that I found myself relenting.

"All right," I muttered to the voice. "You'd just better not be playing supernatural matchmaker here or something, or we'll be discussing this further."

No answer to that. I hadn't really expected one.

Not quite allowing myself to sigh, I transferred the shotgun to my left hand and began walking to the gate. There was a manual release there, since obviously I hadn't brought the remote with me.

"Okay," I told Jason. "I've never had La Chiripada."

The look of relief that passed over his face was also adorable, and erased some of the strain I'd seen in his features. "Great. Thanks. I appreciate this. Really." He began stuffing the wine bottles into his backpack, then hefted it onto his shoulders. After that, he shot me a questioning look. "And your name is?"

"Jessica," I told him as I pushed the button to open the gate. "Jessica Monroe."

Another one of those blazing smiles. "Well, Jessica, I am *very* pleased to make your acquaintance."

## CHAPTER 11



WE HEADED up to the house after that, Dutchie dancing around Jason, tail wagging and tongue lolling as if her long-lost best friend had just come home.

“I hope you’re a dog person,” I told him as we went in the front door.

“I am, actually. There were always a lot of dogs on the pueblo. I didn’t have one of my own, since I was living in an apartment about half the time, but — ” He broke off, pausing a few paces inside the entryway. His expression was so awestruck that at first I thought he was impressed by the house, which didn’t surprise me too much. It was pretty impressive. But then he said, “Is that *bread*?”

“It is,” I said, adding, “and I hope I haven’t just burned it.”

I jogged into the kitchen, Dutchie tagging along at my heels, since of course the kitchen was her favorite room in the house. Jason followed at a more sedate pace, probably because of the backpack he carried.

But when I peered into the oven, the bread looked perfect, golden brown and with just the right amount of loft. The timer said I had exactly thirty seconds to go. So I grabbed some potholders and pulled out the pan, setting it on the stove top to cool.

By then Jason had shrugged off his backpack and leaned it up against one of the cupboards. “That’s amazing.”

“What is?” I asked, turning to face him.

“The bread. This.” He waved a hand, as if indicating the kitchen and the house beyond. “It’s like — it’s like it never happened.”

Again, I didn’t have to ask what he meant by “it.” “Someone definitely put a lot of work into this house. I was lucky to find it.”

A pause, during which I wondered if he was going to ask again how I had found it...and what the hell I should say in response to such a question. Instead, though, he inquired, “Your family didn’t build it?”

“Oh, no. We could never have afforded something like this.”

My reply appeared to make him relax slightly. Maybe he’d been thinking I was some rich girl from the city or something. There was a joke. But I could see how that might have made things even more awkward between us; I knew most of my state’s Native American residents weren’t exactly rolling in cash.

Well, neither was my family, so I added, “I found some paperwork when I was going through the house. The guy who built it was a real estate developer from Phoenix. I doubt he’s going to be showing up any time soon.”

A nod, although I could see the way Jason was surveying the kitchen, from the gleaming stainless-steel appliances to the custom cupboards and granite countertops. I had no idea what he might be thinking. In that moment, I was only strangely glad that I’d been so careful about keeping the place clean. In the past, I hadn’t been what you might call the world’s greatest housekeeper, but now I found cleaning the house helped to distract me, and used up some of the empty hours.

His next question surprised me. “You came from Albuquerque. We were pretty cut off in Taos. Did you ever hear anything more about the disease... where it started, mortality rates, anything like that?”

That was the last thing I wanted to talk about, but Jace clearly wanted more information than he’d gotten back home. Not that I had a lot to give him. Even so, I thought it best to stall a little while I figured out how much I should say.

“Water?” I asked, and he blinked, clearly startled by the non sequitur, then replied,

“Yes, thanks.”

So I got a glass from the cupboard and filled it up with water from the refrigerator door. When I went to hand it to him, I realized how tall he was, how there were definitely some impressive muscles under the loose-fitting flannel shirt he wore. And even though he had to have been living rough for the past few weeks, I could tell he was clean. In fact, I caught the faintest scent of wood smoke coming from his clothes, and something about the aroma made a little thrill go through me.

I definitely needed to get it together.

Stepping away from him, pretending that I needed to go check on the bread, I said, “Things fell apart pretty quickly in Albuquerque, too. We never got a straight story about where it started or anything like that. Afterward....” I let the words trail off as I flashed back to that dark Walgreens, and the man I had confronted there. “I did meet someone who said he’d worked for emergency management downtown. He said the mortality rate was 99.8 percent.”

“Shit.” With his brown skin, Jace couldn’t exactly go pale, but I still saw the blood appear to drain from his face. Then his dark eyes seemed to go sharp as he focused on what I’d just said. “Wait — you *met* another survivor? Where is he?”

*Shit* was right. I’d just met Jace. Was I supposed to tell him that I’d murdered a man?

I didn’t see much of a way around it. If we were really going to be sharing this house, I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep that big a secret from him. He needed to know, so he could decide if it was worth the risk to stay.

“He’s dead,” I said, my voice flat, harsh. “He tried to take my vehicle away from me, all the supplies I’d put together. He pulled a gun on me. So I shot him.”

Silence. Jace stared at me, obviously trying to process what I'd just said. When he spoke, his tone was a lot gentler than I'd expected. "Because he was trying to steal from you, and you would've been dead without that vehicle and those supplies."

The question was, *would* I have been? I could have gone foraging all over again if necessary, could've found one of the abandoned vehicles and hot-wired it, another skill my father had taught me. I wasn't sure what happened to car keys if they were actually on a victim of the Heat, in a pocket or something, when they went to dust. All their clothes and jewelry seemed to disappear, so obviously the heat in their bodies was so extreme that it could destroy everything around them. Or was the explanation that simple? I hadn't actually stopped to puzzle it out, mostly because I knew in the end it didn't really matter. Those people were gone, and so were the belongings they had on them.

"I thought so at the time," I said slowly. As Jason kept looking at me with that concerned expression on his face, I felt something give way inside, the words flowing out, even though I hadn't meant to mention anything else of what had happened. "And he had this *look* on his face, and the night before that, crazy Chris Bowman had broken into my house and *attacked* me, and —"

I couldn't go on, because out of nowhere tears were streaming down my face, and, to my dismay, I'd begun to sob, the horror of it all coming back to me, something dark and terrible that had only been lurking in the murky sediment at the bottom of my mind, just waiting to return and overwhelm me.

Jason crossed the kitchen and pulled me against him, his hand smoothing my hair, his warm voice murmuring my name as I wept into his shirt, the flannel soft against my cheek. He smelled of wood smoke and pine needles, and underneath that, clean male sweat, and I breathed him in, reassured beyond measure at the feel of someone so solid, so real.

And then I realized what I was doing, that I was sobbing in the arms of a

man I had just met, and I pushed myself away, shaking my head. “I — I’m sorry,” I gasped. “That was just — that came out of nowhere. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said. His dark eyes seemed alight with compassion, with understanding. “I can’t imagine how rough this must have been for you. And I’m sorry that you...did what you had to do. But I don’t think you can blame yourself for that.”

I went to the paper towel dispenser and tore off a partial sheet, then blotted my eyes. Good thing I hadn’t bothered with makeup since I’d gotten here, except for some gloss to keep my lips from cracking in the dry, cold weather. “Thank you,” I said simply. “But I do blame myself. There had to be something else I could have done — ”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “Sounds like you were kind of up against a wall.” Again I was struck by the warmth in his expression...but it wasn’t *that* kind of warmth, more that he was sorry I’d had to go through anything so terrible. “But I’m glad you told me the truth.”

So was I, oddly enough. I’d just told him the worst thing about me, and he hadn’t even blinked. That had to be a good sign.

“I’m glad, too,” I told him, wanting to put the whole thing behind me. Somehow I knew Jace wouldn’t press the issue any further. “Now, how about some of this bread?”



AND LIKE THAT, Jason Little River came to live at the compound. He took over the larger of the secondary bedrooms, putting his meager belongings in the closet there. I noticed that he hadn’t brought any personal items with him, no photographs of family or anything like that, unlike the wedding photo of my parents that now lived on the mantel in the living room, or the shot of all of us at one of Devin’s football games, which was now sitting on the dresser in the master bedroom.

When I asked him about his family, his expression grew shuttered. “All gone now,” he said, and didn’t seem to want to talk about it anymore. Since I understood all too well what it felt like to lose everyone around you, I didn’t press the issue. Although I didn’t know a whole lot about life on the pueblo, I knew it had to be a fairly close-knit community, a sort of huge extended family very unlike what I’d grown up with. His loss was probably even more painful than mine. If he wanted to open up about it later, after he’d had time to work through it in his own way, then I would be there to listen to him.

He was impressed by the compound, by all the lengths its builder had gone to so it would be self-sustaining. Even so, after one morning of walking around and inspecting everything, just a day or two after he moved in, he told me, “We should really be thinking about getting some livestock. This place isn’t big enough for cattle, but maybe some goats?”

“Goats?” I repeated, not bothering to keep the skepticism out of my voice. “You’re not suggesting we *eat* a goat, are you?”

His teeth flashed in the morning sun as he grinned at me. It was a bright, brisk day, the sky dappled with clouds, but the sunlight still fiercely bright. Despite the glaring sun, I could feel the bite in the wind, the unmistakable signs that winter was coming...and that it was going to be a lot colder than anything I’d experienced down in Albuquerque.

“The original *barbacoa* was made with goat,” he pointed out. I only raised an eyebrow, and he laughed and went on, “I was thinking more in terms of milk and cheese. The cheese you have now isn’t going to last forever.”

Well, that was true. We had plenty of other staples, but some of the perishables like the cheese and the butter were about on their last legs. “Do you know how to milk a goat?” I asked.

“No, but I’ve milked cows. The technique can’t be all that different.”

The way he said it, halfway arch, halfway teasing, just made me shake my head. “Okay, I’ll let you do it. Assuming we can even find any goats.

They weren't exactly thick on the ground, the last time I checked."

"Maybe not, but there were probably people on the outskirts of town who kept livestock, and I know I saw animal pens up in Nambe as I came down into town."

"Oh?" I asked. It was the first time he'd made any mention of his journey here. I hadn't pressed, because I knew better than anyone else that there were some things people just didn't want to talk about. Even so, I'd wondered about the long walk from Taos, and what he'd encountered on it.

"Yeah." He wasn't looking at me, was instead staring to the north and east, presumably in the direction from which he'd come. "Part of the reason it took me so long to get here was that I took the High Road down from Taos. I figured it might be safer to stay off the main roads."

"And you walked that whole way?" I asked, staring at him with some incredulity. I'd heard of the High Road, but I'd never been on it. The scenic side trip was one that my family had discussed taking a few times, but those plans had never materialized. My father had always been a Point A to Point B kind of guy and was more intent on the destination than on the road that led to it.

Jace gave me a rueful smile. "Not at first. I had a motorcycle, and I'd ridden it before with my backpack, although I know that's not really recommended. But I thought I could do it if I kept my speed down. Besides, a motorcycle is a lot easier to maneuver around abandoned vehicles."

I couldn't argue with that. But a motorcycle wouldn't have worked for me. I had too much stuff to bring, and besides, there was Dutchie. Well, maybe a sidecar....

Turning away from me, Jason surveyed the horizon again. The wind picked up, pulling strands of heavy dark hair out of the piece of thin leather he had wrapped around his ponytail. His hair hung a few inches below his shoulders, and so far I hadn't seen it in anything but that heavy tail down his back. That hadn't stopped me from wondering what it would look like, sleek

and loose over those broad shoulders.

Which was exactly the wrong thing to be thinking. After I'd lost it the day we'd met, and he'd held me and comforted me, we'd maintained a careful distance between us. I hadn't noted even a flicker of interest from him. Maybe I wasn't his type, or maybe it was the far more stark fact that he'd lost not just his family, but his people, his entire way of life. He seemed to be bouncing back fairly well, but it was probably a little self-absorbed of me to think he'd be interested in any sort of romantic entanglements so soon after suffering that kind of shock.

Besides, I wasn't even sure whether *I* was interested in anything like that. Yes, Jace was extremely good-looking, and he had an easygoing way about him that I appreciated, after some of the high-strung guys I'd dated in the past, but our focus should be on survival first and foremost. Those other sorts of complications were pretty far down my list of priorities.

And anyway, break-ups were bad enough when you had a decent chance of never seeing the other person again. I didn't exactly have that luxury at the moment.

Jace didn't seem to have noticed my preoccupation, since he appeared to be absorbed in studying the far-off outlines of the Jemez mountain range. I noticed that he held something in his hand, a leather thong knotted through a hole in a smooth-polished black stone. His thumb moved over it, the motion reminding me of the worry beads sometimes used by Greek men.

Then he said, "But I picked up something in my tire in Placita. I had a patch kit in my backpack, but it wasn't just a nail that had blown the tire, but a sharp rock. I lost two nights there, trying to fix it, scavenging around to see if I could find anything to replace it with, but that was a no-go."

"No one there, either?" I asked, although I already knew what the answer would be.

"No. Not a soul. I did some foraging to replenish my supplies, which was what delayed me even more. Or maybe I just wasn't looking forward to that

long, long walk.”

It would have been that. Even with the part of the trip he’d shaved off by riding his motorcycle, he still had to have walked a good forty miles or so. Farther, actually, because it was still about fifteen miles from Nambe to the heart of Santa Fe, and then another five miles to this hidden fold of the hills where the compound was located.

“But you did it anyway.”

He nodded, then shoved the polished stone he’d been holding back into his pocket. “There was nothing left in Taos. I wandered there for about a day and a half — I was at the pueblo when the illness hit, and our healers couldn’t do anything to combat it. No one could. People were being told to stay at home, that the local medical center didn’t have the resources to treat that many victims at once. So...I stayed there and watched everyone die around me.”

“And waited to find out when it would be your turn,” I said quietly.

Finally, he shifted so his gaze fell upon me, rather than that far-off, jagged horizon. Those jet-black eyes, in their fringe of equally black lashes, were startled, but then he nodded in understanding. “Yes. That’s exactly what I did. But then after another day passed, and everyone was gone, leaving behind only dust, I realized I wouldn’t be lucky enough to join all my people in the afterlife. I was doomed to drift here, in a world I hadn’t chosen.”

I probably wouldn’t have phrased it that way, but he was right — that’s exactly what it felt like. Being cast adrift on dark waters, paddling desperately, although you had no idea why you’d been pushed out onto that black ocean in the first place. “So you left then?”

He nodded, and once again his attention moved back to the horizon, to the mountains that blocked his view of the place he had once called home. “Well, I went from the pueblo to my apartment. At least I’d had the motorcycle with me at the pueblo, so the trip didn’t take long. The whole way I didn’t see anyone, just cars left along the side of the road. Same thing at my apartment

— it was a small building, only four units, but all the hotels were equally deserted.”

His shoulders lifted under the leather jacket he wore, although I wasn't quite sure of the reason for the shrug. Dismissing his futile attempts to find any survivors? I didn't know him well enough to guess.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I could tell that staying in Taos probably wasn't a good idea. It's a small town...was, I mean...and the chances of finding anyone who'd lived through the Heat were pretty low. I packed what I could and left. I did see that one woman as I was heading out of town, but, as I said, she took off the second she saw me. Maybe she thought I was a ghost.” He did smile then, but grimly, just the slightest lift at the corners of his mouth.

*Or a rapist*, I thought, recalling my own experiences. I didn't say anything aloud, though. Whatever he might be, Jason Little River was clearly *not* a rapist. “And the wine?” I asked.

“The La Chiripada tasting room was just down the street from where I lived. Since no one was around, I figured it wouldn't matter if I liberated a couple of bottles. I had a feeling I might need a drink in the near future. Or,” he added, with a real smile this time, his expression warming as he looked over at me, “a peace offering.”

I tried not to blush, but I wasn't sure how successful I was at it. With any luck, he'd think the flush in my cheeks had come from the brisk wind blowing down from the north, and not the way he'd just looked at me. “Speaking of the wine,” I said, my tone probably too casual, “we should have something special to drink it with. Frozen tamales probably aren't festive enough.”

“You like rabbit?” Jace asked, a gleam in those black eyes.

“I don't know,” I replied uncertainly. I had a feeling I knew what he was going to suggest. “I've never had it.”

“Well, time to change that.” He glanced over at the house, then back at

me. “That is, assuming you have a .22 in that gun safe of yours.”



AT LEAST HE didn't ask me to go with him. In the back of my mind, I'd understood that at some point I'd have to start eating game meats, but I wasn't sure I could handle watching Jace shoot a fluffy little bunny and then expect to roast it or whatever a few hours later.

He did take Dutchie along, saying she might as well start to learn what it meant to be an outdoor dog. I knew he was right; her days as a pampered suburban pooch were long over. Anyway, she was more than happy to go along on the hunting expedition, trotting off at Jace's side without even a backward glance toward the house. I only hoped she wouldn't scare off every rabbit in a five-mile radius.

In the meantime, I had to scour the cookbooks that sat on the shelf mounted to the kitchen wall to see if I could find anything about cooking rabbit. Actually, that didn't take me much time at all, because in addition to the standard *Joy of Cooking* and *Better Homes and Gardens* cookbooks, I found several specialty ones, including a title dedicated to cooking all sorts of game meats, starting with rabbit and quail and moving up from there.

After that, it was a matter of poring over the recipes and deciding which sounded best — and one for which I had actually had all the ingredients on hand. I decided that the rabbit with mustard sauce variation sounded good. Since I'd already harvested some onions and garlic from the greenhouse a few days earlier, all I had to do was rescue the onion from the fridge and the garlic from the little terra-cotta keeper that sat on the counter.

While I did that, I couldn't help worrying that Jace would come back with a couple of rabbit carcasses and expect me to skin and dress them, his work as the he-man hunter done. I didn't know the first thing about doing any of that. Hell, I could barely cut up a whole chicken properly. My mother showed

me how to do it once, but I'd protested the whole time that you could buy already cut-up chicken, so what was the point? Wasting a half hour on that sort of exercise just to save a dollar or so on the price of the meat had hardly seemed worth it to me.

That had annoyed her, I could tell; she was probably flashing back to when she and my father first got married, when she was substitute teaching while trying to get a full-time position, and he was still a rookie right out of the Academy. Money had been tight. I understood that intellectually, but twenty-five years later, it seemed a little extreme to be worrying about a few cents a pound for chicken.

But at least she had taught me to cook — not Cordon Bleu or anything, but how to make a roast and how to prepare a variety of potato dishes and lots of veggies, sauces, that sort of thing. I knew I wouldn't have to worry about poisoning Jace if he did somehow manage to bring back a rabbit, even with Dutchie's help.

Until they did return, I wasn't about to get anything started. I assembled the ingredients on the kitchen counter, went down to the cellar to get some potatoes, and then found a tablecloth and some matching napkins on one of the shelves in the laundry room. This would be the first time we'd sat down at the dining room table, as his first few nights here, Jace had eaten with me at the little breakfast set in the kitchen nook. For some reason, that had felt safer to me. There was a certain ritual associated with sitting down to a real meal at a dining room table.

Maybe I was making too much out of his going rabbit-hunting. It wasn't as if we wouldn't be eating a lot of that sort of thing in the future, if it turned out he really was handy with that .22. Then again, making an occasion out of it might make us both feel a little better about our current situation.

That thought seemed to reassure me, so I went ahead and finished setting the table, completing the setup with the long wrought-iron candleholder that had been sitting on the sideboard. It held five pillar candles, and would

provide plenty of light.

*Candlelit dinners?* I asked myself. *Boy, you really are asking for trouble.*

I decided if Jace asked, I'd say it was a good way to save energy.

He returned an hour or so later, Dutchie bounding along beside him, and a very messy bundle of rabbit dangling from a bag in one hand. So he had done the butchering for me, probably guessing that asking me to handle that particular duty would have damaged my delicate sensibilities.

"Thanks," I said, taking the bundle from him. "I found a recipe with mustard sauce. Does that sound okay to you?"

"Sounds great," he replied. He was windblown, but looked far more relaxed and happy than he had when he was telling me about how he had left Taos. Getting out in the fresh air and away from the house seemed to have done him a world of good. "I need to get cleaned up. Can you manage things from here?"

In another world, I might have complained about having to do the typical female thing of cooking, now that he'd bagged his bunnies. Actually, though, I was just grateful that he even had the ability to go out and get us food. He knew how to hunt; I knew how to cook. It seemed a pretty fair division of labor from where I stood.

The bundle of rabbit parts was a little bloodier than something I would have gotten from the supermarket, but I wasn't so squeamish that I couldn't handle it. I rinsed everything off and patted it dry, then sprinkled the pieces with salt and pepper while warming up some olive oil in a pan. As the rabbit was browning, Jace returned to the kitchen, face and hands looking freshly scrubbed, and asked if I needed help peeling the potatoes.

Okay, so much for my worry about thinking he was going to sit on his ass and watch a DVD of *Die Hard* or something while I labored away in the kitchen.

"Yes," I said. "Thanks."

He went to work, being sparing with the water, for which I was grateful.

So far it seemed as if the well could manage just about anything we threw at it, including daily showers for the two of us, but it never hurt to be careful. I used to take long, hot showers, the kind that would basically kill all the hot water in the place by the time I was done, but once I got here, I retrained myself so the whole procedure only took five minutes. Not the easiest of tasks at first, but things did get sped up when you didn't have to worry about shaving your legs.

I risked a glance at Jace, thinking I wouldn't mind having to go back to the whole leg-shaving thing if the situation warranted it. But that day seemed far off — if it ever came at all — so in the meantime, I was pretty sure my five-minute showers were safe.

Neither of us spoke, but it was a companionable sort of silence, him peeling the potatoes, me working away at the sauté pan, following the steps of the recipe. He did stop to ask whether I wanted the potatoes sliced or cut up or whatever, but since I was planning on mashing them, he didn't have to do much besides quarter them and put them in a pot of cold water.

“Don't you need milk for mashed potatoes?” he asked.

“There's evaporated milk in the pantry. It won't be quite the same, but I think it'll be okay.”

I could tell by the way his brows drew together that he wasn't exactly thrilled by the idea of evaporated milk, but he didn't say anything, only went over to fetch the box and then mix up a batch for me. Well, if it was that big a problem, the next day I'd send him off in search of any stray goats that might be wandering the area, looking for a home. Dutchie would probably be ecstatic at the prospect of that sort of expedition.

The dog had definitely latched on to Jace. Maybe she'd been more bonded with Mr. Munoz, back in Albuquerque. Or maybe Jace was one of those people whom dogs tended to love. I didn't know, and in the end, it didn't matter. Jace was Dutchie's new best friend. It didn't bother me as much as I thought it might have, simply because Dutchie had proved herself

to be a decent judge of character. If she liked Jace, it must mean he was okay.

It was dark by the time dinner was ready. Jace and I carried the various platters and bowls to the dining room table, and I brought out some matches I'd found in the kitchen so I could light the pillars in their wrought-iron holder. Without my asking, Jace turned off the overhead fixture, so all we had was the candlelight. It danced off the heavy glass goblets, the dark bottle of cabernet that sat waiting to be drunk. The walls in this room were a warm parchment yellow, and seemed to reflect the glow of the candles and multiply it.

"Wow," Jace murmured. "I hadn't expected to see anything like this ever again." Then he shook his head. "Wait — I don't think I'd ever seen anything like this *before*, either. It looks beautiful, Jessica."

"Thanks," I said, my tone almost shy. Now that I was with him in this intimate space, would he take all this for more than I had intended, as some sort of seduction or something?

Well, there wasn't anything I could do about it now. I pulled out my chair — obscurely glad that he hadn't offered to do it for me — and sat down. A second later, he followed suit, lifting the cloth napkin I'd set out and placing it in his lap. Then he raised the bottle of wine, which he'd already opened back in the kitchen, and poured some of the cabernet into my glass first, and then his.

"I think we should have a toast," he said.

"What should we toast to?" Not being dead seemed the obvious choice, but it seemed crass to voice the thought aloud.

He seemed to think about it for a moment, his glass a few inches off the tabletop. The candlelight gleamed against his raven-dark hair, and again I wondered what it would feel like to run my fingers through it.

"To sanctuary," he said at last.

I was definitely on board with that. Even if nothing ever happened between Jace and me, we had found a quiet haven here, a place to shelter

from whatever might be going on outside in the world. “To sanctuary,” I echoed, raising my glass as well and clinking it against his.

A brief silence fell as we both swallowed some of the wine. It wasn’t as heavy as the Montepulciano I’d drunk a few days earlier. I could taste the fruit in it, and thought it was probably a good choice to go along with the sharpness of the mustard sauce I’d made for the rabbit.

Then we both dug into the main dish, which turned out to be excellent. I wasn’t sure why I’d avoided rabbit before this, because I found myself liking the taste.

*Good thing, too, I thought, because you’re probably going to be eating a lot of it in the future.*

And the mashed potatoes actually were fine, even with the evaporated milk, and there was fresh bread and butter and roasted carrots. It really was quite the feast, especially considering I’d had to work with what was available in the cellar and the greenhouse. No more popping down to the grocery store to get that one special ingredient.

“This is...amazing,” Jace finally said, after making some serious inroads into the food on his plate. “Were you a chef or something?”

“Hardly.” I took a sip of wine to cover my embarrassment, cheeks flaming. I really needed to get this blushing thing under control one way or another. “My mother taught me how to cook. That is, she pointed out that it was mostly following directions, at least for the basic stuff. So...that’s what I did tonight. Followed directions.”

“It’s still pretty incredible.” Expression thoughtful, he drank some of his own wine. “So what did you do? Before, I mean.”

“I was getting my master’s at UNM, so I T.A.’d a couple of courses. English — a lot of paper grading, mostly.” I broke off a piece of bread but didn’t eat it, just sort of rolled it between my finger and thumb. “What about you?”

“I graduated from UNM four years ago, then came back to Taos.” He

looked at me directly then, as if studying my features, and it was difficult to remain as I was, to not glance away. “We must have been there at the same time, but I guess there wouldn’t have been much overlap. You’d have been a freshman when I was a senior.”

I could have sworn his expression was somewhat regretful, but I didn’t want to read too much into it. That way only lay disappointment.

“Anyway,” he went on, “after that I went back to Taos. I conducted tours at the pueblo part of the time, and the rest of the time I worked on getting my business going.”

“What kind of business?” I asked, after finally remembering to eat the piece of bread I was holding.

“Website and graphic design. I did some work for the local businesses. Mostly advertising stuff. The tours paid a lot better.”

That revelation surprised me. “They did?”

“Oh, yeah.” He got himself a piece of bread, then buttered it. When he went on, he wore a rather sardonic smile. “You’d be amazed how much the tourists were willing to part with. On a good day, I could make around three hundred bucks. White guilt is expensive, I guess.”

I just stared at him, and he hurried to say,

“No offense. But I think that’s part of why they’re willing to hand over a twenty — or more — for a half-hour tour of the pueblo.” His gaze sharpened on me, and again I had to force myself to look back at him directly. “Anyway, I’d say to look at you, you must have some First Nations blood back in the woodpile yourself. Or am I overreaching?”

So that was it — he was just inspecting my appearance in an attempt to determine my own origins. Fair enough. Would he feel better, knowing I had a Native American heritage of my own? “No, you’re not overreaching,” I replied, glad I sounded calm and unruffled. “Family legend has it that my great-great-great-grandmother was full-blood Ute.”

“Even better,” Jace said, a certain warmth in his eyes doing unexpected

things to my midsection. “The Ute and the Pueblo were on very good terms back in the day.”

What in the world was I supposed to say to that? Was Jace hoping that he and I would be, as he put it, “on very good terms”? Not that I thought I would be opposed to such a shift in our relationship, but we’d only known each other for a couple of days. I certainly didn’t intend to rush into anything.

“Well, that’s good to know,” I remarked. “At least I won’t have to worry about tribal warfare breaking out in the laundry room or something.”

For a second or two, he didn’t reply, only stared at me, and I hoped I hadn’t offended him. But then he chuckled, reached for the wine bottle, and poured some more into my glass. Still smiling, he said, “No, I don’t think we have to worry about any conflict here.”

It was all I could do not to shiver. No matter what he said, though, I wouldn’t take for granted this current harmony and goodwill lasting indefinitely.

How could it, when we were such strangers to one another?

## CHAPTER 12



BUT SOMEHOW, strangely, that cooperation did continue. We fell into a sort of pattern after a few days — rising early, eating breakfast, which was toast or oatmeal most of the time, taking turns with our showers, getting dressed, then doing whatever needed to be done around the place. Jace was full of plans, abetted by some of the books and manuals he found in the office.

“We really should build a henhouse,” he said one morning, about a week after he showed up. “I know people in the area had to have kept chickens. Eggs are a good, steady source of protein.”

“So are rabbits,” I replied, not bothering to point out that we’d been eating rabbit at least every other day. Wile E. Coyote would have been jealous.

“Now they are,” he said. “In the dead of winter, it might be more difficult. But those plans I found for a henhouse look dead easy. We just need to get some supplies.”

“What, you’re a carpenter and a web designer?” I asked, teasing. Sort of. What I knew about building henhouses was roughly the same as what I knew about brain surgery — that is, nothing. I didn’t think I was going to be much help.

He shrugged. “I picked up a few things here and there. It’ll be fine.”

And so, later that morning, we headed down into Santa Fe in search of a

Home Depot, which wasn't as easy as it might seem, considering we couldn't exactly Google its location. But we found a yellow pages inside an abandoned dentist's office, and tracked down the store from there. It was a good ways outside the city center, so I was doubly glad that we'd looked it up instead of driving aimlessly all over the place.

Jace had a list of everything he needed, and we "liberated" one of the trailers you used to be able to rent to haul your building supplies home. Thank God my father had invested in a tow package for the Cherokee, even though we'd never actually had any reason to use it. There just never seemed to be quite enough in the family budget to buy a trailer or an ATV.

It took a while to locate and then load all the necessary supplies — partly because we both kept finding things we thought would be useful and figured we might as well add them to the haul. But after the back of the SUV was packed to the rafters, and the trailer similarly loaded down, we drove off, moving slowly through the streets, since I had to keep zigging and zagging to avoid abandoned cars and trucks. We'd left Dutchie at home, much to her dismay, since we'd known we would need all the available cargo space in the Cherokee.

"It's kind of strange, don't you think?" I asked Jace after we'd cut back up on Cerrillo and were heading to Alameda.

"What's strange?" he replied, his attention still on the list he held. Maybe he was worried that we'd forgotten something.

"That we haven't seen *anybody*. I mean, even with a 99.8% mortality rate, there should still be a couple hundred people wandering around Santa Fe, right? Where are they?"

He did look up at that question, his gaze drifting to the empty sidewalks and dark windows of the businesses on either side of the street. "Lying low?"

"Maybe," I said, but I wasn't sure I believed it. By that point, it had been almost a month since the Heat first began to spread across the country. Anyone who was going to die was long dead. You'd think the survivors

would be out foraging in earnest, getting ready for winter. “It’s just weird that we haven’t seen a single person.”

“Do you want to find more people?” His tone was almost sharp as he asked that question, as if he thought I wasn’t satisfied with his company, that I needed something more.

“I don’t know,” I replied. It was only the truth. Part of me wanted to know what had happened to everyone, but after my experiences in Albuquerque, I wasn’t sure being around other people was such a good thing. Yes, Jace had turned out to be all right — more than all right, really — but could I count on being that lucky a second time?

“They could be hiding,” he said, his tone thoughtful. “Or gone to Albuquerque, thinking that maybe if any center of government still existed, it would be there, in a place where there would be more survivors. There are probably a lot of reasons why we’re not seeing anybody.”

That explanation sounded logical enough. If it hadn’t been for the voice urging me to get out, would I have left my hometown, or would I have stayed there in the hope that people might gather in what had been the state’s most populous area?

I wouldn’t second-guess myself, not now. I really didn’t know. Then again, my run-ins with Chris Bowman and the man outside Walgreens might have been enough to convince me that it was time to get out of Dodge.

“You’re right, of course,” I said, and he smiled.

“It’s okay, Jess. *We’re* okay. That’s all we have to worry about right now.”

Oh, how I wanted to believe him. I just wasn’t sure if I did.



THE HENHOUSE DID GO TOGETHER with surprising speed, and within three days’ time, we had a full-on chicken coop with space for six hens to nest, a

perch that Jace built from a closet rod, and an enclosed run. He also hung a light overhead so the hens would be encouraged to lay even on gray winter days. It was all perfect, except...no chickens.

So we got in the Cherokee again, this time taking Dutchie with us, and started scouring the rural and semi-rural areas outside Santa Fe for any rogue chickens who needed a home. It actually didn't take as long as I'd thought; about an hour into our search, we found a house with a flock of chickens scratching away happily in the backyard, apparently unaware that the apocalypse had happened and they'd been left on their own. We gathered up six hens and the rooster, who was less than pleased at being plucked out of his yard and put in the back of an SUV. Jace was a little scratched up by the time the procedure was over, but in the end we had everything we needed. All I could say was that I was very glad I'd had the forethought to lay down some plastic trash bags in the bed of the SUV before dumping the chickens back there. If he'd had a proper grave, my father would have been rolling over in it.

It took a few days for the chickens to settle down and start laying, but after that we were able to have eggs pretty much every morning.

"Next, the goats," Jace said at dinner not too long after that.

"Are you still on that kick?" I asked. All right, I had to say that the whole chicken thing was working out pretty well. But the thought of having goats roaming around the property intimidated me more than I wanted to admit. When I was a little kid, maybe five or six, my parents had taken me to a petting zoo. All had gone well until one of the goats decided to eat part of my sweater. I'd screamed bloody murder, and my father had grimly lifted me out of the pen and carried me away. Needless to say, goats weren't exactly my favorite animals.

"Yes, I'm still on that kick. We ate the last of the cheese two days ago." His dark eyes caught mine, and he grinned at me, a wicked grin I'd come to know over the past few weeks...and one that invariably made my knees go a

little wobbly. So far I didn't think Jace had noticed what kind of an effect it had on me, but still, I couldn't help getting annoyed with myself for not having better self-control. He clasped his hands together and said in mock-earnest tones, "Jessica, do you want to consign me to a cheese-less future?"

"Oh, for God's sake...." I couldn't help smiling back at him, though, and I spread my hands in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, I give up. So, say we find some goats. How do you plan on getting them back here?"

"Easy," he replied. His grin now had an element of triumph in it. "We'll just find a horse trailer and put them in there."

Easy. Right.

As with the henhouse supplies, we went foraging for the trailer first. There were a number of horse properties in the area, so that wasn't too difficult. The odd thing was, just as I hadn't seen any people on any of our expeditions, so, too, were there no horses in evidence anywhere. They could have bolted, kicked down the fences and gates when it became clear no one was coming to feed them or give them fresh water.

I didn't see any signs of that, though, and the voice's words came back to me: *The animals will be taken care of.* So apparently I didn't need to worry about the horses. I couldn't help wondering, though.

Just as I couldn't help wondering what had happened to the voice. By that point, I hadn't heard him for more than a week. Now that it seemed I was truly settled with Jace, maybe the voice had moved on, deeming me no longer in need of any assistance.

I wasn't sure why, but that thought saddened me a little. I hardly wanted to admit it even to myself, but I missed the voice. If nothing else, he would have given me someone else to talk to...if he'd stuck around. A few times when Jace was out of the house and occupied with some task or another, I'd tried calling out to the voice. It never replied, though, and at last I'd given up, telling myself that if the voice didn't need me, well, I didn't need it, either. Intellectually, I knew I should let it go. But its absence bothered and worried

me, despite my best attempts to think about other matters.

Jace and I hit the goat jackpot on our second stop. Not only did we find a nice, largish horse trailer, but the property actually had goats roaming around, keeping the lawn cropped, doing their usual job of eating anything that wasn't nailed down.

So we hooked up the trailer to the Cherokee, then had a little convo in which we decided having four goats to start should work — three does and a buck. If it turned out the does didn't produce enough milk or whatever, we could always come back and collect more of the herd. There seemed to be fifteen or so of them, although it was hard to get an exact count, what with the way they kept milling around.

Choosing was difficult, because I had no idea what to look for in a goat. Thank God Jace wasn't quite as clueless, and he managed to get two of the does with the most developed milk bags up into the trailer without too much trouble. All right, that looked easy enough, so I started to do my best to urge another doe, a pretty animal with a sleek black coat and fawn-colored tipping, in the general direction of the trailer. She just bleated at me and trotted off, so I followed her grimly, wishing Jace would stop messing around with the two he'd already gotten in the trailer so he could help me.

Then, out of nowhere — wham! Something hard hit me square in the butt, and I went flying onto the ground. I blinked, wondering what the hell had happened, and then realized it was the buck, who was standing a few paces away and glaring at me out of his dark amber eyes. It seemed he'd taken exception to my maneuvering that one doe, and had butted me right in the ass.

From the trailer, I heard laughter, and I scowled. Jace came out, grinning at me where I sat on the ground in a pile of dirt and dead weeds.

“Very funny,” I snapped. “You come over here and deal with this bastard.”

“Sorry, but the way he got you right in the — ”

“Point taken.” I began to push myself to my feet, only to be stared down by a very angry-looking buck. Fine. I’d wait here until Jace took care of him.

Which he did, somehow managing to circle the beast and then urge him up the ramp into the trailer. How, I wasn’t quite sure. Hypnotism? Some magical Native American goat-charming trick?

Whatever it was, it worked. The buck headed right into the trailer as if it were full of a harem of does in heat, and the last doe, the one I’d been trying to manhandle, trotted after him, tail swishing.

Frigging goats.

Jace came over to me and extended a hand. “Need help?”

I scowled at him but took his hand anyway, letting him pull me to my feet. In fact, he yanked me up with such vigor that I lost my balance and pitched right into him, colliding chest to chest. He took me by the arms and steadied me, holding me for a second or two longer than he really needed to.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Uh — ” Was I all right? My rear end ached, and I knew my jeans were covered in dirt, but in that moment all I was really conscious of were his hands on my arms, the strength of the fingers wrapped around my biceps. Our faces were only inches apart. Blood tingled all through me, and I knew all I had to do was go up on my toes, bring my mouth to his....

No, that was insane. This was the first time he’d even touched me since he held me when I wept, on the day he had first come to the compound. Other than a few sideways looks and glances I’d probably misinterpreted, he had done absolutely nothing to show he had any interest in me other than as a companion and friend.

Somehow I gathered myself, saying, “I’m fine,” and then gently pulled my arms from his grasp. He didn’t try to stop me, didn’t tighten his grip or attempt to bring me closer.

Well, there was my answer.

I dug the car key out of my pocket and headed to the driver-side door of

the Cherokee, while Jace went around the other side. So far I hadn't let him drive the SUV, and he hadn't pushed the matter, somehow sensing that having control over the vehicle was important to me. Besides, he'd taken to driving the Polaris all over the area around the compound, had used it to bring back a buck he'd shot one Saturday afternoon. The freezers were full of venison. Yes, Jace was very handy to have around.

Even so, I didn't say anything to him on the trip back home.



THE AWKWARDNESS EASED itself soon enough, as it had to. We were so busy with getting the goats set up and then foraging for feed, reading up on their care and what we needed to do to ensure the does were properly producing milk, that the moment we shared back in their corral was soon pushed aside, if not forgotten.

Of course, the awkward part was realizing that we needed to breed the goats now so they would have babies in the spring, and therefore more milk. Oh, yeah, discussing breeding options for farm animals with a guy you have a serious amount of unresolved sexual tension with is a whole new species of fun.

To be fair, Jace was very mellow about the whole thing, and didn't make any rude jokes or indulge in any cringe-worthy innuendo. He spelled out the whole thing logically and factually, and then let the goats do the rest. It really wasn't that difficult; a buck is going to do what a buck is going to do, after all. I was just glad that I managed to avoid seeing them actually do the deed.

One thing we didn't have to worry about was the goats escaping the compound. They might come through and eat the ornamental plants in the garden area directly off the back of the house, but there was no way even the most ambitious goat could jump a seven-foot-high solid adobe wall.

Jace did have to teach me to milk the damn things, which at first scared

me to no end, since I was sure I was going to end up with a hoof in my face the second I put one of my unpracticed hands on the animal's teat.

"You can just do it, you know," I told him, hovering nervously in the background as he sat down to give me a demonstration.

"Oh, no," he replied. "Equal division of labor on this farm."

I made a face but didn't argue. It was true; I might have done most of the cooking, but he did the hunting, and even cleaned out the chicken coop when my one foray into doing so proved I didn't have the world's strongest stomach. In return, I happily did his laundry. At least that way I was able to learn that he favored dark-toned boxer-briefs over tighty-whiteys.

"It's not that hard," he went on, his voice almost too coaxing. "Just watch."

He placed his thumb and forefinger near the top of the doe's teat, squeezing it, and then exerted pressure with his remaining fingers on the lower part of the teat. A thin stream of white liquid emerged and went into the glass jar he'd set beneath it. "See?"

"Oh, yeah. Easy peasy."

"Actually, it isn't. You have to exert a good deal of force. But that's okay. She wants to be milked." He did it again, and I watched his long fingers squeezing against her flesh. For a second, I had a brief flash of those fingers cupping my breast, squeezing, and I had to force the thought out of my mind. No way was I going to let myself get turned on by watching Jace milk a goat. He glanced up at me. "You want to give it a try?"

I really didn't. To stall for time, I responded with a question of my own. "Is there anything you can't do?"

He appeared to consider, then said, "I don't know how to play the violin. Now come over here and start learning how to milk this goat."

Heaving a sigh didn't really seem appropriate, given the situation, so I waited while he got out of the way and then sat down on the old packing crate we were using as a milking stool. I did take a breath, though, before

placing my fingers more or less in the same position Jace had put his.

“Good,” he said, watching my hands, not my face. “Now squeeze with those two fingers while using the rest to push the milk out of the teat.”

Oh, boy. I squeezed, tentatively at first, and the goat, who we’d named Aster because of the little star-shaped mark on her haunch, shot me a look of pure irritation over her shoulder. But at least she hadn’t kicked me.

“Harder than that,” Jace instructed me, but his voice sounded more coaxing than annoyed.

I definitely didn’t want him annoyed with me. This time I squeezed harder, exerting so much pressure that I was certain Aster was going to step on my foot in protest. Instead, milk squirted into the bottle, and she seemed to relax slightly, letting me do what I needed to do.

After letting out a little exhalation of relief, I went back to milking her. More and more milk kept squirting out, but within five minutes, the fingers of my right hand were aching like you wouldn’t believe. I tried switching to the other hand, but couldn’t get the angle right. After another minute, I sat back, shaking my head. “I can’t do any more.”

“It’s okay,” Jace said. His hand dropped to my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “It’s going to take some time to develop those muscles. I can finish up.”

That was probably my signal to relinquish the packing crate to him so he could sit down, but I found I didn’t want to move. Not with his warm hand on my shoulder, the pressure of it somehow delicious, even through the flannel shirt and heavy canvas anorak I wore.

He seemed to realize that as well, because he moved his arm, breaking the contact. At the same time, attempting to cover up the awkwardness of the moment, I got to my feet.

“Thanks, Jace. I’ll just get back to the house, then.”

Grinning, he asked, “How’s the butter project coming?”

“Good. I’m just about to break out the mixer and have at it.”

Making butter had turned out to be a bigger task than I'd expected, but after some trial and error, I'd gotten enough buttermilk ready to go so I could move on to the next step. At least we had power in the house, and the kitchen had come equipped with a fancy stand mixer. Much better than having to stand around with a butter churn the way they did it in the bad old days.

We'd made the decision to use a good deal of the milk for making butter and cheese, since neither Jace nor I was what you would call a big milk drinker. Both of those projects weren't exactly what you'd call user-friendly, but it was sort of amazing how much extra time you had on your hands when you weren't spending half the day chatting with your friends on Facebook or whatever.

I still hadn't decided whether that was a good thing or not.



A WEEK AFTER THAT, I stood at the window in the living room, looking out over the drive, past the wall to the landscape beyond. Heavy clouds blocked the sky, and I wondered how much we would get out of the solar panels today. We had a backup generator, but we hadn't needed it yet. I was glad of that — the procedure to switch over from the solar collector to the electric generator didn't sound all that simple. But the oven ran on propane, so I'd still be able to use that, even if we decided to dial back on our power consumption for the day. All the heat came from the various fireplaces and the wood-fired stove in the sitting room, so the interior temperature of the house wouldn't be affected, one way or another.

Anyway, it wasn't the possible loss of power that had me staring out at the brooding vista. What with one thing or another, I hadn't been paying that much attention to what day it was, although I'd dutifully marked off each one on the calendar in the office, just so I wouldn't completely lose track of time. But today, when I'd picked up the Sharpie to draw that thick black line, I'd

paused and frowned at the date I was crossing out.

October 31<sup>st</sup>.

“Something wrong?” Jace asked, coming into the living room. He looked a bit surprised, and I supposed I couldn’t blame him. We didn’t spend much time in there, beautiful as the room was. Usually we were either in the kitchen or the family room, or, more rarely, the office.

“No,” I said, then paused. “It’s Halloween.”

“And?” His expression told me he wasn’t particularly impressed by that piece of information. “Did you want to go trick-or-treating or something?”

“Ha,” I replied. My trick-or-treating days were long behind me, although Elena and Tori and I had still gone out on Halloween, mostly as an excuse to get dressed up and go to bars. I’m not going to lie — the year before, we all did variations on the “sexy” something, me as a witch, since it suited my long near-black hair, Tori as an angel, and Elena...well, I still wasn’t entirely clear what her costume was supposed to be, except that it was black and red and sparkly, and showed way more leg than I would ever have dared. Needless to say, we didn’t have to buy any of our own drinks that night.

“It’s not the trick-or-treating,” I said slowly. “It’s more...I don’t know. Like the date is telling me it’s been more than a month since...well, since.”

The light of humor in his dark eyes abruptly disappeared. “You’re right. I guess I hadn’t really thought about it, what with everything we’ve been doing.” He closed the distance between us, coming to stand next to me in front of the window. So close, and yet...and yet, he might have been a million miles away. I knew I didn’t have the courage to reach out and take his hand in mine, to feel the reassurance of his touch. Then he shifted so he was halfway facing toward me, his gaze fixed on my profile. “I have an idea.”

“You do?” I didn’t dare move, didn’t want him to see any of the yearning currently pulsing within me. I wished it could be different, but I just wasn’t brave enough.

“Tomorrow’s the Day of the Dead. *Dios de los Muertos*.”

“And?”

He smiled, but it was a grave, quiet smile. “I think there are a lot of dead who need to be honored.”

## CHAPTER 13



WE'D BEEN MEANING to go back into town anyway, but had been putting it off for one reason or another. Well, today we had a mission.

I drove, of course, since I still felt hinky about letting Jace get behind the wheel of my father's Cherokee. This time we went to a place we'd avoided, the Albertson's grocery store near the center of town. So far, we'd either had everything we needed on hand, or we hunted or foraged for it. Although there were items we could have used from the store, neither of us thought it a very good idea to go in there, not with all that food spoiling inside.

Neither did we know for sure what it would be like now, after having the power cut off for more than a month, but it was the best place we could think of to get some of those saints' candles for our Day of the Dead observance. Maybe Santa Fe had a Hispanic grocery store somewhere, but I remembered the Albertson's because that's where the girls and I stocked up on booze when we came to stay at Elena's parents' timeshare.

I pulled into the parking lot of the Albertson's, then reached down and pulled the bandanna I had wrapped around my neck up and over my mouth. Jace did the same. We looked like we were there to hold up the place, but it seemed the best solution, since we didn't have access to any surgical masks.

"Ready?" he asked.

Probably not, but it was too late to back out now. Besides the candles,

there were a number of nonperishable goods we wanted to grab — paper towels, toilet paper, rice, flour, sugar, spices. Of course Jace didn't know the store at all, but I had a hazy idea of where some things were located, based on my previous visits here. I'd just have to hope it would be enough to get us in and out as quickly as possible.

“Ready,” I said, my voice muffled by the bandanna tied over my mouth.

We got out of the Cherokee and headed toward the entrance to the store. Shopping carts had been abandoned in haphazard order in front of the building, and we each grabbed one. We also both held big crank-operated flashlights, part of the emergency supplies at the compound, since my experience inside the Walgreens in Albuquerque had taught me that those little pen-sized ones really didn't cut it when you were trying to carry out a salvage operation.

The glass in the door had been broken out and lay scattered all over the place, so it was a good thing that Jace and I both wore heavy hiking boots. Shards of glass crunched underfoot as we pushed our way inside, flashlights bobbing this way and that.

It was fairly cold that day; the outside temperature reading in the Cherokee had put it at around forty-six degrees. Maybe that was a good thing, as it kept the smell from being too overwhelming, even with my nose covered. Oh, it was definitely there, something sickly sweet and yet acrid at the same time, but not so overpowering that I couldn't ignore the odor. It did seem to catch at the back of my throat, and I found myself breathing shallowly, pushing the cart grimly ahead while Jace cut off to the right to canvass that side of the store.

Some people might have said that was foolish, to separate like that, but since neither of us had seen another living soul in weeks, we decided it was a risk we were willing to take. This way we could be in and out more quickly.

As I moved along, panning my flashlight over the shelves, I could again see evidence of looting, of items that had been taken. Breakfast cereals

seemed to be popular, for some reason. The vitamin aisle had also been almost cleaned out, although I found some bottles of multivitamin that had been left behind. The same with the paper goods — a lot had been taken, but not all. I grabbed what I could, stacking big packages of toilet paper and paper towels in my shopping cart.

Then I came around the corner and found the real reason why we'd come there: the Hispanic food section. I was sort of surprised to see that all the saint candles seemed undisturbed. Maybe people had been more interested in seeing to their physical needs than their spiritual ones, or possibly it was just that they hadn't thought to use the candles for lighting after the power failed. Whatever. It didn't matter now. What mattered was that I was able to scoop up a dozen of the things, packing them in and around the toilet paper and the boxes of Kleenex and all the other items I'd picked up.

"Got 'em!" I called out.

Jace's voice came back to me from the other side of the store. "Great! Go on out to the Jeep — I'm almost done."

I wasn't sad to hear that at all. This grocery store wasn't quite as creepy as the Walgreens had been, since the flashlight I held was far more effective than the one I'd had then. Besides, I knew Jace would come running the second I gave the alarm, should anything strange happen. All the same, I was glad to get out of there, out of the lingering stench and the mournful realization that nobody would be coming by to restock those shelves or pick up the items that had been knocked to the floor.

As I was beginning to load my haul into the cargo area of the Cherokee, Jace came out as well, his cart full to the brim with those big economy-size bags of rice, boxes of salt, pepper grinders, container after container of spices — you name it, he seemed to have nabbed it from the bakery aisle, including some much-needed tins of olive oil. We had some, but not nearly enough. This would definitely help to extend our supplies for a good many more months.

“Looks like you plan to keep me chained to the stove for a good while longer,” I joked.

He slanted me one of those dark-lashed looks I loved so much. “Oh, I might give you time off for good behavior.”

“That a fact?”

“Absolutely.”

A hint of a smile had been playing around the corners of his mouth, but as I watched, it faded. When I followed his gaze, I thought I understood why. I’d excavated my cart to the point where all that was left were the saints candles. He reached in and picked one up, turning it over in his hands. From her blue robe, I guessed the saint depicted on it was the Virgin Mary, but I didn’t know for sure. My family wasn’t Catholic.

Elena would have known, but she was long gone.

“I suppose we’re done here,” Jace said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes,” I told him. “Let’s go.”



ALTHOUGH WE HADN’T DISCUSSED our plan in any detail, somehow we were both drawn to the monument at the center of the plaza. It seemed that here, in the heart of the city, was the best place to pay our respects.

Dead leaves had scattered over the walkways, but otherwise the place looked as if it hadn’t been touched since the last time I was here, when the voice had summoned the wind to sweep up the mess the looters had left behind. True, many of the stores had their windows broken in, but unlike at the Albertson’s, there was no glass scattered on the ground.

I had to wonder how much of that detail Jace took in as we walked from the Jeep to the center of the plaza. Some, it seemed, if the tight lines of his mouth and the puzzled furrow in his brow were any indication. But he didn’t ask any questions, only continued to the monument and the low wall that

surrounded it.

The day had remained dark, the clouds threatening, although it hadn't rained. It smelled like it might, though, heavy and damp. If it did, then these candles wouldn't last very long. But at least we would have made the effort.

Still not speaking, we each took our burden of candles and placed them at regular intervals along the low wall surrounding the monument. Jace produced a box of strike-anywhere matches from the inner pocket of his jacket, then took one out and used the rough concrete of the wall to get it started. It flared up, and he cupped it in his hand, moving from candle to candle and lighting them one by one. They flickered in the chilly wind but didn't go out.

We'd waited to go out on this expedition until late afternoon, and now it was almost dusk. It was the first time I'd ventured out into the city at anywhere close to dark, and I realized how very black it would soon become, especially with the cloud cover blocking out any possible moonlight or starlight. But we had our flashlights, and, for the moment at least, the candles themselves were giving off far more illumination than I had expected they would.

Jace glanced over at me, and I nodded. This had been his idea, after all, and so I thought he should be the one to make the speeches.

For a long moment, he didn't speak, but only stood there in front of the candle with the Virgin Mary on it, the blue of her robe seeming to glow from within. Then he said, "We honor all those who walk in the paths of their ancestors. Those of us who are left here behind have so many questions, questions we know will never be answered. But our thoughts are with you, and we hope you have all found peace in the next world."

The next words he uttered, I couldn't understand, and I realized he must be speaking the language of the Pueblo. The sound of it was slow and sad, but strong and rich as well, and I found something inside me unclenching for the first time since I'd left Albuquerque. True, I had written something of the

time before, in the little sketches I'd jotted down during my first days at the compound. After that, though, I had walled away my grief, thinking that the only way to survive and go on was not to think of everyone who was gone, of everyone I had lost. Now, hearing Jace speak, I knew that had been the wrong approach. I needed to celebrate who they were and what they had done, not pretend they had never existed. That was doing them no service, giving them no honor.

Jace fell silent, and I could see the way he looked over at me, clearly expecting me to say something. How I was supposed to follow that, I had no idea. But no, that was foolish. This wasn't a competition.

"I miss you all," I said simply, then turned and began to walk away from the monument. I didn't bother to turn on my flashlight, even though the sun had gone down by then. The illumination from the candles was enough to light my path.

From behind me, I heard the sound of Jace's footsteps, hurrying a little so he could catch up with me. And then I felt his hand slip into mine, his fingers warm and strong, even though it was cold enough that we really should have been wearing gloves. My own fingers felt as if they'd been dipped in ice water.

Neither of us said anything. It was enough then to walk hand in hand back to the Jeep, to take comfort in the feel of human flesh pressed against mine, reassuring in the dark and the cold. When it was time to pull the car key out of my pocket, I hesitated for a fraction of a second. I didn't want to let go of him, to relinquish my grip on his fingers.

He seemed to detect my reluctance, because he stood there next to me for a moment, his grip tensing. But then he let go and said, "Let's get home."

I couldn't argue with that. The night wind was drilling through the anorak I wore as if it were made of gauze rather than sturdy canvas, and right then the thought of being surrounded in the warmth of our house seemed even more attractive than usual.

So I nodded and unlocked the Cherokee, and we both climbed in. After I'd pulled away from where we were parked and was negotiating the narrow, car-choked streets — a task far more difficult after dark than it was during the day — I felt Jace's hand cover mine where it rested on the gearshift.

“You okay?” he asked.

I couldn't take my eyes off the road, but I nodded. “I think so. That was — ” The exact word seemed to elude me. Moving? Sad? Satisfying? All those, and more. “It helped,” I finally said, hoping he would understand what I meant.

It appeared he did, because his fingers tightened around mine. All he said, though, was, “Good.” And then he let go, seeming to realize that I needed to focus on driving. Although I'd gone back and forth along this route several times, it had always been during the day, and of course there were no streetlights to guide me along my way.

I flicked on the high-beams and slowed down. Good thing, too, because when I finally got to it, I almost missed the turn-off to Upper Canyon Road. Muttering a curse, I angled the Cherokee onto the street at almost the last minute. In the passenger seat, Jace shifted, but he remained silent, as if he knew any comments on my driving were the last thing I needed right then.

We bumped along, and then there was gravel under our wheels as we left the paved road and began to head up the winding dirt track that led to the compound. I slowed so I could shift into four-wheel drive, and when I looked up, I let out a little screech. Three pairs of eyes seemed to glow red as they stared straight into the Jeep's headlights.

“Coyotes,” Jace murmured. “It's okay — just drive forward slowly. They'll get out of the way.”

Which they did, as I began to inch toward them. Somehow, though, their movements seemed almost leisurely, as if they weren't too worried about me running them over. Almost at the last minute they got out of the way, but they only moved to the side of the road, where they stood and stared as we passed

them by.

Something about their posture, about the way they were watching the Jeep, made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. It wasn't the cold; I'd turned on the heater as soon as we got inside the SUV. No, their unblinking surveillance just felt...wrong. Unnatural. I'll admit I wasn't the world's foremost authority on coyotes, but in general, wild animals tended to scatter when confronted by something as large and intimidating as a Jeep Grand Cherokee.

I shot a sideways glance at Jace. He wasn't looking at me, though, and instead was staring out the passenger window. I didn't know how much he could even see, since the high-beams were illuminating the road ahead of us, not either side.

"That was weird," I said, once we were past the coyotes and they'd melted away into the darkness.

"A little," he agreed. Then I saw his shoulders lift. "Maybe they're getting bold now that they don't have to worry about getting run over every time they come out of hiding."

That sounded plausible. But still a note of wrongness seemed to echo inside me, and I couldn't help thinking there had to be more to it than that. Then again, the world had ended in a way no one could have ever predicted. Things had been wrong for weeks now.

Well, mainly. I risked a sideways glance at Jace and saw that he was looking out the window again, his fine profile faintly illuminated by the glow from the dashboard lights.

Looking at him, I knew there was one thing right in my life.



ALTHOUGH I CAST worried glances from side to side as we approached the compound and I pushed the remote to open the gate, I saw nothing in the

darkness, no gleaming red or yellow eyes of various wildlife just waiting to pounce. We came onto the property without incident, although I activated the controls for the gate as soon as our rear bumper had cleared it. The motion-activated lights above the garage door turned on as we approached.

Off in the distance, I did see a shimmer of eyes glowing in the darkness, and I jumped.

“It’s okay,” Jace said softly. “It’s just the goats.”

I didn’t quite relax, but I did let out my breath. “Oh, right.”

Was that a chuckle? When I glanced over at him, his expression was sober enough, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Fine, if he wanted to laugh at me for jumping at shadows — or glowing eyeballs, in this case — I’d let him. I didn’t see anything wrong with staying on my guard.

But the unpacking of the Cherokee passed without incident, although it took longer than I’d expected to unload all that stuff and get it safely stowed. Dutchie kept wandering between us, trying to track all the new and interesting smells we were bringing in the house, until at last I bribed her with a chewy treat so she’d get out from underfoot.

By then it was moving on toward seven o’clock, and far past time for dinner. When I had all afternoon to figure out what to make and plenty of time to prepare it, I really didn’t mind cooking. Right now, though, I thought I might have sold my soul for pizza delivery. Or Chinese takeout.

Jace must have noticed my lack of enthusiasm for the task at hand, because he said, “It’s not that bad. Look what I brought back.” And I saw that he held a package of fettucini in one hand and a jar of vodka cream sauce in the other. “Add some of that rabbit sausage you made a few days ago, and we’re set.”

I could have kissed him. Actually, I realized I would have loved to have an excuse to go over and kiss him, but I wasn’t sure dry pasta and pre-made sauce were a good enough reason. I had to settle for smiling and saying, “That sounds perfect. Can you feed Dutchie while I get this going?”

He nodded, setting the pasta and the jar of sauce down on the countertop. The dog, seeing that he was heading toward the pantry, got up from her rug and went bounding over to him, tail wagging wildly. At least she wasn't the type to turn up her nose at kibble. She still got as excited about it as though we were feeding her T-bone steak or something.

While they were occupied, I filled a big stock pot with water and set it on the stove, then found a smaller pan and dumped the sauce into it, setting it on low heat on the back burner. The sausages were being stored in an airtight container in the fridge, so I got them out and started them cooking, too. Actually, I was sort of surprised that they'd turned out as well as they had. Let's just say that making sausages hadn't exactly been in my cooking repertoire before this, but they really weren't that difficult, once you figured out how it all worked.

They were just starting to sizzle away when Jace came over to the stove and paused to sniff the air. "Those smell good."

"You said the same thing two days ago when we had them for the first time."

One eyebrow went up. "So? Two days shouldn't make them taste any less good."

Maybe not. I wasn't going to argue the point, especially with him standing that close to me, barely a foot away. He'd taken off his jacket, and I could see the way the knit henley shirt he wore molded to the muscles in his arms and chest, the smooth golden-brown skin where he'd left one button undone.

Shit. I shouldn't be staring. Was I staring?

I had a feeling I was staring.

Blood rose to my cheeks, and I turned back to the skillet, making something of a show of turning the sausages over. I also took a pot holder and lifted the lid on the pot of pasta water to check on it, but it wasn't boiling yet.

As I was setting the pot holder down on the counter, I felt a hand settle on my waist, turn me around. Jace was even closer now, dark eyes fixed on my face. The touch of his fingers through the long-sleeved T-shirt I wore seemed to burn like fire.

I swallowed, thinking I needed to say something. But words had fled, leaving me alone with him, with the need I now saw in those dark eyes. I recognized it at once, because I'd felt the same thing myself.

And then...oh, God...he was bending toward me, his mouth suddenly on mine, his lips strong, urgent. I tasted him, felt him taste me, and then I was pressed against him, feeling the shocking solidity of his body, the power of the muscles in the arms that were now going around me, bringing me even closer, as if he needed every inch of me to be touching every inch of him.

*Why now?* some part of me asked, but the rest of my mind and body and soul, all those parts that had been aching for him for days...for weeks...they didn't care so much. It was enough that here, in this moment, Jace was kissing me, and I was kissing him back, letting him know I'd wanted this, too, more than he could ever know. Every nerve and cell in my body seemed to be responding, pulsing with heat. Had it ever felt like this before? I didn't know, because Jace kissing me seemed to have wiped away my memories of every other kiss I'd ever experienced.

A hissing sound interrupted us, though, and Jace let go of me abruptly. "The water's boiling," he said.

*That's not the only thing boiling,* I thought, but I didn't answer, only lunged for the pot holder so I could lift the lid on the stock pot and then turn down the heat to a more reasonable level. Those mundane tasks helped me gather myself a bit, although I could still feel the blood thrumming and throbbing in my veins. That wasn't the only thing throbbing, either. I wouldn't say I was the kind of person who got turned on easily — as my asshole ex-boyfriend had complained on more than one occasion — but right then I was so aroused that Jace probably could have laid me out flat on the

kitchen counter and taken me there with absolutely no complaints.

He'd backed away slightly, though, seemed content to watch as I dumped some fettucini into the boiling water and then turned the sausages over once again. It was only after I gave the vodka sauce a quick stir that he said, "You didn't...mind that, did you?"

"Mind it?" I asked. We now stood facing one another, my back to the stove. He looked calm enough, but I thought I could detect a certain hard, bright glint in his eyes that I'd never seen before. Arousal? I couldn't tell.

I realized I didn't know him well enough to guess. Yes, we'd been living under the same roof for almost three weeks now, but we'd always been careful around one another, making sure we didn't cross any lines, didn't blunder through any barriers.

Well, those barriers were pretty well knocked down now.

"I didn't — I didn't want you to think I was forcing you or anything."

Now he appeared almost worried, the gleam gone from his eyes, leaving them sober and dark, so dark I couldn't really tell where the pupils ended and the irises began.

Forcing me? That was a joke. I'd wanted that kiss, but had worried that my growing feelings for him weren't reciprocated.

"I mean, after what happened to you in Albuquerque — "

Time to disabuse him of that notion. I set the spoon down on the little stone rest we used to keep our cooking utensils off the counter, then went over and took his hands in mine, right before I went on my tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. A fast kiss, not like the breath-stealing, knee-knocking one we'd shared a few moments earlier, but still enough that he should understand that I liked kissing him very much indeed.

"This isn't Albuquerque," I told him. "And you're nothing like...either of them." To be fair, I didn't even know for sure that the man who'd wanted to steal the Cherokee had the same designs on me that Chris Bowman did, but I'd gotten the impression his intentions weren't exactly benign. "And I've

wanted...this...for a long time. I just wasn't sure it was what *you* wanted."

The tense set of his shoulders seemed to relax slightly, and he even grinned. "Oh, I wanted it, too. But I didn't want to push you. I could tell you'd been through a lot."

"We both have," I said simply. No need to go into it any more than that. He'd lost everything, and I'd lost everything. Through some miracle, though, we'd both come to this place, come to the one spot in the world where we'd be safe to grow into knowing one another, caring for one another.

And again I couldn't help wondering if this was somehow the doing of my guardian angel, the voice. Had he given Jace the same prompting he'd given me?

Eyes flickering as he seemed to study my face, Jace asked, "What is it?"

Did I dare mention the voice? We'd just opened up so much to each other; the last thing I wanted was for him to think I was crazy, or at least slightly unbalanced by everything I'd experienced since the Heat stole everything I loved. But I didn't want to keep it a secret from him, either.

"Did you..." I began, then stopped. He was still holding my hands, fingers strong and somehow comforting. I never wanted him to let go, although I knew he'd have to at some point, just to let me get back to making dinner. But that could wait another minute or two. His gaze was still resting on my face, expectant, wondering what I was trying to ask. And there was simply no good way to ask.

"Did you ever hear anything?" I blurted. "Afterward, I mean. Like a voice guiding you, telling you where you should go. Telling you should come here."

A long, long pause. At least he hadn't let go of my hands, but I could see him weighing the question in his mind, trying to see if I was serious. "No, nothing like that," he said at last. "Like I said, I came to Santa Fe because no one seemed to be left in Taos, and I had a friend here. The world's longest shot, I know." He hesitated, then asked, his tone soft, "Did you hear

something like that?”

I wanted to deny it. But that would also seem like a denial of all the assistance the voice...guardian angel...whatever...had given me. “Yes,” I said. “It’s how I found this house. I would never have gotten out of Albuquerque alive if not for the voice.”

“The voice,” he repeated. Nothing in the calm, even set of his features told me what he was thinking, and so I could only stand there in agony, wondering when he was going to let go and back away from me. Away from the crazy woman.

Somehow I managed to stand there, waiting.

“You’ve been blessed, I think,” Jace said at last. “Some guiding spirit looked down on you and knew you were worthy, that you needed to survive.”

Relief washed over me. So he didn’t think I was crazy. Then again, although I’d never much believed in such things, I guessed that his people thought differently. The dividing line between our world and the world of the spirits was definitely thinner for them.

“You really think that?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. Up until that moment, I hadn’t realized how important it was that he believed me.

“Oh, yes,” he replied, pulling me closer to him, his lips finding mine. “So let’s make sure our survival matters.”

## CHAPTER 14



DINNER WAS...WELL, dinner was wonderful. It might have only been left-over sausage and sauce out of a jar, leavened a little by some zucchini from the greenhouse that I steamed to go along with the pasta, but I might as well have been eating at a five-star restaurant for as exhilarated as I felt. Jace had kissed me. Jace wanted me, had only been holding back because he didn't want to pressure me or frighten me off.

Some people might have said it was inevitable, that if you put two healthy, attractive people of the same sexual orientation in the same place, sharing the same home, eventually they'd end up together. Propinquity, or whatever they called it.

I didn't believe that for a second, though. There were plenty of guys I'd known over the years who, if they'd shown up on my doorstep the way Jace had, I could've lived in platonic harmony with and never had the slightest inclination for anything more than a quick hug on a birthday or something.

Jace, on the other hand...well, I'd been thinking how hot he was from the first moment I laid eyes on him, even as I was confronting him at the gate to the compound, shotgun in hand. That sudden, unexpected flare of admiration had shifted into attraction as the days had gone on, and now was...what?

Far more than simple attraction, even if I was too scared to put a label on it right then.

He'd opened a bottle of wine, some more of the Black Mesa Montepulciano, which, as it turned out, was also a New Mexico wine. I'd been so rattled when I arrived at the compound that I hadn't even read the label that closely. It did go well with the simple meal I'd prepared. More than that, it gave the evening a sense of celebration, that this was just the beginning of something far more.

Was I ready for that? Yes, I'd been dutifully taking my pill every night, knew I'd be protected in that way, if nothing else. Maybe I should've been worrying whether Jace had packed some condoms as part of his "surviving the apocalypse" kit, but for some reason, I didn't think that was necessary. He certainly didn't give off the man-whore vibe. It should be fine.

"Dollar for your thoughts," Jace said, and I startled, knowing I could never tell him I'd been pondering contraceptive options. By then we were winding down, only a few bites left on our plates.

"A whole dollar?" I teased, glad that we were eating by candlelight. With any luck, he wouldn't have noticed the way the hot blood rose to my cheeks.

"Well, a penny's probably worth more than a dollar now, since at least you could melt a penny down and get the copper out of it." He set down his fork and leaned forward slightly, a smile touching those full lips, the ones that had felt so delicious when pressed against mine. "But your choice."

"I — I wasn't thinking about anything in particular," I said.

An eyebrow went up.

"Seriously." I lifted my glass of wine and took a quick swallow.

The other eyebrow went up.

Oh, boy. I could stall and I could hedge, but it was pretty obvious that Jace would see through any of those machinations. "Okay, fine," I told him, setting my wine glass back down and taking a breath. "If you have to know, I was thinking about whether you'd packed any condoms when you bailed out of Taos."

He let out a breath, both eyebrows still raised. "You don't beat around the

bush, do you?”

“Well, you *asked*.”

For a second or two, he didn't say anything, only looked at me. I tried not to blink or glance away, but damn, that was hard. My cheeks felt like they were on fire.

At last he said, “No, I didn't. Sorry...I guess I was thinking more about the world ending or something than whether I was going to get laid in the near future.”

I winced, and he shook his head as if exasperated with himself.

“Jessica, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant.” His hands flattened on the tabletop, as if by exerting pressure against the cool copper surface, he could take back what he'd just said. “That is, if we — if we were together, I think you know it would be a lot more than just getting laid.”

My heart seemed to start beating again. “It would?”

“You know it would,” he said, his tone quiet, but no less intense for all that.

I smiled at him. “It's fine. I'm on the pill.”

After that...well, I'm still not sure who moved first, but almost in a single motion, we were on our feet, pushing our chairs away from the table, Jace reaching out to take me by the hand. He pulled me into him, kissing me, his mouth sweet with wine. I felt as if I could never get enough of tasting him.

But he broke the kiss after a few seconds, leading me down the hallway to my bedroom. He'd never been in here before, of course, although I left it unlocked most of the time, except for the occasions when I was getting dressed. Since Dutchie liked to wander between our rooms at night, I didn't have the heart to shut the door. Because of that, though, I always kept it tidy. I knew I didn't have to worry about Jace tripping over a discarded bra or something when we entered.

It was cold, though, away from the fireplace in the family room, which did a pretty good job of heating the dining room as well, since they were right

next to each other. Jace let go of my hand — with some reluctance, it seemed — and asked, “Okay if I get a fire going?”

“You already have,” I said, smiling, but I nodded. “We could use one. It’s probably going to get below freezing tonight.”

He went to the fireplace and began expertly stacking some logs within it. We were burning a lot already, but I wasn’t too worried. The house had an enormous log room built on the north side, with wood stacked almost to the rafters on every wall. Jace had taken one look at the stockpile and said we could have fires in every room through July if necessary.

So I allowed myself to enjoy the warmth that began to spread through the room after he got the fire going, and not fret over whether we were going to run out of wood halfway through the winter. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t also enjoy watching the way Jace’s jeans hugged his backside as he bent over, coaxing the fire to life.

Afterward, he turned around, then came over to me where I sat on the foot of the bed. “Better?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Although it’ll probably still be smart to get under those covers quickly.”

“I can help with that.” His fingers tugged my shirt loose from the waistband of my jeans, then undid my belt buckle. At the same time, I was working at his belt as well before undoing the buttons on his faded Levi’s. I hooked my thumbs through the belt loops of his pants, easing them down. I could tell he was already aroused, the bulge in the dark gray boxer-briefs he wore evidence that stopping to get the fire going hadn’t put him too much off his stride, so to speak.

He stepped out of the jeans but didn’t let that distract him from pulling my T-shirt up and over my head. After dropping it on top of his jeans, he reached down and undid the front clasp of my bra, releasing a long, drawn-out breath as his hands closed over my bare breasts.

I gasped, closing my eyes as he caressed me, fingers sliding over my skin.

Then he was tugging at my jeans, getting them out of the way, and I stepped out of them, letting him lead me over to the bed. With one hand, he yanked back the covers, and I collapsed onto the mattress, bringing him with me, bare skin to bare skin, our mouths finding one another in the fire-lit darkness. The sheets were icy cold, but I hardly noticed.

Because oh, God, he was reaching between my legs, stroking me as his mouth closed on my nipple. My heart was pounding, my breath coming in great, heaving gasps. I had done all these things before, but never with Jace. And it had never felt like this with anyone else.

My own hand moved lower, touching him, wrapping around him, feeling the heat and the strength of his arousal. He moaned as I touched him, the sound seeming to reverberate through every inch of my body. Or maybe it was just the approaching wave of the orgasm that I could feel bearing down on me, building up until I couldn't do anything except allow Jace to touch me, to flick his tongue against the bud of my breast, and then it tore through me like a swollen river breaking down a dam, my voice calling his name, my body heaving against his.

Yes, it had been a while, but it was more than that. It was Jace, all of it — the way he'd made me come, the way I felt as if I had been some strange half-alive being before this, hiding in the darkness until he brought me into the light.

Then he was shifting, moving, and I could feel him pushing against me, against my entrance. I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted him inside me, filling me. "Please, Jace," I breathed.

That was all he needed. In that instant, he was there, in me, moving deeper and deeper as I rocked my hips against his, drawing him into me, our bodies locked together, finding the rhythm, the perfect push and pull of man and woman, Jace and me. I clung to him, one hand moving up to clutch his neck, feeling the leather cord that held his hair back. One tug, and it was loose, his raven hair spilling over his shoulders, brushing against my cheek,

and that was it, the last push I needed. Crying out, calling his name, gasping, my body convulsing against his, and then I could feel him let loose, heard him groan, his hips driving him into me, my legs wrapped around him, until finally he stilled, went quiet, his mouth by my ear, my name a soft breath in the silent room.

“Jessica....”

We lay there for uncounted moments, flesh to flesh, drinking in each other’s warmth. Finally, he shifted, pulling away from me, but only so he could lie on his side, his chest touching my arm, as if he didn’t want any real distance to come between us. I understood the feeling all too well. In a moment, I’d have to force myself out of bed and go to the bathroom, get myself cleaned up, but right then I only wanted to be next to him, to breathe him in, to reassure myself that he truly was real, that this actually had happened.

He reached out and pushed a strand of hair away from my face. Such a tender gesture, so different from the wild abandon of a few minutes earlier. Because the room was so dimly lit, I couldn’t precisely decipher his expression. But I definitely wasn’t expecting what came next.

“I love you, Jessica.”

Out of nowhere. Or not nowhere, not really. I could have seen those words in the way he looked at me when he thought I wouldn’t notice, in how careful he was to listen to my suggestions...in the very reticence that had kept him from making a move until he was certain it wouldn’t be rebuffed.

And because he’d been brave enough to say it first, I didn’t hesitate. Not now. I’d been denying this to myself, coming up with reasons why it couldn’t be true, but there was no point in denying it any longer.

“I love you, Jace.” It was true. I knew it, accepted it, let my heart and mind and soul become open to the idea. I loved Jason Little River. The sound of his voice. The crinkle at the corner of his eyes when he laughed. The long, strong fingers of his hands. The way he asked for my opinion on things and

never made me feel foolish for not knowing as much as he did about raising animals or gardening or...well, most things. I'd led a sheltered life, while I got the impression he hadn't. His hands were beautiful, but they had the calluses and scars of someone who hadn't spent his entire life behind a desk. I supposed that was from the time he spent at the pueblo, even though his own start-up business had involved computers.

All these details and contradictions, all the elements that made Jace uniquely Jace...they were what made me realize I loved him. And, by some miracle, he loved me in return.

He pulled me against him, and I burrowed my face into his chest, breathing in the warm, delicious scent of his skin, hearing his heart beat, strong and sure. I couldn't remember a time when I'd been this happy.

Happy. Was I allowed to be happy, when most of the world was gone?

I didn't know. I tried to tell myself that my parents would have wanted me to be happy, that they wouldn't have wanted me to wallow in sorrow for the rest of my days, just because they were gone. But even in the warm afterglow of our lovemaking, of hearing Jace say that he loved me, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt.

He pushed a lock of hair away from my face, trailed his fingers across my cheek and down to my mouth. I pressed my lips very softly against his forefinger, and he smiled. But then his expression sobered, and he gave me a very direct look.

"Don't do this to yourself," he said.

"Do what?" But I was pretty sure what he meant.

"You can't beat yourself up just because you've found some happiness in your life. The Dying wasn't your fault. All you can do is live your life to the best of your ability, make your survival mean something."

*The Dying.* It was the first time I'd heard him use that phrase, but it was apt enough. Because that was what had irrevocably changed the world... all that death.

“I know,” I whispered. “It’s just sometimes...it comes rushing over me like a wave, you know? I put it aside, and I’m fine, because I’m here with you, and I know we’re safe, but....”

His arms went around me, keeping me close to him, close to the security of that strongly beating heart and the soothing warmth of his flesh. “I know.” The words came in a murmur, gentle. “You’re stronger than you know, Jessica. It’s human to feel doubt and worry. But...don’t let it get between us. Please?”

There was a note of concern in his voice that I hadn’t heard before, and I shifted so I could look up into his eyes. “Oh, no,” I told him then. “I’ll never let anything come between us.”



WE SLEPT in each other’s arms that night, and awoke to a chilly morning where the roof of the garage was white with frost. The fire had guttered down to coals, and Jace wrapped one of the blankets around himself as he got up to set new logs in the hearth and get a fresh blaze going. Dutchie watched all this with approval; it looked as if she hadn’t moved since she curled up in front of the fireplace the night before. I got the distinct impression that she was happy with our new sleeping arrangements, since it meant she wouldn’t have to split her time between Jace’s and my room anymore.

Even with the fire going, I was loath to get out of bed. But I wasn’t a city girl any longer; I needed to get moving, shower, check on the goats, start breakfast. All these things were speeded up by Jace and me sharing the shower in the master bath, which was roomy enough that we fit quite nicely. Okay, we didn’t save quite as much time as I’d thought, because we got lost in lathering up each other’s bodies, running soapy hands over bare skin, until I was pressed up against the wall and he was inside me again, one of my legs wrapped around him, holding him in place while he thrust into me. We had to

clean up all over again afterward, but it was worth it.

At last, though, we got out of the shower — mostly because the hot water heater began to run out of steam — and got dressed, then dried our hair. A pang went through me as he fished another one of those leather cords out of his pocket and began winding it around his hair.

“Don’t,” I said, and he turned toward me with a quizzical look.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t tie it up. I like it down.”

A slow smile spread over his lips then, and he shrugged and shoved the cord back into the pocket of his jeans. “Okay. But if it starts getting in my face when I’m out in the wind — ”

“Then okay, you can tie it back again.” I went to him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’m not totally unreasonable, you know.”

“Oh, I know.” He gave my own ponytail the side-eye, and I couldn’t help laughing.

“Yeah, do as I say and all that.”

We went out to check on the goats before breakfast, our breath puffing up into the icy air. They seemed all right, but Jace looked at the frost on the ground and shook his head.

“We need to get them some kind of protection from the cold. It’s only going to get worse after this, and when we have our first snowfall....” He didn’t bother to finish the sentence, but I knew what he meant. Our little herd needed someplace to go.

“So what are you thinking?” I asked, looking around the walled-in landscape. From within the chicken coop, I could hear the hens clucking away happily. It was obvious they hadn’t suffered too much from the cold.

“It doesn’t need to be fancy, but some kind of shed, someplace where they can go inside if they need to. The henhouse went together pretty quickly, so I’m sure I can do something like that for the goats, too.”

I saw another foray to Home Depot in our near future. We’d stocked up

on food just the day before, but if we were going to Santa Fe anyway, I was going to put in a request to raid an outdoor gear store or something similar. My outerwear definitely wasn't up to snuff, and I had a feeling that adding some thermal underwear to my repertoire wouldn't be a bad idea, either.

So I asked about that, and Jace nodded. "I could use a few things, too. So we'll do that first, and then we'll go the hardware store. I need to check the library here, though — I'm pretty sure I saw a book with plans for different kinds of outbuildings, and that'll help me figure out how much to bring back."

With that settled, he headed back into the house to start making notes, and I popped into the henhouse to scoop up some fresh eggs for breakfast, then hurried to the kitchen. At least in there it was relatively warm and cheery. My fingers gradually thawed out as I made scrambled eggs and toast, and a pot of fresh coffee. I reflected then that Jace was right — I couldn't let survivor's guilt get in the way of enjoying the life I had now. I had him, and we had this beautiful place to live, with plenty of food and no one bothering us. In this post-Dying world, that was about as close to heaven as I would probably get.

After breakfast, we patted Dutchie and went out to the garage. I'd been thinking this over while Jace took care of this dishes, and I realized it was time for me to show how much I really did trust him.

"Wait," I said as he began to head to the passenger side of the Jeep. He glanced back toward me, and I opened my hand to reveal the key fob lying on my palm. "You want to drive?"

His dark eyes lit up, but he didn't move. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, and he came back to me, taking the key from my hand as he leaned down to kiss me. Mmm, coffee and the faintest trace of butter, rich and friendly, welcoming, just like the man who was kissing me.

"Thank you," he said, then went to climb in the driver-side door.

It felt strange to go around to the passenger side, to get in and then watch Jace back the Cherokee out of the garage and maneuver it down the steeply

sloping drive to the gate. I had a new perspective on things this way, could concentrate on my surroundings rather than merely on the road.

Not that there was a lot to look at up here. The junipers didn't change much with the seasons, and the grass had already been sere and yellow even before the frost hit. But the sky was a deep, deep blue, overlaid with faint trceries of high clouds, and in the Sangre de Cristo mountains above town, I could see the patches of bright yellow aspens now looking faded as they lost more and more of their leaves, settling in for winter.

We came down onto Upper Canyon road and wended our way into town. "Any ideas on outdoor supply places?" Jace asked.

"Not really," I admitted. "When I came here with my friends, we were more interested in partying than hiking. And of course you can't Yelp something after the apocalypse."

His mouth seemed to twitch, but when he turned slightly to look at me, his expression was grim enough. "Is that what you think this is? The apocalypse?"

"Well, close enough as makes no difference." We'd slowed to maybe twenty miles an hour at the most, partly because Jace was weaving in and out of the abandoned cars on the streets, but also because I had a feeling he didn't have any idea where he was supposed to go. "I mean, most of the world is dead, and the life we had back then is gone. No, I suppose there weren't any four horsemen and blood-red moons and flaming swords and all that, but...."

He didn't reply, but I could almost feel him turning over the idea in his head. My knowledge of Native American mythology was scanty at best, and so I didn't know if his people had their own vision of the end of the world. The terminology I'd used was purely Revelations sort of stuff, but that was my only frame of reference. At least, those were the kinds of things you'd always hear quoted in movies dealing with the end times.

"I have an idea," he said, in a very different tone. "Let's stop and go into that hotel. They had to have phone books and local directories at the

conciierge desk, right?”

He had a point. I couldn't remember the last time I'd used a phone book, since I either used Yelp or Google Maps to find things with my cell phone, but maybe not everyone was as firmly rooted in the digital age as I had been before the world collapsed. Checking at the hotel sounded like a good idea.

So he pulled up onto the sidewalk in front of the La Fonda Hotel, in a spot where once bellhops had probably assisted people with their luggage but was now free of cars. And actually, as I got out of the Jeep and looked around quickly, it somehow seemed as if the street wasn't quite as choked with vehicles as I remembered it.

“What's the matter?” Jace asked, seeming to notice the way I was scanning the street. “Do you see something?” His hand went to his belt, and for the first time I realized he was wearing his long knife in its sheath. I hadn't even thought to bring one of the guns with me. Maybe Jace made me feel a little *too* safe. I was getting sloppy.

“No,” I replied, quickly so he wouldn't get too nervous. “That is...I could have sworn there were more cars here the last time I drove through. It's as if some of them are just...gone.”

His eyebrows went up, and I could see him look past me to the street the hotel faced. What good that would do, I wasn't sure, because I didn't think he'd even come this way when he passed through town. There were obvious gaps in the lines of cars parked at the sidewalk, but that didn't have to mean anything, except that no one had been parked there in the first place.

“You're sure?” he asked, and now I thought I detected a note of patience in his voice, as if he was trying to humor me.

“No, I'm not sure, because I wasn't memorizing everything I saw when I drove through here. It just feels...off.”

“Well, all the more reason for us to see if we can find a phone book and a map, and then get out of here.”

I decided I couldn't argue with that logic, and followed him into the

lobby of the hotel.



LUCKILY FOR US, the concierge's desk did have an area phone book, as well as a detailed map of downtown and a larger one for the greater Santa Fe area. I took a quick glance around, remembering how Tori and Elena and I had gone up to the rooftop bar for drinks. Back then the place had been packed. Now the tiled floors echoed under our footsteps, and I had to work hard not to look at the flurries of gray ash that stray drafts must have blown against the floorboards and into the corners.

It felt good to be out in the sun again, despite the brisk wind, although we got into the Jeep quickly enough. I paged through the phone book and discovered that there was an REI probably less than five minutes from our current location. Jace seemed cheered by that, and we headed there in silence, although I kept looking at the streets as they passed by, trying to determine if they felt less impacted by abandoned vehicles than I'd previously thought. It was hard to say for sure, as I'd never gone down this particular road. It did seem less crowded than it should be, although I was basing that observation on pure gut feeling and not much more.

The store was located almost on the railroad tracks, just off Market Street. While there were a few vehicles parked nearby, the place still felt far more deserted than some of the other shops I'd visited. Again, people probably weren't thinking of outdoor supplies as they were succumbing one by one to the Heat.

Jace and I got out of the Jeep and headed to the store entrance. The glass wasn't smashed, but the doors seemed to have gotten stuck halfway open. Convenient, since we wouldn't have to worry about breaking in.

When we entered the store, though, I still got the feeling that it had been carefully ransacked, although it wasn't a mess. No, it was more that the stock

seemed far leaner than it should have been. The glass case with the GPS devices had been emptied of its contents, and it looked as if a bunch of the mountain bikes were gone, too.

But at least the low-dollar stuff like the thermal underwear and the gloves hadn't been totally depleted. I got a shopping cart and started adding anything in my size, while Jace went to the men's section and basically did the same thing. He dumped in all his items, then went back for a thigh-length down-filled jacket. Before he put it in the cart, he looked at the price tag and shook his head.

"What?" I asked.

"That coat cost more than I paid for my motorcycle."

Ouch. Well, retail prices were definitely a thing of the past, so it wasn't as if we had to worry about whether we could afford any of this stuff. "Yes," I said, "but a motorcycle won't keep you warm at night."

A corner of his mouth quirked, even as a warm gleam came and went in his eyes. "Oh, I've got something way better than a jacket for keeping me warm at night."

I could feel heat as well, running through my core, but I knew we needed to stay focused on the task at hand. "Anything else?"

"That about does it for me. I like my boots, so I'm not going to bother replacing them. You?"

"Same." Maybe there were some fancy outdoor shoes that would have suited me better, but my hiking boots were sturdy and comfortable. They'd cost me a good chunk back in the day as well, come to think of it. Money well spent, as far as I was concerned, considering everything they'd gotten me through during the past few weeks.

So we pushed our haul out to the Cherokee and stowed everything in the back. "Who do you think took that other stuff?" I asked Jace, just as he was closing the hatch to the cargo area.

He shrugged. "Other survivors, I suppose."

“Don’t you think it’s weird that we still haven’t seen anyone?” Something felt strange. I couldn’t put my finger on it, since I really didn’t have any frame of reference for what things were supposed to feel like after the apocalypse. Still, you’d think that any survivors in Santa Fe would have seen Jace and me coming and going, would have realized we didn’t pose any kind of threat. At least, I didn’t think we looked terribly intimidating.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He turned the key over in his hand, fiddling with it. “I’ll bet if you crunched the numbers, you’d realize the odds of us running across any of the few hundred survivors in the area on any given day really aren’t that great. We’d have to keep coming down here day after day, looking for them. Are you ready to do that?”

Part of me was. Oh, I didn’t really need anyone other than Jace, and we’d done just fine — more than fine — on our own, but still....

I wanted to know.

However, I could tell from the expression Jace currently wore that he didn’t share this particular thirst for knowledge, and I decided I’d better not push it. After all, before I’d met him, my run-ins with survivors of the Dying hadn’t exactly been all that pleasant.

“No,” I said, and gave him what I hoped was a convincing smile. “I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

## CHAPTER 15



STRANGELY, although at first glance the Home Depot looked exactly the same as the last time we'd left it after we'd gotten the supplies for the chicken coop, when we went to fetch a trailer to haul the lumber home, only one was still sitting there. The other three were gone.

That did take Jace aback; he stood there for a moment, hand on his chin, staring at the spaces where the trailers had been parked. Finally he said, "What the hell?"

"So you'll admit they're gone."

"Of course they're gone. It's kind of obvious, don't you think?" Then he shook his head. "Sorry, Jess. Didn't mean to snap at you. But this is just weird."

That was a good word for it. I could see survivors making off with GPS devices and hiking boots and multi-packs of toilet paper. But equipment trailers?

"Well, at least they left us one," I offered.

That didn't seem to mollify him much. He stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, clearly discomfited by this evidence that there were survivors, and that they seemed to be organized enough to make off with most of the store's trailers. I saw the troubled glance he sent toward the entrance at the lumberyard end of the building, and guessed he was worried that the stock

inside would be similarly picked over.

We were here now, though, so we might as well go in and see what we could find, once we had the trailer hooked up to the Cherokee. That didn't take long, though, and afterward we headed toward the building, both of us grimly silent.

Several big orange flatbed carts sat near the entrance, so Jace took one and wheeled it in, glass crunching underfoot as he did so. It seemed clear enough, even from a quick glance around, that someone had been in here since our last visit. The battery displays were almost all emptied out, and a lot of tools seemed to be missing, too. But at least the lumberyard didn't look as if it had been raided, so Jace was able to get the supplies he needed. Tools we already had back at the compound, up to and including a belt sander and a jigsaw, so the looters were welcome to take anything that still remained here.

"I wonder what they're doing with all of it," I ventured as he began shifting the lumber from the cart and into the trailer.

"Who knows?" he replied. "They're probably people like us — you know, with a place where they're holed up and safe but still need assorted odds and ends. Actually, I have a feeling they would need more, since our compound was so well stocked when you found it. And you're probably used to seeing stores getting restocked on a regular basis. Things can start to look pretty picked over when no one's coming in with new products all the time."

Well, that made sense. It was true that I didn't have much experience yet of a world where stores weren't magically restocked when supplies ran low. Even so, something didn't feel right to me. Batteries and hammers I could understand. But the trailers? I supposed if they had enough stuff to haul away, it made some sense. But that would have to be a *lot* of stuff.

Jace finished tying down the lumber, then threw the nails and fasteners and other small items he'd collected into the cargo area of the Jeep. From the way the corners of his mouth were turned down, I could tell he wasn't thrilled at the prospect of having to compete with other survivors for supplies we

might need to get through the winter.

But no, that wouldn't happen. We were stocked on food, and now we had milk and eggs and cheese and butter, so really, once we got the goats sheltered, we wouldn't have much need to come back down to Santa Fe proper unless we were just dying to. And I didn't see that happening anytime soon.

Thinking about our goats made me recall the herd we'd taken them from. They were just as much out in the cold, although I thought I remembered seeing a few ramshackle outbuildings on the property where they were grazing. Still, it couldn't hurt to check on them. It wasn't that out of our way.

When I mentioned my concerns to Jace, he nodded. "That's probably a good idea. They would have more shelter there than our own goats, but we might as well look. If they're in trouble, we can unload this stuff, get the horse trailer, and then bring them back to the compound. It might take a couple of trips, though."

I said I wouldn't mind that at all, so we got into the Cherokee and drove off, angling away from our normal route so we could get to the edge of town and the small ranch where we'd first found the goats. But when we got there, the animals were all gone. I would have said they'd wandered off on their own, but I could see tire tracks in the dirt, tracks that were fatter and wider than those of my Jeep. Some big off-road truck, if I had to guess.

Jace seemed to be of the same opinion, because he squatted down to take a closer look, one finger digging into the rutted earth. "Probably a half-ton pickup, judging by the tread and how deep it is." He stood, following the tracks along the narrow dirt road that led to the pasture gate. We'd come in that same way, but it looked like the truck had turned and headed west afterward, rather than to the east, the direction of town and our own hidden compound.

"Where do you think they were going?" I asked.

"I have no idea. I don't think there's much out that way, unless they were

headed to the highway. And if that's the case, their home base could be anywhere."

"So you don't think they're local?"

For a second or two, Jace didn't answer me. He just stood there, gazing off to the west, straight brows pulled together in a frown. The wind blew his loose hair, turning it into a shining raven cloud around his head, but for some reason, I didn't find myself quite as lost in admiration as I might otherwise have been. Instead, a shiver of apprehension went down my spine. Whatever thoughts might be occupying his mind, they didn't look as if they were pleasant ones.

"I don't know if they're from around here," he said at last. "Maybe, maybe not. Maybe one of the survivors knew this ranch existed, then noticed some of the goats were missing and came back to get the rest before they disappeared, too. And maybe they're holed up someplace remote, just like we are." He turned and began heading back to the Jeep, walking quickly. I practically had to jog to keep up with him.

I almost asked what the rush was, but he seemed to know what I was thinking. Jaw tense, he told me,

"I think it's better that we get back. We've been gone long enough."

Nothing else, but the implication was enough to make me hurry into the passenger seat, to hold on as he drove faster than he really should have on the way home, the trailer rattling and bumping behind us. It was a beautiful, brisk fall day, but I couldn't enjoy the scenery. I just wanted to get home and make sure everything was all right.

If anything had happened to Dutchie....

But when we pulled up and opened the gate, everything looked fine. The goats were still wandering around, eating dried grass, and I could hear the hens clucking away in the chicken coop. Jace maneuvered the Jeep around so he could back the trailer up to the edge of the yard. That way, he wouldn't have to carry the lumber as far. He left it, though, to come with me to the

house.

“Let me go in first,” he said, and I did as he asked, allowing him to walk in front of me.

All that did was subject him to the first of Dutchie’s onslaught. She came bounding up to us, panting, tail wagging, nose busily sniffing the bags we carried. Since all they held was the clothing we’d pilfered from REI, she lost interest soon enough, instead hanging out by the pantry, clearly angling for a chewy treat.

“I think it’s safe,” I told Jace, going to get the dog her treat. Maybe she hadn’t exactly earned it, but I was so happy to see her and the rest of the property safe that I didn’t much care.

“Probably. I’ll go drop this stuff in the bedroom, though. That way I can check the rest of the house.”

I didn’t bother to stop him. If it made him feel better, he was welcome to search every inch of the property.

After I gave Dutchie her treat, I paused and surveyed the kitchen. Nothing appeared out of place, unless you wanted to count some water slopped on the floor around the dog’s bowl. The world’s neatest drinker she was not. Otherwise, though, it was tidy enough, the dishes stacked in the wooden drainer on the counter, everything I’d used to make breakfast either put back in the refrigerator or the pantry.

Jace entered the kitchen then, relief plain on his face. “Everything looks fine.”

“Were you really worried it wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know. I suppose — ” He stopped there, clearly trying to decide what he really wanted to say. “I suppose seeing all that stuff taken rattled me. I’m not sure why. Maybe because the last time we were in town, I didn’t see any evidence of other survivors. Now, though....” His shoulders lifted; I noticed that he’d taken off the leather jacket he’d worn on our expedition. “I know it’s stupid. They have just as much right to help themselves to supplies

as we do. But the way they came in and took all the rest of the goats? It feels...greedy, I guess. We only took what we needed.”

I could see what he was thinking, but at the same time, I wasn't sure I wanted to ascribe any negative intentions to the people who'd collected the rest of the herd. “Maybe...or maybe they saw them and were worried about them, the same way we were, and took them all because they had more room for them. There could be all sorts of reasons.”

“You're probably right.” The square set of his shoulders seemed to relax a little, and he came over to me and took me in his arms, holding me tightly against him. Something of the cool juniper-scented wind outdoors seemed to have clung to his hair, and I breathed it in, marveling at how the feel of him could drive all worries right out of my head. Whoever had absconded with the goats, it really didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. We had enough to keep our own little homestead going, and would have more goats in the spring, once the does gave birth. Really, in a couple of seasons we'd be swimming in animals and wondering what the heck we were supposed to do with all of them.

“I'll make some sandwiches,” I offered, after I glanced at the clock and realized it was nearly one-thirty, past the time when we'd usually eat lunch.

Jace nodded, but I could tell from the way his mouth was set that he was still turning the problem over in his head. Well, if he wanted to brood over it, I couldn't stop him.

I just knew it would be fine. It had to be.



THE DAYS SEEMED to blur after that, running together until I realized that we were less than a week away from Thanksgiving. Jace had spent long hours building the shed for the goats, doing his best to make sure they didn't have to be exposed to the elements any longer than absolutely necessary. And they

did seem grateful for the shelter we provided, going in there without any urging from us.

As a child, I'd read all those "Little House" books about Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family moving from place to place, homesteading, farming, and although I thought I'd absorbed most of the details, it wasn't until I was doing roughly the same thing myself that I understood how time-consuming having to do everything yourself actually was. And yes, I realized that Jace and I were living in a modern, up-to-date house with a lot of conveniences that Ms. Wilder could never have conceived of. Even so, there was still housework and laundry and cooking and so much more, like making cheese and sausage and butter, collecting eggs, making sure the goats had fresh water and were milked twice a day, tending the plants in the greenhouse and determining what was ready to be eaten and what still needed a few days. By the time we were done with dinner and the clean-up afterward, Jace and I were practically asleep on our feet. Every once in a great while, we'd sit down and watch a movie from the collection in the family room, but that happened maybe every ten days or so, if that. And no, we never watched any of the real estate developer's porn. Jace had looked at the row of Blue-Rays and chuckled, shooting me an inquiring look.

"No way in hell," I'd told him, and he'd let it go. I wasn't about to confess that I actually had tried to watch one of them in the first week I'd been here, lonely and scared and thinking maybe giving myself an orgasm would help to relax me. But about five minutes of looking at the actors with their unnaturally waxed bodies and the women with their fake breasts and equally fake moans made me less inclined toward sex than I'd ever been in my life, and I took the disc out of the player and put it away, knowing I could never watch one of those movies again.

And now, I had no need to.

By some unspoken agreement, Jace and I had begun making love in the morning, while the world was still dark and the day hadn't wrung every last

drop of energy from us. Sometimes one of us would wake up in the middle of the night and reach out for the other, and we'd cling together in a sort of frenzy before passing out again, but it wasn't a common occurrence.

Even so, it was a good life. The weariness I felt every day when I lay down to sleep...it was a good kind of tired, the kind you got when you'd spent your day doing something that felt useful, worthwhile. I could tell that Jace viewed our existence the same way, that he didn't have any regrets about the life we were living. In a post-industrial world, this seemed to be the new normal.

Behind all that, though, I still had this nagging sensation at the back of my mind, as if I was missing something vitally important, that if I could only put the pieces together in the right order, I'd figure out what had been bothering me all this time. It was sort of like looking at one of those "magic eye" pictures and attempting to puzzle out what exactly the hidden image was. I was never very good at that, either. No matter how hard I tried, I could only see a blur of color that didn't mean anything.

In the meantime, Thanksgiving came, and we feasted on pheasant, which I found I enjoyed far more than turkey. Maybe that was simply because, although my mother knew her way around a turkey, my Aunt Susan really didn't, and so on alternating Thanksgivings I'd had to eat dried-out bird smothered in cranberry sauce to give it a decent flavor.

No such worries with the pheasant Jace brought home, which was moist and delicious, especially paired with a sauce I made from currants he'd found during one of his hunting expeditions. And combined with wild rice and sautéed green beans from the greenhouse — well, it was probably the best Thanksgiving meal I'd ever consumed, even if I couldn't help looking at all the empty seats around that huge dining room table and thinking it would have been wonderful to have friends and family there to share the meal with us.

But that world was long gone, and if I were destined to spend the rest of

my life around only one person, I couldn't think of anyone better than Jace to share it with. During that meal, he'd gone quiet a time or two, and I had a feeling he was thinking the same thing, that Thanksgiving was supposed to be about sharing, about being with loved ones, and now ours were all gone.

Those somber moments were fleeting, though, and I could tell he wasn't about to let the memories of what once was ruin what we had now. He joked about Dutchie wanting to eat that pheasant whole before it even hit the back of the ATV, and praised my cooking, raising a glass to honor my efforts. It did feel good. Before all this, I would never have said I was particularly domestic, but I'd risen to the occasion with more success than I could have imagined.

Also, I'd surprised him by putting on the black dress I'd brought from Albuquerque, and my jeweled sandals, and those amazing tanzanite earrings that had so mysteriously shown up in my pocket after my first visit to the plaza in Santa Fe. Actual makeup, my hair styled as best I could, since I hadn't brought any curling irons or hot rollers with me, thinking I'd never need them again. Jace had taken one look at me and asked, "You expect me to be patient all through dinner with you looking like that?"

I'd given him a sphinx-like smile and continued teetering my way back and forth from the kitchen, bringing food to the table. Funny how just a month or so in hiking boots had apparently killed all my ability to walk in heels.

And after dinner, Jace surprised me by taking me in his arms, actually lifting me away from the dining room table and carrying me to the bedroom, where he proceeded to show me exactly how much he appreciated me, mouth moving with teasing slowness across my skin, his fingers stroking me, finding exactly the right spot to wring moans of ecstasy from a place so deep that before I'd been with him, I hadn't even known it existed. Then we were together once more, bodies locked, moving in a rhythm that had become second nature to us by now.

That was really how it felt...natural, as if my body had been made to fit with his, and the reason it had never worked with anyone else was simply that they hadn't been the *one*. We fell asleep in one another's arms, a perfect end to a perfect day.

A week after that, we had our first snowfall. At first, I didn't even know what was happening, only caught an odd flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye while I was clearing up the breakfast dishes. The skies had been heavy and gray when we woke up that morning, and Jace said it smelled like snow. I'd laughed at him over that remark, although really, he would know more about it than I would, since he'd grown up in Taos. When I was in high school, Albuquerque had been hit by a freak snowstorm that basically shut the city down, but that was my only real experience with snow, save for a light flurry here and there that didn't stick around long enough to cause any trouble.

This, though — it drifted downward, light and delicate, the flakes settling on the goats' shed and the chicken coop and the evergreens in the backyard, giving everything a soft sugar frosting. I stood at the window, a dish still in my hands, and stared at the miracle of it, how beautiful it was.

I was so transfixed that I didn't even realize Jace had come up behind me, not until his arms wrapped around my waist and his breath came warm against my neck as he said, "Looks like winter is really here now."

"And we're all safe and snug inside," I responded, setting the dish in the drain before I could drop it. The sensation of having him there, pressed up against me, was enough to send all sorts of tingles up and down my spine.

"That we are. I'll go out and check on the goats in a bit, just to make sure there aren't any leaks in the shed or anything, but I think we'll ride this out just fine." He shifted, as if glancing up at the ceiling, then added, "But we may not have lights for much longer. With cloud cover this thick, the solar's not going to do us much good."

"Then we'll spend our day by candlelight," I replied. "I'll turn off

anything extraneous — maybe that way, there'll be enough of a trickle to keep the refrigerator going.”

“Not a bad plan. You may want to go scrounge some extra candles from the basement.”

“I'll do that as soon as I'm finished with these dishes.”

His lips brushed against my cheek as he gave me a soft kiss, an acknowledgment of my words. Then he let go of me, heading toward the laundry room and the mudroom beyond that, where he could get into his jacket and gloves and brave the snow to check on the livestock.

There really weren't that many dishes to do, so I was done in the next few minutes. After that, I went from room to room, making sure we hadn't left any lights on. In general, we were pretty careful about that sort of thing, but I did realize that I needed to put the computer in sleep mode so it wouldn't draw any more power than was strictly necessary. If something happened to set off one of the periphery alarms, it would turn back on right away, but in the meantime it could hibernate.

After that I got a flashlight from the drawer in the kitchen where we kept them, and headed down into the basement. It had its own lights, of course, but if we really were in for a snowy day, I didn't want to turn them on and waste more power. The flashlight would do well enough, even if it was a little creepy to be wandering around down there with only a narrow beam to show me what I was doing.

I'd come down here once before to fetch the candles, but that had been weeks ago, before Jace had even shown up at the compound. The basement actually was very organized, with rows of metal shelving and the items on them arranged according to use. Even so, I couldn't exactly recall where I'd found the candles that last time. On the left, about five rows down?

Figuring it was worth a try, I shone the flashlight's beam in that general direction, but saw only bins of what looked like bundles of wire and cable, possibly intended for repairs to the home's electrical system, should the

occasion warrant. Undeterred, I moved to the next row, only to have my foot bump into a cardboard box sitting on the ground next to one of the shelving units rather than placed directly on it. That was strange, simply because everything else I'd encountered in the basement so far had shown an almost fanatical adherence to order on the part of the person who had put it there.

I frowned and moved the flashlight's beam over the box. It had clearly come from some kind of a manufacturer; there was even a shipping label still affixed to it. Crouching down, I read the name and address.

*Cory Berman*

*28-A Skyline Trail*

*Santa Fe, NM 87501*

Cory Berman. So was that the name of the developer from Phoenix who'd built the property, or the caretaker who'd kept watch over it? Maybe it didn't really matter. They were both gone, after all.

What did matter, as I read the lettering stamped on the box itself, was what had been sent to him.

*Yaesu FT-857D Amateur Radio Transceiver*

Holy crap.

A ham radio?

A way to make contact with other survivors.

Heart pounding, I shone the flashlight around and saw another package, a much longer one, that seemed to contain the antenna to go with the radio. Damn.

I didn't know the first thing about setting up a ham radio, or its antenna, but maybe Jace would. Or at least could puzzle out the instructions. We'd have to wait for the snowstorm to blow over before we could go up on the roof to mount the antenna, but in the meantime we could read up on how to use the radio itself.

This could change everything.

I was halfway to the cellar stairs before I remembered I'd come down

here in the first place to pick up some spare candles. After going up and down a few more rows of shelving, I found them — pack after pack of shrink-wrapped pillars and votives and tapers, the sort of thing you'd buy in bulk for a wedding or some other large event. I grabbed a flat of pillar candles and headed back to the stairway, then hurried up to the main level of the house.

Jace was nowhere in evidence as I set the package of candles down on the breakfast table in the nook. When I peered out the window, though, I could see him hauling something from the garage to the shed. A sack of the pellets we used to supplement the goats' diet, it looked like. That made sense — they probably weren't going to head out to forage until the snow stopped.

About ten minutes later, I heard him come in, then waited as he stopped in the mudroom to get rid of his coat and scrape the snow from his boots. In the meantime, I'd gone around the house and lit a number of candles, as it was clear from the lowering skies outside that we probably wouldn't see any sun today. Actually, it was so dark that it almost felt as if dusk was coming early, which of course was ridiculous. At this time of year, the days were short, but they weren't *that* short.

"What's up?" he asked, almost as soon as he entered the kitchen. I supposed he could tell I was fairly dancing with impatience.

"Guess what I found in the basement?"

One brow lifted slightly. "You know, that question generally doesn't have a good answer."

"I'm serious."

"So am I." But I could tell by the twitch at the corner of his full lips that he wasn't...not really.

"A ham radio," I announced. Jace appeared nonplussed by that revelation, so I went on, "It's still in its original packing...I think it was delivered here but never used. And there's an antenna, too."

"And?" he asked.

I felt a stir of impatience. “What do you mean, ‘and’? With that radio, we can try to reach out to any other survivors, find out where they are, how they’re doing.”

“Maybe they don’t want to be found. It seems as if they’ve done a pretty good job of hiding so far.”

“So have we,” I pointed out. “But it doesn’t mean we don’t want people to find us. Or...do we?”

Without replying, he went to one of the cupboards and got out a glass, then filled it with water. He drank some, his gaze not fixed on me, but on the increasingly snowy landscape outside the window. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “You wouldn’t think there’d be much of a struggle for resources, not with so few of us left, but after hearing what happened to you in Albuquerque, I’m not sure I’m willing to trust anyone right now. What if there’s a bigger, more organized group out there, one that decides what we have here is better than where they’re living? We have weapons, but there are only two of us. Would you be willing to risk that?”

When he put it that way.... Involuntarily, my mind flashed back to the man in the Walgreens, to the greed in his watery brown eyes, and I shivered.

“No,” I admitted, hoping Jace hadn’t noticed my shudder. “Of course I don’t want to do anything that would put us in harm’s way. But maybe if we set it up and just listened, didn’t transmit?” That seemed like a good compromise to me, but Jace’s grim expression didn’t change. After a perceptible pause, he said,

“Maybe. But we’ll have to wait for better weather. No way am I climbing up on the roof in a snowstorm, just so I can install an antenna.”

“Of course not.”

“And it may need hardware we don’t have, so then we’d have to go back into town.”

A prospect I didn’t particularly relish, and it seemed clear enough to me that Jace wasn’t looking forward to it, either.

“Well, we can figure out the logistics later,” I said. “It’s nothing that has to happen right now.”

He nodded, and I let the matter go, instead went on to ask him what sounded good for dinner that night. Something in the tense set of his shoulders appeared to relax. It didn’t take a genius to figure out he was glad that I didn’t intend to press him on the issue.

Exactly why, I didn’t know. Was he really that worried about the consequences of contacting other survivors?

Or did he have some other reason why he wanted us to stay isolated here?

## CHAPTER 16



ACTUALLY, despite his obvious reluctance to do so, Jace did get to work on the antenna situation a few days later, after the weather had cleared. We bumped along the icy, muddy roads to go back to the hardware store, since, as he'd guessed, we didn't have all the little bits and pieces necessary for the installation.

Although a good deal of the snow had melted by then, there was still enough of it around to make driving treacherous, and I was more than happy to have Jace behind the wheel. He had experience driving in snow and ice, and I sure didn't. And as I stared out at the streets while we drove along, it suddenly hit me, the thing that had been niggling at the back of my mind for so long.

"None of the cars are missing," I said, and Jace took his eyes off the road for just long enough to shoot me a quizzical glance before returning his attention to the icy pavement.

"What?"

I glanced back out the window, wanting to confirm the notion that had finally taken coherent shape in my brain. "You know how I said that it seemed like there weren't as many vehicles around as I remembered, that some seemed to have gone missing, but I couldn't quite figure it out?"

A nod.

“Well, the *cars* are all here. And sure, there are still SUVs and trucks all over the place. But....” I let the words trail off as I focused on the patterns I now saw on the streets around us.

“But what?”

“I bet if we stopped and made a survey, we’d see that the SUVs and trucks left behind are the ones without much utility. Two-wheel drive, small engines...you know, passenger cars with SUV bodies. The ones that can pull their own weight, like this Jeep — I have a feeling we won’t find as many of those around.”

By then we were almost at the Home Depot, so Jace didn’t say anything until after he’d pulled into the parking lot and stopped. “You mean someone’s been coming here and systematically taking the trucks and the four-wheel-drive SUVs?”

“Well, I doubt I could prove it, but...yeah, something like that.”

He shook his head and pulled the key from the ignition, then slipped it into his pocket. “In a way it makes sense, I suppose. Whoever and wherever the other survivors are, they’re going to have to do a lot more for themselves. So having vehicles that can tow things and haul things and get around on unplowed roads would be vital.” His brows had been pulled together as he pondered the conundrum, but then he seemed to relax, and although the air was sharp and cold, a flicker of warmth went through me as he gave me an admiring glance. “That was some pretty good detective work, Jess. I don’t think I would have even noticed.”

“Well, it’s just a theory,” I said deprecatingly, trying to convince myself as much as him.

“Better than anything I could come up with.” Then he hesitated, looking past me down the street that fronted the store. Of course it was completely deserted, but I could tell he was worried. “Maybe you should stay here. You know — keep an eye on the car.”

I really didn’t want to do that, but if it turned out I was right about the

way the abandoned vehicles were being cherry-picked, then it made sense for me to stand watch. At least this time I'd remembered to bring a sidearm. It was hanging in a holster against my hip, a reminder that we could never relax all the way when we came into town. Jace had one as well, the big S&W, which was better suited to his height anyway.

"No problem," I said. All right, so I didn't sound terribly enthusiastic, but neither had I argued with him.

He leaned down and kissed me on the cheek, his lips warm against my wind-chilled skin. "I'll be less than five minutes. I just need some brackets and wire. It'll be fast."

I nodded, and he reached into his pocket and pulled out the car key.

"Just in case."

*In case of what?* I wanted to ask. I didn't, though, only took the key from him and slid it into my coat pocket.

After that, he turned away from me and headed into the store, walking quickly despite the patches of ice that lingered on the asphalt. I supposed I could have gotten back inside the Cherokee where it would be warmer, but I didn't. Instead, I leaned against the driver-side door, my eyes scanning in all directions for...what? A batch of marauders out of a Mad Max movie, bearing down on me, intent on stealing my SUV?

No sign of anything like that — no movement at all, except a crow that came flapping down the street and then perched on one of the tall lights in the parking lot. It shook out its wings and settled down, fixing me with a baleful yellow gaze.

*Crap on my car, and I'll use you for target practice,* I thought, but the bird didn't move, only sat on the lamppost, surveying the parking lot. In happier days, it might have had some pickings there — the uneaten fries from some kid's Happy Meal, a spilled Coke. Now, however, the lot was bare of anything except the abandoned vehicles that still remained there, waiting for owners who would never return, and some patches of unmelted snow.

But even though I didn't see anyone else, and I knew I was perfectly safe, I couldn't help the wave of relief that washed over me when I saw Jace coming back out of the store, carrying several bags' worth of supplies.

"It looks like they — whoever they are — came back. More stuff is gone." Jace handed me the bags, and I got the car key out of my pocket and gave it to him.

"Stuff you needed?" I asked anxiously.

"No, everything we came here to get is pretty esoteric. But now the batteries are totally cleared out, and the solar garden lights, and — well, just a lot of different things."

The batteries would have worried me, except that we had flats of the things back in our basement, both regular and rechargeable. And solar garden lights? Our property was outfitted with those, too. It seemed whoever was looting the Home Depot, they were coming from a place of a lot more need than either Jace or I.

But we'd have to figure that out later. Or never. The weather seemed to be holding, and I had to hope it would stay that way for a few days, long enough so Jace could get the antenna installed. Maybe after that we could start to get some answers.

Right then, though, it was a lot more important that we get home. We had no evidence to show that anyone knew of our hideaway, but leaving it unattended always made me feel nervous. Dutchie would bark up a storm, but I doubted her doing so would be enough to scare off anyone who was determined to break in and take what they could.

Either no one had yet discovered the compound, or any survivors in the area had decided it was easier pickings in town, because once again we returned to find everything as we had left it. We gave Dutchie her usual greeting of some scratching behind the ears and a treat, and then Jace went to survey the area outside the office.

"We're in luck," he said, after prodding at the mud and driving a piece of

rebar down into the ground. “It’s not frozen.”

“And that’s relevant because...?” I was standing a few feet from him, close enough to see what he was doing but not so close that I would be in the way.

“Because I have to install a ground rod in addition to running co-ax from the antenna to the unit in the office.” At my blank look, he sort of grinned and shook his head. “It’s a little more complicated than sticking a TV aerial on your roof.”

“Can you do it?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized that I probably should have asked that question before we went to all the trouble of getting supplies.

“I think so. I’ve read over the instructions a few times. Good thing I learned to solder in my shop class in high school.”

And here I’d thought all we’d have to do was install the antenna on the roof, run some wire, and *voilà*, we’d be chatting it up with survivors around the globe. I should have known nothing would be that easy.

But he got to it in earnest after that, producing a ladder from the garage and climbing up to the roof, then letting me hand the antenna up to him from a point midway on the same ladder. I had to loiter there for some time, waiting so I could catch the bundle of coaxial cable as he tossed it to me once one end had been attached to the antenna. After he was done on the roof, Jace came down and fastened the wire to the exterior wall of the house with a series of brackets.

“I can handle it from here,” he told me. “You’d better go inside — your lips are starting to turn blue.”

“They are not,” I protested, although truthfully, it was fairly cold outside, probably only a few degrees above freezing.

“I can see them. You can’t.” He grinned at me. “Really, I’ve got this. Isn’t it around time for you to be starting dinner anyway?”

“Chained to the stove, just like I thought,” I remarked, but I leavened the

tartness of my words by giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Don’t stay out so long that *your* lips start to turn blue.”

“I won’t.”

I had to be satisfied with that, so I went in the house and started rummaging around in the kitchen. Outside, the daylight slanted its way toward dusk, and before it got full dark, I heard Jace come inside, although he seemed to go straight to the office rather than stopping in the kitchen to check on the ETA for dinner. Since I was making quickie rabbit stew that didn’t really need babysitting, as it was now in the “let it sit in the pot until you’re ready to eat it” stage, I headed back to the office, where I found Jace under the table we’d designated as the ham radio workstation.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” came his voice, somewhat muffled, since he was facing the wall. “Just need to make this last connection.”

Since I really didn’t have anything better to do, I leaned against the doorframe and waited as he wrenched on something. A few minutes and a couple of muffled curses later, he was pushing himself out from beneath the table and getting to his feet.

“I think that should be it.”

“So let’s fire it up and see if we can find anything.”

He set down the screwdriver he was holding and crossed his arms. “We don’t have to rush into this, you know.”

“After you just spent all afternoon working on it?” I said, both perplexed and irritated by his reluctance to use the radio. “If you didn’t think it was a good idea, then why waste so much time and effort on it?”

“I’m not saying that,” he replied, digging in his pocket for another of those interminable leather cords so he could pull his hair out of his face. I wondered why he hadn’t done that earlier, but maybe having his hair down on his neck had helped to keep him warm while he was up working on the roof.

“Then what are you saying?” I crossed my arms and tried hard not to scowl. “I guess I just can’t figure out why you’re so reluctant to even *attempt* to find other survivors, especially since we wouldn’t be talking to them, just scanning to see if there is even anyone else out there.”

A long pause. I could tell from the way his mouth tightened and he didn’t quite look at me that he wasn’t particularly eager to explain himself. Maybe not, but I wasn’t about to let this go.

Finally, he jammed his hands into his jeans pockets and said, “All right, what if we listen in and find some survivors, then decide they sound all right and that we should reach out to them? What if they turn out to not be all right?”

“‘Not all right’ as in...what?” I asked, wondering what he was driving at. I tried to think of the worst-case scenario and added, “Like, cannibals or something?”

A grim smile touched his lips. “No, I don’t think cannibalism is going to be an issue, not with all the wild game to be had around here. More like....” The words died away, and he hesitated again. “More like, what if they turn out to be a bunch of good old boys who aren’t exactly thrilled to find an Indian shackled up with a white girl?”

I stared at him. “That’s....” I’d been about to say, *That’s ridiculous*, but then I realized maybe it wasn’t. It should have been, but...I’d seen enough ugly incidents involving my friend Elena to know prejudice wasn’t exactly a thing of the past, even for someone who was beautiful and talented and came from a family with money. The worst incident had been at a frat party in college, when some drunk asshole told her, “Hey, *chiquita*, you’re pretty hot. Why don’t you come over here and suck my *chalupa*?” Luckily, Tori was standing right there and responded by dumping her cup of cheap keg beer over the guy’s head, but I’d never forgotten that scene. I knew Elena hadn’t, either, even though she’d blown it off at the time, telling us the guy was too wasted to know what he was saying. That wasn’t true, though...he’d known

*exactly* what he was saying. And so had she, despite trying to act as if it was no big deal.

So as much as I wanted to brush off Jace's concerns as being completely unfounded, I knew they weren't. Just because the calendar said it was the twenty-first century, it didn't mean that everyone had gotten the memo.

And while intellectually I could understand where he was coming from, I knew I'd never be able to feel that doubt, those misgivings, the way he did, because I'd come from a completely different world. I was a white girl. Sure, I had a Ute great-great-grandmother — if the family legend was even true — but that didn't mean I could relate to his experiences as someone who'd grown up on the pueblo, who'd come at life in twenty-first-century America from a completely different angle than I had.

"So you see what I mean," he said quietly.

"Yes." His expression brightened a little at that, and I went on, "But... can't we just try it to see if it works? No one will know we're doing that if we don't transmit anything, right?"

At least he didn't try to equivocate. "No, no one will know that we're listening in. If there's even anything to listen to. But we'll give it a shot."

Jace went to the ham radio receiver and switched it on. When he'd set it up, he'd told me that it was designed to be portable, that if we could locate a different antenna setup, we could even take it along with us in the Jeep if we wanted. Why we'd want to do that, I didn't particularly know, but it could possibly come in handy one day.

"Well, here goes," he said, pressing the power button.

A soft hiss began to emerge from the small speakers set up to either side of the receiver. Jace began scanning along the bands, going slowly enough that he could stop if he came across something interesting. All I heard was that hiss, sometimes louder, sometimes softer, but even I knew it was all merely dead air.

And then...what sounded like a faint, tinny voice, a single syllable. "Lo

— ”

It cut off with a screech and was replaced by more static. “Damn it,” Jace said, scanning back to the band where the sound had come from. But there was no voice this time, only an angry, crackling hiss.

“What happened to it?” I asked, coming closer, as if somehow I thought my presence would help the tuner lock back on to the signal.

“I don’t know.” He sounded irritated, and I didn’t blame him. All that work, for something that might or might not have been an actual person?

“Keep scanning,” I suggested, and he expelled a breath and continued his slow sweep across the bands. Just more hissing, more static.

My stomach clenched, and I told myself to calm down. Just because we weren’t picking up anything now didn’t mean there was no one out there. The other survivors might not have the skill to operate ham radio equipment, or hadn’t managed to set theirs up yet. It wasn’t as if Jace and I were alone on the planet — the missing supplies and those mysteriously vanished trucks and SUVs told me other people were out there somewhere, and, from the look of it, they seemed to be fairly well-organized. Sooner or later, we’d have to cross paths. Although now, after what Jace had confided in me about his misgivings on that score, I wasn’t sure meeting up with other people would be as beneficial as I’d previously hoped.

“I’m not getting anything,” Jace said at last, then shut off the receiver before turning back toward me. “Maybe I screwed up something in the installation, but it’s dark out now, so I won’t be able to check until tomorrow morning.”

“It’s fine,” I told him, even though I didn’t know if it really was. “I think you did have it working. I just think...no one’s transmitting.”

“Still, I’ll investigate more tomorrow.” He glanced away from me, sniffed the air. “Smells like dinner’s ready.”

“Almost,” I said, knowing that he’d changed the topic on purpose. Still, what did it matter? We weren’t getting anything out of that ham radio

tonight.

So we went to the kitchen, which was warm and smelled of good and savory things — proven by Dutchie, who was loitering much closer to the stove than she should be. I shooed her away, and then dished up our food while Jace got her some kibble. Just another normal night...or as normal as things could ever be now.

That syllable was still rattling around in my head, though. *Lo*.... “Lo” what? The transmission had cut off so quickly that I didn’t even know whether it truly had been part of an actual broadcast of some sort, or merely a weird distortion that sounded like part of a word but was in fact only a nonsense note generated by a rogue sound wave or something.

I didn’t speak of my concerns to Jace, though. The subject of the ham radio was a sore one already, and he *had* tried. I’d let it go for now, and maybe someday I’d learn if there truly had been someone broadcasting out there...or whether I was only imagining things.



WE CHECKED the radio every day after that, but got nothing but static and hiss. It was frustrating — for me, anyway — but as there didn’t seem to be much we could do about the communications blackout, we put it aside so we could focus on more important things, like surviving the winter.

Well, it wasn’t that bad, but I still could tell I hadn’t become acclimated to the cold. Santa Fe probably averaged around ten to fifteen degrees colder than Albuquerque most of the time, but when that difference is between fifty-five degrees and forty, believe me, you can *feel* it. We had the wood stove in the sitting room going all the time, and the fireplaces in the living room and family room as well, but you could still sense the drop in temperature when you went out of the range of any of them. Jace got in the habit of going to our bedroom immediately after dinner and starting a fire so it would be

comfortable enough to get undressed by the time we went in there.

Of course it could have been much worse, and the conditions were certainly endurable, but all the same, I found myself missing the central forced heat at my parents' house or even the wall unit in my studio apartment over the garage. That thing had heated up fast.

But those appliances were long gone, along with a million other comforts and conveniences I hadn't even appreciated until I didn't have them anymore, and so I told myself not to worry about them, that I was damn lucky to be where I was now.

Especially since I could be here with Jace.

We talked about the coming spring, about what we might be able to plant outside the greenhouse to supplement the crops we grew there. Because of the goats, we'd have to build a separate enclosure for another garden, since otherwise it would get eaten before we had a chance to harvest anything, but Jace thought he could manage it, especially if the stores of lumber down at the Home Depot didn't get pilfered by whatever survivors were still lurking around the area.

And occasionally, after I was done hurriedly washing my face and brushing my teeth, because the heat from the fireplace in the main part of the bedroom didn't quite reach into the bathroom, I'd pull out my packet of pills and hesitate before taking one. We hadn't discussed that kind of future, but it seemed clear to me that Jace didn't intend to go anywhere, that he was planning on a future with me in it. Was it crazy to consider starting a family? After all, someone needed to begin repopulating the earth.

But after that wild moment of hesitation, I always popped the pill in my mouth and swallowed it resolutely. Having a baby was a crazy idea. With no doctors, no medical facilities...no epidurals?

No, thanks.

The funny thing was, I'd never been all that invested in the idea of having a family. Elena was the one who wanted to get married and have lots of kids

(and a nanny, of course) and do all that domestic stuff, and Tori wanted to be a social worker and focus on other people's kids, not her own. As for me, well, most of the time my main concern had been finding someone to have a few dates with and then break up with before things got serious. I'd tried serious once, and all that had gotten me was taking multiple exams for a bewildering variety of social diseases, thanks to my cheating ex.

With Jace, though...it was different. So different that some days I could barely wrap my head around it. I thought it would probably be wonderful to have a child with him, because I had a feeling he'd be a great father. He certainly possessed the patience and the quiet good humor. I knew I could count on him to be steady under pressure...a lot steadier than I, when you got right down to it.

Also, he was so gorgeous that it seemed a real shame to let all that amazing DNA go to waste.

More important than all that, however, was that I loved him. I wanted to bring something into the world that came from our shared love, that showed our commitment to one another.

I knew better than to bring up the subject, though. One day, the time would be right to discuss a future beyond the next planting season, but I didn't think we were there. Not quite yet, anyway.

The cold days slid past. It snowed here and there, but never enough to completely bury us, just enough to make the world pretty to look at and a pain to get around in. Christmas would be here in less than a week, and I had no idea what to do about that. I wanted to give Jace something, but I couldn't exactly nip out to the mall and buy him a sweater. Yes, we could go into town together and split up while we picked out presents for one another, but that didn't sound very safe.

When I mentioned Christmas to him, that I wished I could get him something, he'd pulled me against him and given me a strong, lingering kiss, the kind that made me want to drag him back to the bedroom and tear all his

clothes off, although we'd have to pause long enough to get a fire started before I could safely do that. And he'd said,

“You're the only present I need.”

How was I supposed to respond to that statement? By kissing him back, of course, and telling myself that presents didn't matter, that being here together was what mattered.

The next day he went out with the ATV, saying he was going hunting, and since he went on these expeditions a few times a week, I didn't think all that much of it.

But then he returned carrying a beautiful pine tree, a little bit taller than he was, and I realized he had given me my present, the one thing I'd really wanted all along.

“How did you know I wanted a Christmas tree?” I asked, watching as he settled it in a corner of the living room. It had a stand made of two pieces of wood attached to the bottom of the trunk, so he must have stopped at the garage first to hammer those on before coming to the house.

“I guessed. I saw the look in your eyes when you were talking about Christmas, and....” His shoulders lifted, and he reached out to make a minute adjustment so the tree sat more squarely in the corner. “I thought you should have some sort of holiday, even if it can't be like what you were used to.”

“It's perfect,” I said sincerely. And it was, especially because I knew Jace wasn't Christian, and might not have even had a tree while he was growing up. But he'd still realized how important following these traditions was to me.

“Glad you like it.” He stepped back a few feet from the tree, looking at it with narrowed eyes, as if making sure it stood as straight as it possibly could. “I didn't have anything to use as a bowl, so I'm not sure how we'll keep it fresh.”

“I'll get some paper towels and dampen them, then wrap them around the bottom of the trunk. It should work okay.” I gazed at the tree, wondering

what to do to decorate it. Go to town and raid the nearest Michael's? No, that wouldn't work, even if I could convince Jace to take me on such a frivolous expedition. The Heat had struck in late September, and even a store as gung-ho for Christmas as Michael's wouldn't have had any decorations out then. Should we raid random houses along Upper Canyon Road and see if they had any boxes of Christmas decorations hidden in their garages?

That sounded even worse.

Then I remembered the jars of popping corn in the pantry. Perfect. Old-fashioned, but it suited the way we were living now. "We can make popcorn strings, and I'll use one of the spare Mexican blankets in the linen closet to wrap around the base. It'll look great."

Jace nodded. "Sounds good. I'll try not to eat all the popcorn before you get it on the string."

"Better not," I warned him, and went to kiss him on the cheek before heading off to the kitchen. I had no idea how much popcorn to make to cover a seven-foot tree, but I got the feeling I was about to find out.



A GOOD DEAL, as it turned out, and although Jace didn't eat all of it, or even anything close, I did catch him popping quite a few kernels into his mouth as he worked at making his own strings to decorate the tree. It was so lovely being there with him in the living room, a fire blazing away in the hearth, candles burning on the tables and on the mantelpiece of twisted juniper, that I couldn't even get angry about the way a good portion of the popcorn in his bowl was going into his mouth rather than onto the thread he held. Then again, maybe that had something to do with the half bottle of wine we'd brought out here with us after we were done eating dinner.

Either way, I was feeling more than a little mellow as we hung the popcorn strings on the tree, then topped it with a five-pointed star that Jace

had fashioned out of aluminum foil and tied on with some extra thread.

“I want to make a wish,” I said.

“Is that a tradition?” he asked. “To make a wish when you put the star on the tree?”

“I don’t know if it was for everyone. But we always did it in my family.” A flicker of sadness went over me then as I thought of all those family Christmases when I was younger, the wrapping paper strewn everywhere, hot cocoa for Devin and me and coffee for my parents. Regret, too, that they’d never get to meet Jace. I had a feeling they would have liked him.

“All right,” he said. “What’s your wish?”

So many I could have made — that the world would somehow heal itself, that the Dying had never happened. Those things were out of my hands, though, so I wished for the one thing I truly wanted that was reasonable. “I wish that it will always be like this — the two of us here, together.”

A glow touched his dark eyes, a glow that had nothing to do with the flicker of the fireplace or the gleam of the candles all around us. “I think I can make that wish come true.”

He moved close, pulling me into his arms, and then he was kissing me, mouth warm, lips insistent against mine. Just like the first time we’d kissed, I could taste the wine on his tongue, and heat flamed through me, awakening a deep throbbing in my core. I knew this was one night when we wouldn’t fall asleep exhausted without touching one another.

No, we were hurrying down the hallway to the bedroom, laughing at the chilly air, Jace fumbling with the logs so he could get the fire going.

“You should have come in here right after dinner like you were supposed to,” I teased him.

“I would have, except someone insisted I come with her to make popcorn strings.”

“Oh, right. Well, I hope that won’t take you *too* long.” I pulled the sweater I wore over my head, followed by the long-sleeved T-shirt I had on

underneath. It was cold enough that I broke out in goose bumps, but I wouldn't let that stop me. While Jace was busy with the lighter, his back to me, I took off my boots, then stepped out of my jeans. All that remained were my socks and my bra and panties, and I made short work of those.

When he turned around, his mouth dropped slightly. "Damn, Jessica." He took in a breath, then added, his voice husky, "You are so beautiful."

Heat went over me, despite how cold it was in the room. "Th-thanks," I said, my teeth chattering slightly. "Now come over here so I can tell you the same thing."

He was across the room in a flash, my fingers working the buttons of his flannel shirt while he undid his belt buckle and then the buttons of his Levi's. Oh, how I loved the smooth, heavy muscles of his chest, his flat stomach. If anything, he'd gotten bigger and harder during his months here, probably from all the manual labor.

Speaking of bigger and harder....

I sank to my knees, stroking him, and then brought him into my mouth, tasting salt and a faint, faint musk. He moaned and tipped his head back, his fingers tightening on my shoulders. "Man, Jessica," he breathed. "I'll have to remember to bring you Christmas trees more often."

Chuckling, I continued to move my hand up and down his shaft, my tongue swiping over him. After that, he didn't seem capable of speech, only continued to hold on to me, until he pulled himself from my mouth and raised me to my feet, then pushed me down on the bed, his hands warm on my ass.

We didn't have sex in this position very often, but I loved it when we did. He pushed into me, hands shifting slightly so they were wrapped around my hips as he rocked against me, in me, and I gasped, my own palms flat on the bed as I took him in, took all of him, pushing deeper, stronger, until I felt the throbbing warmth growing within me and knew I was close...so close.

As was Jace, because I felt him clench, then cry out, and as he released, I did so as well, my body clamping down on him, pulsing, squeezing. I gasped.

“Oh, God, Jace....”

That was about all I could manage before I collapsed on the bed. He slid down next to me, his chest heaving, and then pulled me against him. How perfect the warmth of his skin, the way our bodies fit together. We held each other in silence like that for a few moments, and then he said,

“Happy?”

I didn't even have to stop to think. “I've never been this happy.”

He kissed me then, not fiercely as he had before, but with a touch of his lips to my skin as soft as a snowflake settling there. “That's all I've ever wanted. To make you happy.”

Because I could already feel myself slipping into sleep, I didn't really stop to puzzle that out, how he could've always wanted such a thing when we'd only known each other for less than two months. Instead, I cradled my head against his chest, and let myself drift into darkness.

## CHAPTER 17



VOICES in the darkness woke me. I blinked and sat up, holding myself still for a second or two, since the room wanted to spin around me. For some reason, I felt positively thick-headed, like the one time in college I'd tried an over-the-counter sleep aid because I was stressed from exams and the breakup with Colin, and I was having a hard time falling asleep. That didn't make sense, though, since I hadn't had anything more than a glass of wine with dinner, and another one while we were in the living room, making popcorn strings.

Instinctively, I reached to my right, where Jace should have been sleeping. But the bed was empty, although I knew we couldn't have been asleep for too long, as the fire was still burning brightly. Dutchie was passed out in front of it, nose and tail almost touching, her heavy breaths not quite a snore.

Once again I heard that strange murmur, and I sat very still, ears straining to make out individual words. But the voices were far enough off that I couldn't catch anything, although one of them sounded like it could be Jace. Had he gotten up and tested the radio, and this time actually made contact with someone? I would have thought he'd come and wake me up for something that momentous, but maybe he'd thought it best to let me sleep.

I blinked, fighting off the last of that strange drowsiness, pushed back the

covers, retrieved my panties from where they were lying on the floor, and then went to the closet to get my flannel sleep shirt and thick robe. Yes, lying naked next to each other was very romantic, but by the time 4 a.m. rolled around, it was also damn cold. Luckily, Jace didn't seem to mind the sleep shirt, which was covered in penguins. One time he even told me he thought it was cute. He could have been lying, but I think it was more that he wanted me to know he thought I was sexy no matter what I might be wearing to bed.

As I tied the robe around me, I went to the doorway, then paused. The voices should have been coming from my right, down the hall in the direction of the office. But they weren't — instead, they seemed to originate in the living room.

That didn't make any sense. Even if the unthinkable had happened and another survivor had shown up on our doorstep, I should have heard something, no matter how deeply asleep I was. If nothing else, Dutchie would have barked her head off. But she was passed out on the floor of the bedroom, so conked she looked like someone had drugged her.

Frowning, I slipped out into the corridor, the tile floor icy against my bare feet. It wasn't quite pitch dark, since, in our rush to get to the bedroom, Jace and I had left the pillar candles burning on the coffee table and on the mantel. Because of that, as I approached I could make out clearly enough who was in the living room.

Only...my brain couldn't quite grasp what it was seeing. Two men. At least, they looked like men, but...they couldn't be. Not hovering in midair, approximately a foot and a half above the floor, as if they had no need of solid ground.

One of them was Jace. Or rather, he resembled Jace, except somehow older and harder, his jaw and eyes stern. His hair seemed longer than its current inch or so below shoulder length, almost as long as mine, and floated around him, appearing to wave in an unseen wind, a wind that stirred the branches of the Christmas tree and made all the flames in the pillar candles

on the mantel and coffee table dance and sway. Just as when he'd fallen asleep, his chest and arms were bare, but now thick cuffs of silvery-blue metal surrounded his wrists, and he wore full-legged pants made of a shimmering dark blue fabric, possibly silk.

The other man...or whatever he was...stood in profile to me, so I couldn't get all that good a look at him. And actually, I wasn't sure I wanted to. There was something cruel in his hawkish profile, in the set of his jaw and mouth. His hair was pulled back into a severe ponytail and banded with reddish metal — copper, maybe, or even rose gold. More reddish metal gleamed at his wrists, and his pants, similar in construction to the ones Jace wore, were a dark burnt-umber sort of shade.

Stranger than his presence, and even stranger than the way he floated above the floor, however, was the way odd little flames seemed to dance around his feet and swirl in the air directly above his head, as if he were somehow made of fire, and had only taken on physical form so he could have this conversation.

I flattened myself against the wall, glad of my bare feet, which had made no sound as I approached, and the relative darkness of the hallway where I hid. Jace...that oddly altered Jace...and the stranger would have had to look directly at me to see me at all, and it seemed clear enough that they were occupied with one another, not sparing a glance for the supposedly sleeping house around them.

“...wasted enough time here already,” the stranger was saying. His voice was deeper than Jace's, harsh, and something about it made chills go up and down my spine. “It is time to come join the rest of us.”

“Surely a few days more won't matter,” Jace replied. “After Christmas has passed — ”

The stranger made a sound of disgust. “Christmas? What foolishness is this? That day means nothing to us, and you have coddled the woman long enough. Tell her the truth, or as much of it as you deem necessary, but we

will not wait much longer.”

“What is the rush?” Jace crossed his arms and stared directly into the other man’s eyes, something I didn’t think I’d have had the courage to do. “What does it matter if we wait out the winter here, and then come to you in the spring?”

For the briefest second, the stranger hesitated, his hands tightening into fists at his sides, even as the flames dancing around his feet and above his head flared brighter, shifting from warm orange to an acid yellow. From annoyance...or something else? “Because it may not be safe to do so. We are disturbed by some of the developments among the Immune. They’ve gathered in a place not far from here, and although we do not know how they are managing it, they are blocking us from scrying them, or indeed from coming within miles of their compound so we might finish them off.”

“*The Immune*”? I thought. *Other survivors? And what the hell does he mean by “finish them off”?*

“That is troubling,” Jace said, and it seemed the unseen wind that swirled around him gained in force, wildly blowing at his hair and causing the flames of several of the candles to almost snuff themselves. “No one has been able to get close?”

“No. There is one road in and one road out, both heavily guarded. Several of the Chosen volunteered to investigate, since they would be able to get far closer to the Immune than we would, but we have had no contact with any of them since, and it is feared they have been lost.”

It was hard for me to tell for certain, but it almost seemed as if Jace winced when he received that particular piece of information, as if it was more painful to him than the rest of what he had just heard. “That is a grievous loss.”

The stranger shrugged. Clearly, he was not overly concerned about the loss of these “Chosen,” whoever they might be. “They volunteered for the mission. Their partners will find replacements, if they wish.”

From the set of his shoulders, it appeared that Jace wasn't quite so blithe about the fate of the Chosen who had disappeared. "How long has it been? Perhaps you are not giving them enough time."

"Two weeks, as such things are counted here. Time enough." The stranger straightened, his eyes on a level with Jace's. "I am telling you this because your safety here is not guaranteed. Better for you to be with the rest of us." Then he paused, and my heart seemed to stop in my chest as he glanced over in my direction. "Your paramour is awake. It seems she was not quite as deeply asleep as you thought. You will have some explaining to do, I think."

That appeared to be his parting shot, because after he made that remark, the flames which had been licking at his feet seemed to grow and swell, rising until they engulfed him. Then they went out, and Jace was alone in the living room.

His eyes met mine, and I saw him draw in a breath, then lower himself to the floor. As he did so, his appearance shifted back to the Jace I knew...or thought I knew. At the same time, the lamp in the corner of the room flared to life, although neither of us had touched a light switch.

"Jessica," he said, his arms reaching out to me as he began to move in my direction.

"Don't," I retorted, still hugging the wall. "Stay back."

He stopped at once, but I could see the pleading in his dark eyes. "Jessica, I can explain —"

"Oh, you'd better explain." The cool plaster of the wall against my back gave me a little courage. At least this way, he'd have to face me, couldn't sneak up on me from behind. "Who — *what* are you?"

His shoulders seemed to droop then. He looked so pitiful that, under normal circumstances, I would have gone to him at once and put my arms around him, attempted to comfort him. But there would be no comfort here. Not after what I had just seen.

“Please, come and sit down,” he said. “We must have this conversation, but we don’t need to have it like this.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Jessica.” This time he sounded different, his voice deeper, the way it had been when he was speaking with that — whoever he was. At the same time, he backed off, going to sit down on the couch. “Look. Here I am. You can sit in that chair. I promise I won’t move unless you say it’s all right.”

For a second or two, I didn’t do anything, only watched him through narrowed eyes. He was sitting there quietly, his hands planted on his knees. He certainly didn’t look as if he intended to launch at me, but how could I trust him when it was clear he was definitely not who he had pretended to be?

Then again, I did want answers, and if he might be more inclined to give them if I sat down as he’d asked, then that seemed to be what I should do. Not taking my eyes off him, I crossed over to the chair and sank into it. Actually, that did feel a bit better, although the spurious sensation of relief could have had something to do with the rug under my bare, icy feet and the warmth of the fire as it reached out to heat the room.

I pulled in a breath. “So...this you I’m looking at right now. Is it the real you, or the other one?”

In answer, his features seemed to shift and harden, becoming those of the man I’d seen floating above the floor a few minutes earlier. Still handsome... in a way, more handsome, because those features had somehow become more chiseled, more refined, even though he was recognizable as the Jace I’d thought I had known. “This is my true aspect,” he said.

Right then, I wasn’t sure which was upsetting me more — knowing that Jace wasn’t real, was some sort of disguise worn by this...being — or the casual way he flipped from one appearance to the other. I tightened my fingers on my knees, feeling the soft nap of the robe I wore and realizing that now it was giving me absolutely no comfort. “And your true name?”

“Jasreel.”

So he was still Jace, in a way...although I doubted I'd ever feel comfortable enough to call him that again. The thought made incongruous tears sting my eyes, and I swallowed. Could I mourn the loss of something I'd never truly had?

Maybe, at some point. Right then, I had to man up and get some answers.

"So what are you?" I asked, my voice deliberately hard. "Some kind of demon...angel...what?"

"Neither." He reached up to touch the smooth stone he wore around his neck, and I wondered then if it was some sort of talisman, rather than the simple souvenir I'd thought it must be. "I am a djinn."

I blinked at him. "What, you mean like *I Dream of Jeannie*, and the big blue guy in the lamp from *Aladdin*?"

His mouth tightened. "Not like that at all, even though your people have simplified the idea of the djinn to something as foolish as a being who can grant wishes."

"So you don't grant wishes?"

"When called by a powerful enough magician, perhaps. But we do not enjoy the process and will do whatever we can do free ourselves from such bonds."

Okay. First djinn...and now magicians? My head was spinning. "All right, so you're a djinn. I can't really deny that, not when I saw you floating two feet above the floor and watched your friend vanish in a puff of smoke."

Jace's...*Jasreel's*...brows drew together. "He is not my friend, not in any way you would understand."

I decided to let it go for now. That other djinn had seemed like a nasty customer anyway. There was a far more important question I wanted to ask. "All right, then...*why*?"

A long, long silence. He stared at me, dark eyes sorrowful. "You should know...*beloved*."

Every single vein in my body seemed to be filled with ice. I tried to draw

in a breath, but it got caught somewhere in my throat, choking me. I stared at him, then finally forced the words out. “That was you? The voice was *you*?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “I had chosen you, and so I would do whatever was necessary to keep you safe.”

In my mind’s eye, I saw Chris Bowman’s limp body being thrown across the yard as if it had been made of rags, saw a bullet stop an inch away from my face, then bounce harmlessly off some invisible shield. Yes, this Jasreel had been there all along, watching over me, then leading me here. But for what purpose? I found it hard to believe that some sort of supernatural, supremely powerful being would go to all that trouble just for a little booty.

“That word,” I said. “*Chosen*. I heard your visitor mention it, too. What does it mean, really?”

Jasreel stared at me with those sad, sad eyes. How could I be terrified of him, and angry with him...and yet still want to reach out to comfort him? No, that was crazy. Bad enough that only a few hours earlier we’d —

My brain shut down that line of thought with an almost audible *click*. I could not let myself think about that, or I really would go mad.

“It will be difficult to hear,” he said quietly.

“And it’ll be even more difficult for me not to know the truth,” I replied. “So tell me.”

His fingers clenched on his knees. For the first time, I noticed that although his face and body had shifted to those of what he called his true self, he wasn’t wearing those silk pantaloon things, but a pair of flannel pajama bottoms he routinely wore to bed when he was pretending to be “Jace.” The contrast was jarring.

Then he said, “This world was ours once, uncounted ages ago. When God made man, He — ”

“Wait, what?” I broke in. “God? Like, *the* God?”

“Yes, *the* God.” This was accompanied by a flicker of a smile, but Jasreel’s expression sobered quickly enough afterward. “When God made

man, the djinn were cast out, and this world given over to mankind. We are not flesh precisely as you understand it, although we can make ourselves corporeal as it suits us. We spent long ages in exile, only coming to this world when summoned, or during brief stolen moments. During that time, the world changed a good deal, and mankind along with it. We watched from our exile, saw how you were destroying this gift you were given. And so, among certain quarters, the decision was made to take back that which had been stolen from us.”

That did not sound good at all. I pulled my robe more tightly around me, although I didn’t think that was going to do much to combat the chill which seemed to be creeping through every limb.

“Many years were given over to the task, but at last the means of mankind’s destruction was perfected — an illness so grave that it would take almost the entire population of the earth with it.”

“You — *you* did that?” I demanded, sour bile churning in my stomach at the thought that this — *thing* — had been behind the death and destruction of everyone and everything I had cared about. I got to my feet, not even thinking, just knowing I had to get away from him, had to run —

But he’d risen as well, his hand clamping on my arm like iron, preventing me from fleeing. “No, *I* did not do that. There were those of us who protested, who said we could not support such a vile act. We were outnumbered, though, overruled.”

His fingers felt as if they were burning into my flesh. “Let go of me,” I gritted from between clenched teeth.

To my surprise, he did release me, raising his hands as if in surrender. “Jessica, I am sorry. The only compromise we were allowed was that those of us who did not support such extreme measures would be able to choose from among the Immune, to find someone who would be under our protection, who would not be subject to the final purge.”

“‘Final purge’?” I echoed, my stomach clenching once again. Just when

I'd thought it couldn't get any worse. "What are you talking about?"

He pulled in a breath, although I noticed he kept his gaze fixed on my face and didn't try to look away. "Those who created the virus knew that no illness would have a perfect mortality rate. There are now perhaps two million people left alive, scattered across the face of the planet. And so the next task is to eradicate the Immune, leaving behind only the Chosen."

It was so awful that I truly couldn't begin to comprehend the scope of what he was telling me. Two million out of seven billion seemed like a paltry number, but obviously the djinn in charge wouldn't be satisfied with even that many human beings left alive.

My legs gave way, and I slumped back down into my chair. "How many?" I asked. "How many Chosen?"

"A thousand."

One thousand people, out of two million. All those who'd thought they had survived the worst, who even now were struggling to pick up the pieces of a world that had utterly fallen apart...they would have all that stolen from them.

"What will happen to the Immune?" I asked. I wasn't sure where those words had come from. It wasn't as if I'd consciously decided to ask that question.

Jasreel sat down as well, expression troubled. In a way, I was surprised I could read his face so easily, since he wasn't even human. But he looked human enough at the moment, and he'd certainly done a good job of fooling me these past few months.

"They will be hunted down," he said at last. "As one of the dissenters, I am not privy to exactly how and why, and truly, I don't wish to know. I cannot stop it."

"You're really that powerless? How many dissenters are there?"

"As many as there are Chosen. One thousand. The djinn do not number anywhere near what mankind once did, but there are still some twenty

thousand of my people, far too many for any of us dissenters to even contemplate confronting them.” He sent me an imploring look then, as if pleading for me to understand. “Jessica, we did everything we could to stop this thing from happening. It was beyond our power. All we could do was save that chosen one thousand of you.”

My protests died on my lips then. Yes, he had lied about who and what he was, but this Jasreel had been by my side for the better part of two months now, and I saw nothing in his face in that moment but regret and sorrow. Whatever horrors his people had perpetrated, he’d wanted nothing to do with them.

Which left only one question. “Then...why me? Why did you choose me? I’m no one.”

He was off the couch and on his knees in one fluid movement. So close, and yet I noticed he didn’t try to reach out and touch me. He wouldn’t, I realized then, unless I told him it was all right.

Whether or not that would happen...even I didn’t know for sure.

His voice was pitched low, but no less intense for all that. “Beloved, you are not *no one*. I recognized your beauty and your strength, and I knew you were the choice of my heart, even out of several million survivors.”

What was I supposed to say in response to such a declaration? I stared at him, at a face that was like Jace’s, but wasn’t, at the broad shoulders, the arms thick with muscle. He looked human, and yet I knew he was anything but a mortal man.

“Please,” I whispered. “Please don’t call me that. I don’t — I don’t know what to think.”

A stillness settled on his features in that moment, as if he’d finally realized that I wasn’t simply going to say, *Oh, it’s all right, I still love you, too, all is forgiven*. He glanced away from me, over at the fire, and then back. “I realize this is all difficult for you.”

“‘Difficult’?” I repeated. “I think we passed difficult about ten minutes

ago.” I pulled in a breath, then pushed the chair back so I could stand up without bumping into him. “I just — I need some time to process this, okay?”

He didn’t get up, but remained there on his knees, still staring up at me with that blank expression on his face. A muscle twitched in his cheek as he said, “You can have as much time as you need.”

“Good.” I sidled away from the chair, moving toward the hallway. “And — don’t come to the bedroom. Go back to your old room. That is, if djinn even need to sleep.”

With that parting shot, I made my escape, all but running to get away from him. Even so, I couldn’t help taking a quick backward glance as I left the living room. He was still kneeling on the floor, but now his head was bowed, his elbows on the coffee table, as if he needed that support to keep himself from collapsing completely.

At that sight, my throat tightened, and the hallway around me blurred, tears welling to my eyes and spilling down my cheeks. I stumbled into the master suite and then fell on the bed — the bed where Jace had made love to me so many times — sobs tearing themselves out of my chest. I didn’t even know exactly what I was crying about. The loss of what I thought I’d had with Jace? The realization that the Dying had come about not because of some horrible accident of nature, but from directed, malevolent intention? Or knowing that the Dying wasn’t even over, and that the survivors, the Immune, would soon be attacked by the djinn, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it?

All of those, and so much more.

Dutchie jumped up on the bed and licked my face, and I gave a strangled laugh, then pulled her close, burying my face in her soft fur. No, ordinarily she wasn’t allowed on the bed, but in that moment, she knew I needed her.

I clung to her the way a shipwreck survivor might cling to a life preserver, and finally let sleep take me to a place where I could try to forget all the horrors I had just been told.

## CHAPTER 18



I STALLED AS LONG as I could. I took a shower, dried my hair, even put on some lip gloss and mascara, things I hadn't bothered with lately, not after I'd swiped some heavy-duty lip balm from REI on our one foraging run there. But all the preparation in the world could only take so much time, and eventually I had to emerge from the master suite, although I noticed that Dutchie had nudged the door open earlier and slipped away.

Or maybe Jasreel had let her out.

Despite my delaying tactics, I knew I wasn't ready to face him. A cowardly part of me was praying that he'd packed up and left, had gone to "join the others," as the strange, cruel-looking djinn had told him to do. Where that supernatural meet-up was supposed to take place, I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

The smell of coffee told me Jasreel was still here, though. I stopped at the entrance to the kitchen and saw him standing at the counter, staring out at the bleak landscape beyond the false lushness of the garden. The goats were already grazing, which meant he must have gone and milked them, taken care of their water, then let them out. Since the snow from the last storm had all melted by then, save for a few drifts directly under the eaves of the house, nothing was stopping them from cropping at the short, yellowed grass.

"You made coffee," I said, my tone flat.

“I thought you could use some.”

I noticed he was wearing Jace’s clothes — flannel shirt, faded Levi’s, worn boots — and yet they couldn’t really be Jace’s clothes. This Jasreel was just enough bigger, more muscled, that dressing him would require a whole new wardrobe. No, these had to be counterfeits, copies, garments designed to look like what I was used to seeing him wear and therefore intended to put me at ease, when in fact they were doing the exact opposite. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and although his expression was serene enough this morning, his eyes looked shadowed. So could djinn suffer from sleepless nights, or was this his attempt at evoking some kind of pity in me?

Normally, I would have said thank you. This morning, though, I went to the cupboard in silence, got out a mug, and poured myself a cup. Getting some goat’s milk and a smidgen of sugar to leaven it used up some more time, a few minutes where I didn’t have to say anything. I could feel Jasreel’s eyes on me, watching every movement I made, and I didn’t like it at all.

At last I turned around and made myself face him, although it was one of the harder things I’d done. Now, in the morning light, I could see more of those differences, see how his brows were just slightly more arched, his jaw just a little more square. There were faint laugh lines around the dark, dark eyes, although they were the same, nearly black, and still circled by the kind of lashes most women would kill for.

“Why are you still here?” I asked abruptly, my fingers circled around the coffee mug I held, desperately trying to claim some of its warmth. My hands felt as icy as the world outside the kitchen.

The question seemed to surprise him. His eyebrows lifted, and he said, “You didn’t tell me to leave.”

All right, I hadn’t, in so many words. I’d said he could go back to his old bedroom, which in his mind seemed to have been an open-ended invitation to stay. Last night, I hadn’t exactly been thinking all that clearly.

His voice lowered. “Do you want me to leave?”

Did I? Rationally, I knew I should have ordered him out of the house the night before, but in that moment, all I'd been able to think about was him not following me to the bedroom.

"I — I don't know," I said at last, then added, as I saw hope flare in his eyes, "that is, I still have some questions I want to ask."

Mouth thinning to a compressed line, he nodded. "You can ask me anything."

*Maybe, I thought, but that doesn't mean I'm going to get an answer I like.* I sipped some coffee, letting the heat of it course down my throat and begin to thaw that lump of ice at my core. Who knew I could feel so cold, when before Jace had made me so warm?

"Jason Little River," I said, bringing up something I'd been pondering while in the shower. "Is he just someone you made up, or is he a real person?"

"He was a real person," Jasreel said. From the use of "was" and the way Jasreel's mouth tightened as he said it, I had to assume that the Mr. Little River was no longer with us. "Everything I told you about me was true... about him, that is. He grew up in Taos, went to the university in Albuquerque, split his time between the pueblo and building his own business in town. He was also physically similar to me, and that made it much easier to hold the illusion of his appearance for extended periods." A pause while Jasreel drank some of his own coffee, which I noticed was pure black. "Jace" had always taken milk, like me. "Jason Little River died two days after the Heat came to Taos. After he was gone, I took his appearance, and his motorcycle, and began the journey here to Santa Fe."

That part didn't make any sense. I decided for sanity's sake that I'd leave aside the part where Jasreel clearly knew where and when the real Jason was going to die. "His motorcycle? What the hell for? Couldn't you have just...I don't know...materialized on my doorstep?"

Jasreel didn't smile. Still in that same quiet, intense voice, he said, "I

could have, but that journey was important for me as well. I needed some time to become Jason, to grow accustomed to being him. Showing up weary and footsore here made me more...believable.”

Something about that comment just made me angry, like he’d known I would fall for his act but decided to hedge his bets, just in case. “All right, you suckered me. So why lie in the first place? Why not tell me the truth?”

He set down his mug. I could see the anguish in his eyes, but all he did was ask quietly, “And would you have believed me? If I had to come to you as myself, told you that my race had destroyed mankind but also that you would live because I wished it, what would you have done?”

What *would* I have done? In that moment, I honestly couldn’t say for certain. When I’d found this place, guided here by the voice, I was thinking more or less five minutes ahead, only wanting to survive another night. I was tired, heartsore, drained. Could I have found it within myself to believe what he told me? Maybe, if he’d given me a little demonstration of that “floating above the ground” trick.

Whether I would have allowed him into my heart and my bed was an entirely different matter.

“I don’t know!” I flung at him. “All I do know is that you came here, and you *lied* to me, made me think you were someone else...made me *love* you... and now I have to reconcile that with the truth, with the way you used me — ”

Horrible, choking sobs rose in my throat after that, and I had to stop, to drop my mug on the counter and turn away from him so I wouldn’t have to look into that face, the face that used to be Jace’s and wasn’t anymore, tears rising up to blind me all over again. A mercy, because then I couldn’t see him clearly.

But I could feel him, warm fingers lacing through mine and pulling me against him, his voice rough with sorrow as he said, “Beloved, it was never my intention to hurt you. I thought perhaps it might be easier — ”

“Don’t call me that!” I gasped, pushing at him, trying to free myself. He resisted for a scant second, and then released me, backing away and holding up his hands as if to show he had no intention of attempting to touch me again. Angrily, I wiped at my tears with the back of one hand.

“Very well...Jessica.” He pulled in a breath, and I noticed how his chest rose and fell, as if he were struggling to gain control of himself. Could djinn experience an accelerated heartbeat, or difficulty breathing? One wouldn’t think so, if they truly weren’t completely tied to this plane of existence, or a physical body. But Jasreel was giving a good enough imitation of it now. Then again, he’d already proved that he was pretty good at pretending he was something he was not.

Looking a little less wild-eyed, he went on, “Jessica, I came to you as Jason Little River because I thought it would be easier for you. I thought we could grow to be comfortable with one another first, and then, when the time was right, I would tell you who I was really was, the truth behind the Dying. It was never my intention to hurt you. How could it be, when I swore an oath as I chose you that your life would be more precious than all the riches in the world to me?”

He took a step in my direction, and I retreated several feet toward the kitchen entrance. That stopped him, and he raised his hands again, almost as if he were as much telling himself to halt as he was showing that he didn’t intend to pursue me or reach out for me. As I stood there, halfway toward the dining room, I realized that poor Dutchie, like most dogs who hate hearing their people fight, had retreated under the little round table in the nook and was staring at us with worried mismatched eyes.

For some reason, seeing her reaction to our quarrel made me calm down a bit. Dutchie loved me, but I remembered that she loved Jace — Jasreel — too. And if she loved Jasreel, surely that meant he couldn’t be evil, or anything close to it. I’d seen the way she’d reacted to Chris Bowman, so I knew she wasn’t one of those dogs who indiscriminately liked everyone.

Whatever lies Jasreel might have told me in order to ease his way into my life, I knew then that he'd told them out of a misguided attempt to protect me, to avoid frightening me.

I was angry with him, and I was scared, almost as scared as the night my father died, but in that moment, I knew I didn't hate him. Some part of my soul wouldn't allow me to hate him.

He'd brought me a Christmas tree. That could have been another manipulation, but I didn't think so. He'd done that because he knew I wanted it, wanted some part of my life to feel normal, even when hardly anything in it was normal anymore.

Maybe something in my expression shifted. I couldn't say for sure, but it must have been enough to give Jasreel some hope, because he said, "Do you still wish for me to go?"

I didn't...but I also didn't know how I could begin to process all this with him around all the time. "I don't know," I replied. "A minute ago, I would have said yes. But —"

"But?"

It was time to take a deep breath of my own. "I suppose I want some more answers. What was that — the other djinn saying about the Immune?"

If he was disconcerted by my change of subject, Jasreel didn't show it. He could have simply been relieved that I was willing to go on talking, even if the topic of conversation had moved away from the two of us and where our relationship currently stood, and on to something more neutral.

"His name is Zahrias. He is the leader of our group in this — sector, I suppose, is the best word for it. The region is not quite analogous to your state of New Mexico, but close enough."

"So this Zahrias came here to, what, warn you?"

"More or less." Jasreel shifted, and I could tell he'd been about to step closer to me, but had pulled back at the last second. "In general, we djinn are able to look in on human affairs with very little interference. If we suddenly

can't do so with the group at Los Alamos — ”

“Lo,” I said, and he stopped and shot me an inquiring look.

“What?”

“That was the transmission, wasn't it?” Another spark that could be fanned to anger. Now I thought I understood what I'd heard so briefly on the ham radio. Voice tight, I said, “The people — the Immune — were transmitting from Los Alamos. And you...cut it off.”

“Yes,” Jasreel replied, sounding resigned. “And yes, I disrupted the signal. Only because I wanted more time alone with you. Until Zahrias came to see me, I didn't know the group there was any kind of a threat. I only knew they must be Immune, and so their time on this earth was limited.”

I decided to put that anger aside to be dealt with later. “So they're a threat just because you can't spy on them?”

“It's more than that, Jessica. The Immune simply should not have the capability to keep us from looking in on their doings. And now that some of the Chosen have disappeared, the ones who volunteered to go where we could not — well, you can see how that would be very troubling.”

From his perspective, I supposed it was. For myself, I was more intrigued than anything else. What were they doing at Los Alamos that would allow them to evade djinn surveillance? I didn't know much about the town, except that it was still a place for research and had quite a few government contractor-type businesses. We drove up there once when I was in high school, more to go someplace off the beaten path than for any other reason, and it really did feel like I'd just walked onto the set of that TV show *Eureka*, the one about a town populated by mad scientists.

But I figured the probability of discovering the truth about what the Immune in Los Alamos were doing was roughly the same as waking up to discover this had all been a terrible dream, so I moved on to my next question. “And the djinn? The ones from this sector, I mean. Zahrias made it sound as if they were all holed up somewhere.”

Jasreel gave me an incongruous grin, as if that mental image amused him. “Djinn do not precisely ‘hole up,’ but they are using Taos as their base of operations.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. A touristy little town didn’t seem like quite the right spot for a bunch of supernatural villains to be hanging out. “Why Taos?”

“Since its population was small to begin with, it did not have many survivors, and the one or two who were left were....” He let the sentence trail off, but I got the gist.

“Disposed of?” I volunteered.

A grim nod. “Yes. Also, because it was a travel destination, it has accommodations for a number of people, restaurants with good stores of food, and so on.”

“They have power in Taos?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

I wondered exactly what he meant by that, but I decided the day-to-day logistics of keeping Taos going under djinn occupation weren’t my top concern at the moment. “And because the Immune in Los Alamos are up to something you can’t figure out, Zahrias wanted you to leave here and go to Taos.”

“Exactly. You and I have been safe on this property, hidden from the world. It’s exactly why I chose this place as our sanctuary, our haven. But if what Zahrias says is true, then it might be best if we left and took refuge with the other djinn and the Chosen in Taos.”

Crossing my arms, I said, “That’s assuming I would go with you.”

Now the expression he wore was one of resignation. “I will not force you. I can say that it would be safer. But that is your decision to make.”

*Oh, thanks for putting it back on me,* I thought. But hauling me off to Taos without so much as a by-your-leave would have made me far, far angrier. Jasreel was treating me as a peer now, giving me equal say in what

we should do next. I could tell that Zahrias' news about the Immune in Los Alamos had Jasreel worried. For myself, I didn't think I had that much to worry about. After all, they were human beings. I was one of them.

Or...was I? Maybe they would look on me as some kind of co-conspirator, a betrayer of my kind. Of course, I hadn't known Jasreel was djinn, but I had no idea whether that kind of excuse would wash with them or not.

"Let me think about it," I said. "I have to go gather the eggs." That had always been my chore, just as watering the goats and lugging their pellets from the garage to the feeding trough he'd built next to their lean-to was Jace's — Jasreel's — job.

He seemed to recognize that I needed some time alone, because he didn't protest, only said, "Of course," and went to get his neglected cup of coffee. I realized then that I'd only had a few sips out of mine. Oh, well. I didn't want to have to go past him to retrieve my mug, so I wrote it off as a loss and went to put on my coat and gloves.

The djinn didn't try to follow me.



THE COLD AIR WAS BRACING, but it didn't do a lot to clear my mind or settle the thoughts that kept racing through it. I gathered eggs mechanically, placing them in the basket with practiced care, the familiar stink of the henhouse around me. Glancing down, I realized it would need to be shoveled again soon. If I asked Jasreel to do it, would he? He'd handled the distasteful chore ever since my one disastrous attempt to handle it, but that was back when he was still trying to convince me he wasn't anyone except a guy from the pueblo, someone who was used to taking on a good deal of manual labor.

*Maybe he can just wave his hands and have all this bird poop and dirty straw magically disappear, I thought. That would be convenient.*

Problem was, I didn't know if his powers — whatever they were, exactly — worked that way.

But even as I pondered such trivialities, my thoughts kept dancing around the real question, the one I didn't know if I could ever answer.

*Can I forgive him?*

Because it wouldn't be simply forgiving the lies he'd told me. To a certain extent, I could understand why he'd done that. If he'd been watching me for some time, studying me before he made me his Chosen, then he would have known I wasn't the type of person who watched the skies for UFOs or believed in ghosts or any of that other "woo-woo stuff," as my friend Tori used to put it. A djinn? I probably would have burst out laughing — if I hadn't unloaded my shotgun into him first, just to be safe. True, if I'd done that and he'd survived unscathed, then maybe I would have started to believe in his supernatural origins.

No, forgiveness would have to go far, far beyond that. He'd protested that he couldn't stop the Dying, couldn't have kept his people from unleashing their terrible virus on the world. Maybe not; I'd seen this Zahrias, the de facto leader of my little part of the world, and if he was any indicator of the type of people the djinn had running things, then I could understand how pleas for mercy would have fallen on extremely deaf ears. Even so, many would say Jasreel still was guilty by association. It was the djinn who had done this terrible thing, and he was a djinn.

All right, most people would probably think that way. But I wasn't a lot of people. I was me. I had to make this decision for myself, based on what my heart and my gut and my mind told me.

And what they were telling me was that Jasreel loved me. He couldn't save everyone, but he could save me. And he had. He'd saved me, and he'd shown, day in and day out, that he cared for me. In little things, like always making sure he helped clear the table, even though the dishes were my bailiwick, and properly sorting his dirty clothes into the correct bins in the

laundry room so I wouldn't have to do it. Bigger things, like that Christmas tree and the aforementioned mucking-out of the henhouse.

The biggest of all...watching over me, keeping me safe, all along knowing that we weren't precisely equals, that he was a being of vastly more power and experience. And yet he had never talked down to me, never discounted my suggestions, always took me seriously. If that wasn't love and respect, what was?

Well, it sounded as if I'd answered my own question.

Feeling lighter by roughly a hundred pounds, I headed back to the house and let myself in the back door, through the mudroom. I scraped off my boots, set down the basket of eggs before I took off my jacket, and then went into the kitchen. Jasreel wasn't there, but I noticed that he'd cleaned out his coffee mug and put it on the dish drain. That wasn't just sucking up, either; he always cleaned up after himself.

"Jasreel?" I called out, the syllables of his proper name feeling strange on my tongue.

"In the living room," he replied.

I wondered what he was doing there. Figuring I'd find out soon enough, I headed in that direction. He was standing in front of the fireplace, which we had going pretty much twenty-four/seven these days. In his right hand he held a log, so it appeared he'd gone in to stoke up the blaze. Dutchie was lying next to him, patting at his leg with one paw. Obviously, someone thought it was time for a belly rub.

Smothering a smile, I said, "So...."

"So?" He set the log on the fire and turned toward me, disrupting the dog's pant-pawing. She gave me a disgusted look and rolled away from Jasreel, toward the hearth.

"So...I'll go to Taos with you. If you think it's for the best."

An expression of such joy spread over his face that, for an instant, all my doubts and worries deserted me. Surely no one who could look like that

would ever mean me any kind of harm. He came to me and cupped my cheeks in his hands, turning my face up toward him.

“You’re sure?”

Was I? His fingers were warm on my face, reassuring, strong but gentle. No one had ever touched me like that. No one except Jace...Jasreel.

I nodded.

He bent and kissed me then, and it was the first time I had kissed this version of him, the first time I had felt the contours of this particular mouth, the taste of this tongue. Not so very different from “Jace,” but different enough that I had to remind myself that it was still him, still the man who had kissed me before, who had made love to me on those cold winter mornings and stood laughing in a field after a billy goat knocked me on my rear end.

But then I felt his body go rigid, and he took a step away from me, one hand going to his throat.

“What is it?” I asked, reaching out to hold on to his fingers. They felt like ice.

His hands had always been warm. Always, no matter how cold it might be outside, as if the weather didn’t affect him the same way it affected me.

“Can’t...breathe....”

I put my hand on his chest, felt his heart beating wildly within, felt him laboring to pull in a breath. Which he did, a short, shallow gasp. Better than nothing, but it didn’t explain what was happening to him.

Dutchie got to her feet, nose pointed toward the doorway. A low, penetrating growl emerged from her throat, and her ears flattened against her head.

*What the —*

I didn’t have time to complete the thought, because in the next second, the front door was flung open, and a group of seven men wearing parkas and heavy boots burst into the living room. Six of them carried guns, and the seventh some sort of strange device, no more than a little black box, really,

with lights that seemed to flicker deep within it, as if buried under a layer of dark translucent plastic.

The scream that had been building in my throat died when one of the men with the guns stepped forward and said, “It’s all right, Ms. Monroe. We’re only here for him.” He pointed at Jasreel, who had taken a step backward, toward the hearth. Sweat was beginning to drip down his temples.

“Who — what — ” I swallowed, knowing I had to keep it together, at least until I found out what the hell was going on. I began again. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

He nodded at the men who flanked him, most of whom were large, burly types, the kind of guys who once upon a time probably could have been found drinking beer at some back-road dive bar. They went to Jasreel and surrounded him, then began dragging him back toward the man in charge and the other one, the one holding that strange box. He, unlike his compatriots, was slender, of average height, and wore wire-rimmed glasses. Despite the commotion around him, he didn’t look up from the box he held, kept his fingertips moving over the surface, as if controlling it via touchpad.

The leader, who held himself like a military man and had the short-cropped hair to match, said, “Ms. Monroe, we’re survivors from Los Alamos. We’re collecting as many of these scum as we can” — a jerk of his chin in Jasreel’s direction— “and are putting them on trial for crimes against humanity. Seems the least we can do, in the name of those who are no longer around to seek justice.”

My mouth was so dry it physically hurt to swallow. But somehow I forced myself to do just that, even as I sent an agonized glance toward Jasreel. He had gone pale under his olive-toned skin, his breath coming in short, labored pants. What the hell were they doing to him?

“He’s not guilty,” I managed to get out. “He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Beg to differ, miss.” The leader of the Los Alamos gang gave a faint

nod, and the four men holding him began to drag Jasreel out the front door.

“No!” I began to move after them, but another of the group, one of the two men flanking the guy with the black box, took me by the arm.

“I wouldn’t,” he said in a murmur. “Right now you have the benefit of the doubt, but...” He let the words die away, but I got his meaning. It was Jasreel these men were after, not me. The last thing I should be doing was provoking them.

I gave the fair-haired man, who seemed to be about my age or a little more, the faintest of nods, then held my position, just a few feet away from the guy in charge. “What proof do you have that he’s guilty of anything?”

“His nature is proof enough.” He gave another of those chin-jerks at the man with the black box and the two men with him. For the first time, the one wearing glasses looked up from his device, whatever it was, then gave a faint nod, right before they went out the front door. The blond one gave me a warning glance before he turned and took up the rear, as if to tell me that I needed to stay put and keep my mouth shut.

Fat chance of that. Instead, I followed them. As soon as I was outside, the chilly air seemed to bite at me, piercing the thermal shirt I wore, but I ignored the momentary discomfort. Parked a little ways down the drive were two Hummers, one bright yellow, the other red. Clearly, these were some of the vehicles “liberated” from Santa Fe and the surrounding area.

I could see Jasreel being bundled into the yellow Hummer and cursed mentally. What was I supposed to do? There were seven of them — all right, the guy with the box seemed peculiarly uninterested in his surroundings and kept fiddling with the device, whatever it was, so maybe he wasn’t much of a threat — but the rest of them were all big enough to take me individually, let alone as a group. And all my weapons were currently locked up in the gun safe.

The leader of the group paused and glanced down at me, seeming to really assess my appearance for the first time. He didn’t leer, but I could see

the look in his eyes take on a certain glint. “You should come with us,” he said casually. “We’re trying to in-gather as many of the Immune as we can. You’d be safe with us in Los Alamos. We can protect you.”

For a second, I actually considered it. Not because I wanted to go with this bastard and his crew, but because that way I’d be closer to Jasreel. I’d still have to figure out some way to free him, but I thought attempting a rescue would be a lot easier if I were nearby.

*No, beloved.*

The words were barely more than a gasp in my mind. I couldn’t speak aloud, not with the leader of the band of thugs standing close by, so in desperation I tried to respond the same way. Amazingly, it seemed to work.

*But I want to stay with you!*

*You will be...better able to help me if you stay away from them, and free.*

*How?*

*You will need assistance...and you will not be able to get it if you come with me to Los Alamos now. I do not think they intend to kill me right away.*

*And that’s supposed to be reassuring?*

*Yes, beloved.*

I had to ask. *How are we doing this?*

*The bond between us. They have trapped me here on this plane, cut off my powers, but I can still speak to you thus. At least —*

But then the thought-speech abruptly broke off, and I realized it must have been because they’d finally hauled Jasreel into the Hummer and shut the door behind him. So our mental connection was limited — by space, and by physical barriers.

Luckily, the entire exchange had taken place in less time than the blink of an eye.

“Thanks for the offer,” I told the leader, my tone as casual as I could make it, as if I hadn’t just held a desperate mental dialogue with their captive. “But I’ve got goats and chickens to tend. I think I’ll stay right here.”

His eyes narrowed. “You sure? It’s not safe for a woman alone.”

*And I’d be so much safer in Los Alamos. Right.* Evenly, I replied, “I’ll take my chances.”

A long hesitation, and I worried that he might try to force me into the other Hummer. But then he shrugged and said, “Door’s always open. Come find us there when you’re ready.”

I nodded, and he seemed to take that as the conclusion of our conversation, because he signaled the three men still waiting outside to get in the red Hummer. Immediately afterward, he crossed to the vehicle and climbed in the passenger seat. A slap on the door, and both vehicles moved off, heading down the drive and out through the gate, which I noticed was standing wide open. They must have shorted out the mechanism or something, although that should have triggered the alarm system. Then again, I didn’t know what the black box the weedy-looking man had been holding could do. Maybe it could simultaneously short out the alarm and somehow trap Jasreel here in this world, with no hope of escape. Or maybe one of the men in the Hummers had just stepped out and clipped a couple of wires.

In a minute or two, I’d have to go inspect the gate and see if what they’d done was anything I could fix. In a minute or two, I’d have to take Dutchie back into the house and lock up, and pray that no unfriendly eyes had seen me in my current vulnerable state.

Right then, though, I could only stand there in the driveway and feel the icy tears roll down my cheeks, stinging in the bitter wind that was blowing down from the north. Jasreel was gone.

I turned so I faced west, in the direction the vehicles had disappeared. And although I knew he couldn’t hear me, I still sent the words out to him, letting them ride on the wind.

*I will find you...beloved.*

~FIN~

Jessica's and Jace's story continues in *[Taken](#)* and concludes in *Fallen*.

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# WOLVES: I BRING THE FIRE PART I



A LOKI SERIES

C. Gockel

**Amy is on her way to her grandma's house. She is being chased by a very bad wolf.**

Galaxies away Loki Norse God of Mischief and Chaos is waking up in a prison cell, strangely without a hangover, and with no idea what he's done wrong — this time anyway. But he does know Thor is hiding something, Odin is up to something wicked, and there seems to be something he's forgotten...

In this urban fantasy tale that is equal parts *Another Fine Myth*, *American Gods*, and *Once Upon a Time*, a very nice midwestern girl and a jaded, mischievous Loki must join forces to outwit gods, elves, magic sniffing cats, and nosy neighbors. If Loki can remember exactly what he's forgotten and Amy can convince him not to be too distracted by Earthly gadgets, Earthly pleasures, or three day benders, they just might pull it off...

## CHAPTER 1



THE GAS STATION bathroom off route 44 is completely lined with white tiles. Overhead a fluorescent light buzzes and flickers. The bathroom smells like urine and Pinesol. A toilet with a cracked seat sits on one side of the little room. On the other is an ancient sink, hanging off the wall.

The toilet is unoccupied. The sink is not. In it is a writhing wet creature about the size of a dachshund but heavier set and tailless, with short, dark gray fur interspersed with tufts of light gray. Holding the creature under a cloud of foul smelling, antiseptic soap bubbles from the bathroom dispenser is Amy Lewis.

A splash of suds comes right at Amy's eyes. Blinking, she looks up at the mirror above the sink. Her long dishwater blonde hair is wet and plastered to her head where it isn't pulled back in a messy ponytail. Her wide blue eyes have dark circles from lack of sleep — she got up early to start the trip from Oklahoma to Chicago. She's not wearing any makeup. She should not care; no one will see her out here. But she wishes she was wearing some under-eye concealer. Her nose has a large soap sud on it. Her wide lips are slightly chapped. She looks like she's been in her car for a week, not a few hours, and she looks far older than her twenty-four years.

Looking down with a sigh, Amy says, "Why, Fenrir? Why?"

Fenrir, the creature, makes a non-committal yip. Some of Amy's fellow

vet school classmates insist that Fenrir is most likely a capybara, a large, tailless guinea pig-like rodent native to South America. But Fenrir's nose is far too narrow and rat-like for her to be a capybara. Other classmates have suggested that Fenrir is, in fact, a giant rat. However, her front teeth are not rodent teeth. Fenrir is a dog...and Amy and one of her professors did a DNA test just to prove it.

A few minutes ago Amy was walking Fenrir outside the gas station. Letting herself take a break from the long drive, Amy had idly watched the sparse traffic whiz by. When she felt the jerking of Fenrir's leash, it was too late. Fenrir was already joyfully rolling in something that would have been easier to identify before it had wandered onto the freeway, before whatever-it-was had cooked for a few days under a sweltering Great Plains sun.

"It's okay." Amy sighs. "I know why you did this." Animal psychology is somewhere between a hobby and an obsession for most vet wannabes. Lifting up the still soapy, still wiggling dog, she says, "You want to be a great big bad wolf. So you rolled on a dead thing to smell like your prey." It's a common behavior among dogs. And possibly rats.

Fenrir yips enthusiastically and licks Amy's nose.

"Ugh." Wincing away from the smell of roadkill, Amy sets the dog on the floor. As Fenrir tears around the little room, Amy pulls off her fleece sweater. She's just trying to wrap it around the little animal when a knock comes at the door.

"Just a minute," she calls, scooping up the animal. The knock turns to a pound.

Hurriedly opening the door, she comes face to face with a middle-aged man with a puffy face and blond, almost white hair. Fenrir immediately starts growling and tries to lunge out of her arms.

Despite Amy's ferocious guardian, the man's eyes go directly to her chest. It's something Amy is used to. She is generously endowed, which is why she tends to wear large shapeless shirts. They make her look fat, but it is

better than the stares. Now she is only wearing a slightly damp tee shirt. Pulling Fenrir's wet body protectively in front of her, Amy says, "I am so sorry she's growling. Really, she hardly ever does this."

Hunching slightly over her growling protector, Amy goes to the side and makes to slip by. The man does not move.

Amy can tell from Fenrir's growl and frantic wiggling that the dog is close to foaming at the mouth. "Shhhh..." Amy says. "I am so sorry," she says to the man. "She's normally not like this."

Well, normally Amy's dog isn't actively trying to lunge at people, but Fenrir isn't precisely friendly, especially not towards males.

Outside a horn honks. The man looks over his shoulder and then steps out of the way.

As Amy walks by him, he calls out, "Are you traveling by yourself?"

The hairs on the back of Amy's neck stand on end. She turns to look at the man. He is smiling. It's a perfectly innocuous smile. She lies anyway. "No."

His smile widens as he closes the bathroom door. Fenrir makes a gurgling noise like she's choking on her own fury and nearly jumps out of Amy's arms.

Squeezing her tight, Amy says, "Really trying to live up to your namesake today?"

Amy's grandfather was a folklore buff. In Norse mythology, Fenrir was the wolf child of the Norse God of Mischief, Loki. The real Fenrir was so vicious that the gods bound him to a tree on a remote uninhabited island — but someday Fenrir is supposed to be the downfall of Odin, the head of the Norse gods himself.

Eyeing the door, Fenrir just growls.

A few minutes later Amy's in her Toyota Camry, releasing the clutch, tearing out of the gas station and on her way.

It's 768 miles from Stillwater to Chicago, mostly open road and farm

land. It's about a twelve hour drive most times — and totally worth it.

The Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, is one of the best veterinary schools in the country and she's got a full ride. But she's spent every spring and summer since high school graduation with her grandparents in Chicago. There are lots of jobs in Chicago, and Amy's full-ride doesn't pay for things like rent, food, books, and the always mysterious 'miscellaneous fees' universities charge. Amy goes to Chicago to work during breaks. With occasional work as a tech for a veterinarian in Stillwater, she manages just to coast by.

Slipping a CD into the player, Amy cranks down the window. It's not so bad to have her fleece pullover off. Heat is beginning to rise off the freeway in waves. With the window down she's comfortable and the smell of wet Fenrir isn't as overpowering.

She glances over at her companion belted into a safety harness in the front seat. Fenrir's fur is starting to dry and she looks more like a rodent-like dog than dog-like rodent. As near as Amy and her vet-wannabe friends can determine, Fenrir is a mix of toy poodle and chihuahua, somehow minus a tail. Fenrir's fur couldn't decide to be chihuahua or poodle, so it's both, some places long and some places short. As it dries this oddity becomes more prominent. Her ex-boyfriend summed up Fenrir as, "Carlos meets princess, a love story gone terribly wrong."

You can't even say Fenrir is so ugly she's cute. She's just ugly. And with her less than charming personality, no one would have adopted Fenrir if Amy hadn't, which is why Amy had to.

Shifting into fifth gear, Amy says, "Well, despite the jackknifed semi in Tulsa that held us up 3 hours, and your little diversion, looks like we'll be home by midnight. Still on schedule."

Fenrir turns her panting muzzle in Amy's direction as though she's laughing at her.

After two more traffic jams, road construction, and some pit stops for

Fenrir that might have been roadkill-induced, it's close to midnight and they're not even in Illinois. As Amy drives through Mark Twain National Forest, she is not the only one the road, but company is few and far between. Trees rise up on either side of her. The air coming in the open windows is humid and hot.

Beside her Fenrir whines.

Biting her lip, Amy says, "I told you...and I told Grandma, we'll stop for the night outside of St. Louis." She should have stopped earlier — but she didn't want to deviate from her plan. Get home. Get a job. Work.

Granted, that careful planning could be undone by death. Despite the coffee she's been drinking all day, she's tired. She's getting to that stage of sleepiness when reminding her brain that if she falls asleep, she'll die, is no longer working. Her brain is rebelling, reminding her if she dies she'll be asleep. Blessed, wonderful sleep.

Amy grabs a CD from the armrest and holds it up near the steering wheel — Nine Inch Nails, *Pretty Hate Machine*. Totally retro, but with enough angst and anger to do the job.

Glancing down quickly, she hits the eject button and pulls out her current disc. As she lifts her head, an orange light in the trees catches her eye. Almost certain it's a forest fire, she briefly turns her head. It is a jet of flame, reaching high up into the sky...

And then it is gone.

She turns back to the road and sees two small lights ahead on the road. It takes a few moments for her brain to register it's a deer's eyes.

Braking and swerving quickly, Amy lets out a quick breath as her tires skid across the gravel on the shoulder. An old memory kicks in and she turns into the skid, but not fast enough. Her car slides into a shallow ditch on the side of the road. The next thing she knows the world is turning over, her neck jerking back and forth, her seatbelt cutting into her chest and hips. There is the sound of crumpling metal from the roof, and a loud crack from the

windshield as it caves inward. The glass doesn't shatter completely, but it cracks into hard splinters that knock into Amy's hands. With a cry she pulls her hands away from the wheel. And then it's just the sound of her breathing as she and Fenrir hang upside down by their seat belts.

Amy swallows. It's hard to think, her heart is beating so fast and so loud. Don't cars sometimes catch fire in the movies when they tip over? That's probably overdramatized. Or not.

Get out, she has to get herself and Fenrir out of the car. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she manages to hold onto the strap and not bang her head against the ceiling. Turning, she tries to release Fenrir. It isn't easy. Just turning her neck is painful, and the little animal is whining and twisting furiously. When she finally frees Fenrir, she realizes she probably should have found the leash first. She's got a wiggling little dog under one arm, and it doesn't make crawling out of the window particularly easy.

Her headlights are still on, so she has just enough light to assess her situation. She's actually only a few yards from the road, even though it felt like she rolled for miles. There doesn't seem to be any smoke coming from the car. Nodding to herself, she tells herself all of this is good. Someone will see her from the road and call for help.

Just as she has that thought, she sees headlights approaching. Pulling Fenrir to her chest to better control the dog and her own body's shaking, Amy walks towards the highway. A burgundy minivan approaches, slows, and then stops. Its lights go off. Amy's stomach drops.

Maybe it would have been better not to be seen. She nervously scratches between Fenrir's ears. She's being foolish. The risk of being killed by a serial killer is less than the risk of being hit by lightning, and that risk is less than 1 in 750,000. Most people are good.

Still, she freezes in her tracks.

A door slams on the opposite side of the van.

"Having some trouble?" says a voice that sounds familiar. Why should it

sound familiar?

Fenrir starts to growl and jumps from her arms just as the man from the gas station rounds the front of the van.

The next thing she hears is a dull thud and a loud yelp of pain. “Nice try,” says the man.

Amy has pepper spray on her keychain. Patting her pockets, she feels nothing. Her eyes widen. It has to be in the ignition. Spinning quickly, Amy bolts towards her car.

She hears footsteps behind her, and a low chuckle.

Dropping and diving through the open window, she tries to roll over to grab her keys. Before she can, she feels pressure on her ankles and the next thing she knows, she’s being dragged out of her car on her stomach.

As she tries to claw her way forward, weight settles on her back and pins her to the ground. Something cold and round settles against her temple and she stills.

“Now,” says the man. “You make a single peep, you struggle at all, and I’ll blow your brains out.”

Amy closes her eyes. She doesn’t make a sound, but her brain is screaming. Someone, anyone, help me.



LOKI AWAKES with his cheek pressed to a cold stone slab, not sure where he is. This is not precisely unprecedented. What is strange is that he doesn’t reek of alcohol and his mouth does not taste like vomit.

Blinking his eyes, he tries to focus. There is light, wan and diffuse as though from a northern window. There is a dull pain in his left temple, and the back of his neck is in agony. That is not so worrisome.

What is worrisome is what he doesn’t see, feel, hear or taste. There is no magic in the room, no soft glow of light and shifting color, no slight tingle on

his tongue and fingertips or murmur in his ear. He might as well be a dumb beast. No, it's worse than that. Beasts have some sense of magic in their whiskers, feathers, and flicks of their tongues. He might as well be a mortal human, blind to magic, and with no magic tricks save one.

His magical abilities cannot be taken from him. But magic can be removed from a place, folded back upon itself, held back for short periods of time in places of great power. Loki knows of only one such place in all of the nine realms. Which means...

Sitting up as quickly as he can with the pain in his neck, he looks around. The room he is in is lined with dull, flat, gray stones that stretch up to a high ceiling. The light is coming from a single skylight. He knows without looking there is a door made of iron bars to his left. There will be at least one sentry on guard beyond.

He's in his home, Asgard, realm of the Aesir, in the Tower. Again. But he can't remember doing anything wrong.

Loki hears the footsteps behind him again. He recognizes them. Loki smiles bitterly. "Thor, what is the charge?"

The footsteps circle around, and there is Thor, towering above him.

"You will be told in due time," Thor rumbles. Mjölfnir, Thor's hammer, hangs at his side. But behind the shield of magic, it is just an ordinary piece of iron.

As are Loki's knives if...

Patting his body, Loki looks down. He is only in a shirt and breeches. His armor, boots and belt, and all his knives are gone.

"I don't know all the hiding places of your toys," Thor rumbles. "So I took away all the places they might hide."

Rubbing his neck, Loki winces and remembers Thor's fist connecting with his temple, and a blow to the back of his neck. "Surely I can know the charge?"

Bowing his head, Thor does not meet Loki's gaze.

Loki scowls up at him.

Thor and Loki look so alike they could be brothers. They are both red haired, though Thor's hair tends towards brown, and Loki's towards a brighter strawberry blond. Both are blue eyed, but Thor's eyes are as dark as a storm cloud, and Loki's are a pale gray. Thor has more generous features. He's slightly taller with wider shoulders, an expressive open face, prominent nose, full mouth and raging eyebrows. Loki is a bit more delicate, his chin a little narrower, and his frame leaner. Loki keeps his face clean shaven and his hair shorter — though it tends to be uneven. Thor sports a red beard, and his hair is long, though neatly groomed.

The biggest difference between them is their skin. Thor's father, Odin, leader of the Aesir, is half Jotunn, the race of the Frost Giants. Thor's mother, Jord, is full Jotunn. Despite his dominant Jotunn blood, Thor's skin is a lovely shade of gold.

Loki's skin by contrast is so pale it is nearly translucent. He does not tan. Without ointments and spells he burns. By most accounts Loki is full Jotunn. Rumors in court say his mother was Laufey and his father Fárbaumi, and he was abandoned to die as a baby after they were murdered by their own kind. There are some who whisper that while Laufey was his mother, Odin is his father, and that is why he was brought to the court when Odin found him. Whatever his origins, Loki has the ability to cast illusions like a fisherman casts line — when he has access to magical energy.

While Loki was raised by the servants of Odin and Frigga, Thor was sent away to be raised by the winged Vingnir and Hlora, and only came to court when he reached the end of his twenties. Thor and Loki were almost friends once.

That was a long time ago.

“I was told only to see you here. Not to discuss the reason for your confinement,” Thor says with vehemence that sounds forced.

“You've been following the rules since your brother Baldur died,” Loki

says, gingerly getting to his feet. Smirking, Loki says, “Don’t you think if there was any real hope of Odin granting you the crown he would have announced it by now?” Poor Thor.

“Watch your mouth, Silvertongue,” says Thor.

Silvertongue is one of Loki’s favorite nicknames. It’s better than Trickster, Fool, or simply Liar. Thor isn’t terribly mad at him. Still, Loki can feel a chill of worry creeping into his bones. Last time he was in the Tower, things did not go well. Smiling despite his fear, Loki says, “I can’t watch my mouth, it’s attached to my face. As are my eyes, which...”

It’s a gentle jibe, but Thor’s hands go to the front of Loki’s shirt and he’s shoved against the wall so hard his teeth rattle. Too winded to speak, Loki just stares at Thor’s face, inches from his own. Thor’s lips are turned down and his eyes are narrowed in anger...or in despair.

Feeling dread uncoil in his stomach, Loki whispers, “Oh, Thor. Has your daddy made you do something terrible?”

Loki knows something of the terrible things Odin would compel someone to do.

Releasing him, Thor drops Loki to the floor and backs away. For a moment Loki feels sorry for him.

From the door comes a sentry’s call. “Visitor to see the prisoner.”

Loki blinks. There are few people who would wish to see him.

Thor says quietly, “I was told there were to be no visitors...” but makes no protest as a slender form emerges with the sentry on the other side of the door.

“Sigyn,” Loki and Thor say almost at once.

The sentry’s key clicks in the lock and Sigyn, Loki’s ex-wife, enters.

Asgard is experiencing a 13th century European revival. Sigyn’s golden hair is held back by a circlet of braided gold at her crown. She wears a draping seafoam green dress. A cloak of moss green hangs back from her shoulders. But what catches Loki’s eye is a large golden pendant on a chain

around her neck. He wonders what man has given it to her, and his heart sinks a bit.

Sigyn says nothing until the lock clicks behind her. “Has Thor told you the charges?” Sigyn says.

“No,” says Loki, turning to the other man. Thor actually looks a little afraid. Pain and death are not things Thor fears. Loss of honor, on the other hand...

Odin has convinced him to do something very bad indeed.

“They’re not against you, Loki,” Sigyn says, and Loki turns sharply to her.

Lips trembling she says, “Valli and Nari have been accused of treason by Heimdall and are to be thrown into the Void.”

Valli and Nari are their sons.

Loki bites the inside of his cheek. He must stay in control; he must fight with his mind...that is how Loki always wins, the only way he wins.

But his hands are already going to Thor’s cloak. As he pulls Thor so their faces are just inches apart, the words he means to say in a low whisper come out a scream. “You swore an oath to protect my sons as though they were your own!”

In the hallway he hears a sentry running and shouting for help.

Thor’s hands go to Loki’s shirt, as though he might push him away, but he doesn’t. Instead he stammers, “Loki, I...” Thor stops, looks sideways, his hands fumbling at his belt.

Loki screams again. “Look at me when you lie to me, oath breaker!”

Thor’s eyes go to him. There is so much shame there — it verifies every horrible suspicion Loki has. His sons will perish, Loki will die unable to help them, and the mighty, valiant, honest Thor is to blame.

He isn’t thinking clearly when he tries to twist and throw Thor. Thor’s magic is partially responsible for his strength, but even without it he is bigger and stronger than Loki, more practiced at these things, and he isn’t

completely blind with rage. All Loki can see is red, and the only thing he can feel is his blood pounding beneath his skin too hot and too fast. Too quickly Loki is pinned on the floor, snarling at Thor and reaching for magic that isn't there.

And then Thor's body goes limp and slumps forward. Wrestling the large frame off him, Loki looks up to see Sigyn, Thor's hammer hanging heavy in her hands.

Loki's eyes go wide and his lips curl. A mortal might have died from even a non-magical blow from Mjöltnir, but Loki knows Thor isn't dead. Scrambling up from the floor, he moves to take the hammer from Sigyn and finish the job.

Drawing back, she scowls. "No."

Loki wants to scream, wants to argue. His blood is pounding in his ears, his skin feels too hot and too tight and their sons are going to die. Killing another one of Odin's sons seems fitting retribution.

"He let us win," Sigyn says. "Let him live."

Clenching his teeth, Loki stifles his protest.

Sigyn presses firmly at the sides of the pendant around her neck, and the casing in front springs open. Inside is a human-style wind-up stopwatch. "Is it working?" she says. "Hoenir gave it to me; Mimir said he's been devising it since the last time you were here."

Loki is about to speak, something angry and unkind, but his eyes widen instead. The stopwatch is beginning to pulse with magic.

"Yes," Loki says, coming forward.

Staring down at it, Sigyn says, "He said that it..."

"Pulls magic from out of time," Loki says in wonderment. "I see it...how?"

"We don't have time," Sigyn says. "Your armor is at the guard station. I have a hairpin; maybe you can pick the lock?"

Loki can pick just about any lock with a hairpin, but there are faster ways.

Clutching the stopwatch, he pulls the magic around him. Closing his eyes he lifts his other hand towards the door. The lock clicks and the door swings open with a creak.

Without hesitation Sigyn runs out, lugging Thor's hammer. Loki follows her into a hallway lined with empty cells. At the end of the hall is the empty guard room, a large ovoid booth set partially into a wall with glass windows on all sides.

Going forward, Sigyn says, "They found out about Valli and Nari's dream of a constitutional monarchy."

Loki's heart falls. Odin is an absolute monarch not interested in sharing his power...and most Asgardians are happy with things that way.

"You knew about that?" Loki says. He'd expressly told his sons to leave their mother out of that folly.

Glaring at him, she says, "I approve of that," and Loki looks quickly away.

As they step through the guard room door, Sigyn says, "Mimir talked the guards downstairs into letting me visit. And then he and Hoenir went back to their hut."

Loki swallows. Hoenir and Mimir have always been kind to Loki and his family, but this...

"Hoenir and Mimir will be confined to the hut until Ragnarok," he says, using the Viking word for the end times.

Glancing at him, Sigyn gives him a tight smile. This escape will spell death warrants for them all; he is not sure even Hoenir's hut can protect them. From down the corridor Loki hears the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Up ahead is a small guard room with a large window looking out at the cell block. Loki's armor and his sword, Lævatein, hang against the far wall. Entering the room, Loki and Sigyn move towards the armor as one. Without speaking, Sigyn sets down the hammer and helps Loki slip on the breastplate as he fastens his simple unadorned helmet. The helmet's most notable feature

is a visor of dwarven crystal. With magic it is shatterproof, but without magic he can't trust it to protect his eyes. He flips it up.

Loki's hands never collide with Sigyn's as they finish the fastenings. They've done this many times before. As the last buckle is finished and Lævatein is on his hip, their eyes meet.

Since Sigyn opened the stopwatch, magic has been creeping into the tower. But his armor is still not fully enchanted, nor will his knives be. It's doubtful they'll make it out alive.

Loki can't speak, and Sigyn looks quickly away.

Down the hall, a guard shouts, "Come out of there! Hands above your heads."

Darting to the far corner, Sigyn says, "Hoenir said these magic eggs were yours, and they might help us...although the guards didn't detect any magic in them..."

"Eggs?" says Loki. He has no magic eggs. Going to the door, he peers quickly out and catches sight of four guards. A crossbow arrow whistles and he pulls back in.

Crouching on the floor, Sigyn holds up a drab olive green knapsack with the words U.S. Army stenciled on top. "They wouldn't let me take them to your cell — insisted on keeping them here," she says.

Mementos from his last trip to Midgard — Earth. Loki smirks. "Throw it here."

Sigyn tosses the bag. Catching it, Loki deftly pulls out one of six 'eggs'. They are thankfully not magical, and therefore fully operational in the dampened magic of the tower. Pulling on the pin at the top with his teeth, he tosses the Mk 2 World War II era grenade down the hall.

For a moment nothing happens.

The guards chuckle. One shouts. "Your magic tricks won't work here, you fool!"

Sigyn looks at him, eyes wide. Almost too late, Loki hurls himself

towards her and covers her body with his. An earsplitting boom ricochets through the tower, and the glass in the guardroom window implodes and showers down on Loki's armor.

Getting quickly to his feet, Loki helps Sigyn up. Together they step out of the guardroom and towards the stairs, avoiding the bodies of the guards, Sigyn clutching Thor's hammer in both hands. Neither speaks.

At the top of the circular staircase, Loki takes out another grenade, swings the knapsack over his shoulder, and gestures for Sigyn to stand back.

The staircase has an echo. He hears more guards but can't tell how far away they are. The sound of his and Sigyn's breathing seems unnaturally loud.

"Loki, they were already taking Valli and Nari to the Center. There isn't much time," Sigyn whispers.

"Shhhhhh..." Loki says, trying to determine just how far away the footsteps are.

Close enough. Pulling the pin he throws the grenade at the far wall. He watches it bounce down the stairwell and out of sight. He hears footsteps, and breathing, and the grenade....plink, plink, plink down the stairs. Loki pushes Sigyn back behind him so his armor will catch any shrapnel.

"An egg?" someone says. Someone else out of Loki's line of vision shouts.

There is another explosion accompanied by the sound of falling rock, groans, and screams. And then Loki hears a telltale whistling in the air. Before he can move, or even think, Sigyn's body slumps against his, and Thor's heavy hammer falls to the ground.

Lifting his head, Loki sees a guard at the top of the stairs. His face is bloodied, and he has an upraised crossbow.

A knife is in Loki's hand and whipping through the air before he even thinks about it. There is just enough magic now that when the knife hits the guard, it explodes, and the guard crumples to the floor.

Throwing Sigyn over his shoulder, Loki looks at the hammer on the stone step. It is a powerful toy — but as soon as Thor wakes up it will rebound to his hands. Cursing silently, he turns and goes as quickly as he can down the stairs.

“Put me down,” Sigyn mutters into his back. “You have to save them, Loki. My boys...my beautiful boys.”

He’s too busy pulling out another grenade to even tell her to shut up. He hears guards mustering in the open chamber at the base of the tower. Pulling the pin just before the bottom of the stairs, he waits for the explosion and then rushes forward. Magic is thick enough in the air now for him to pull it to them and wrap them in a blanket of invisibility.

Outside the tower he sees men gathering near Sigyn’s steeds. Less well protected is Thor’s chariot. Thor favors attaching it to goats so he always has something tasty to eat, but the chariot is perfectly capable of flying on its own, and there are no goats today.

Loki slides Sigyn from his back and lays her on her side in the chariot. She is invisible to those around him, but in Loki’s eyes she shimmers and glows, as does the arrow protruding from her back. He breaks it as close to her body as he can.

“Leave me,” she whispers as he sits her up.

Glaring at her, Loki climbs into the chariot and seats himself next to her, facing the back. “To the Center,” he shouts.

The chariot rises in the air with the crackle of magic. Shouts rise up, and Loki hears the thunk of magical arrows in the floor beneath them. Flames dance near his feet as the arrows catch fire, but Thor’s chariot was designed to withstand lightning — a little fire from magical arrows won’t hurt it.

Moments later, Loki and Sigyn are whisking forward, over and through the illusions of flying buttresses and steeples that are part of this decade’s 13th century revival. There are faster ways for Loki to travel, secret ways that he alone knows. But they would leave him too drained to fight — and he

can't use them to transport others.

He'll need all his power to fight soon. He lets the invisibility spell drop.

Narrowing her eyes in his direction, Sigyn says, "Must you always make things difficult? I'm as good as dead. You should have left me!"

Her lips are horribly pale, and the color has left her cheeks. She is full Asgardian, but looks nearly Jotunn. Leave it to Sigyn to waste her last breaths berating him. Smiling with brightness he doesn't feel, Loki says, "My dear, have you forgotten that among some humans I am regarded as the patron god of lost causes?" Not that he believes he or any of the Aesir are gods.

Sigyn's head lolls to the side, and she makes a sound like, "Pffftt." She heaves a ragged breath and Loki does his best not to look concerned. "What are you planning?" she whispers, her eyelids slipping closed. "To swoop down, pick them up, and carry us all away in this bucket?"

That actually was close to Loki's plan, but he says nothing, just glares at her one more time before standing to look out of the chariot. They are close to their destination. Nearly below them is a wide plain. In it are eight circles of white stone, each about 50 yards in diameter, with wide gates and toll booths around and between them. The white circles are where the "branches" of the World Tree connect with Asgard. Not "branches" at all, they are places where the fabric of space and time tears easily, and the largest, most efficient, gateways to the eight other realms.

The white circles themselves form a larger circle around a small raised dais, its surface unnaturally dark. It is the entrance to the Void, where the Asgardians dump their trash, their spent potions, hopelessly broken magic tools, and the condemned.

Normally most of the circular gateways would be buzzing with merchants and delegates to visit and barter with the Aesir and each other. However, all the white circles and the toll booths at their peripheries are empty; instead, a crowd is gathered in the great dark circle at the center, their attention focused on the black dais.

From aloft, Loki can see Valli and Nari at the base of the dais, their blond heads bent, their hands bound at their backs. Behind them stands Odin, the staff Gungnir in his hands. A great armed host stands in a circle around Odin, Loki's sons, and the dais. A crowd of civilians from the friendly worlds mill about in a dense crowd just beyond the warriors.

"Have you forgotten the Valkyries?" Sigyn asks.

There is a stirring below among the armed host. In the distance Loki sees Heimdall, the guardian of the gates, pointing in their direction. Around Heimdall, the Valkyries, winged warrior women, rise. Bolts of fire hurtle toward the chariot from the staffs in their hands. Loki slumps down next to Sigyn.

"Actually," he says, "I did forget about them."

Sigyn takes a deep, ragged breath. Clutching the edge of the chariot, Loki tries to clear his head as they rock under the Valkyrie onslaught.

"Chariot, down!" he says. He nearly loses his seat as the chariot falls. "Gently," he cries and the descent slows. "Move to hover just above the crowd!"

As Loki suspected, the barrage of fire stops as they get close to the civilians.

"What are you doing?" Sigyn whispers.

"I can't help you," Loki says, pulling a grenade from the olive green bag. "I'm no good at healing...and this bucket will never get close enough to Valli and Nari."

He looks down. They're close enough to the ground. Smiling at Sigyn, he says, "Chariot, to Hoenir's hut!"

"What!" says Sigyn, the anger in her voice nearly blood curdling.

Loki jumps out just before the chariot takes off, and Sigyn's scream fades away. The crowd parts only enough for him to land. Straightening quickly, he holds the grenade above his head and smiles across the crowds in Odin and Heimdall's direction.

“What do you have there, fool?” someone says.

“A rotten egg,” he responds with a grin.

The crowd closes in around him. From where they stand, now on top of the dais, Loki hears Valli or Nari shout, “Father!” The crowd starts to roar, but then Odin’s voice rings out, “Let him pass!”

Odin knows Loki is no fool.

The crowd parts and murmurs. Loki walks forward, still smiling, still clutching the pin of the grenade. He is within a few paces of the dais when Odin thumps the black stone beneath his feet with Gungnir and shouts, “Stop.” The rich velvet blackness that is Odin’s magic whips out across the plain.

Loki’s legs suddenly feel like lead. He feels like the gravity in Asgard has increased by ten, as though he’s consumed vast quantities of magical energy, enough to set a world on fire. He blinks, takes a breath, and moves onward. It takes him a moment but then he realizes that the crowd is dead silent, and except for Odin and him, no one seems to be moving.

“Nice trick,” he says. An incredibly powerful trick. Odin must be using nearly all of Gungnir’s power for this. Not for the first time Loki wishes he’d never given Odin the damn thing. Loki’s eyes flit nervously to the side. Just beyond the plain he can see Odin’s raven messengers, Huginn and Munnin, soaring through the air, and he almost sighs with relief. Not everything has stopped.

He looks up to Odin. Unlike the other Aesir who all chose to appear closer to the age of 25, Odin appears to be near the human age of 50. He wears a patch over a missing eye; he purportedly exchanged that eye for wisdom. As Loki draws closer, he sees Odin’s one eye widen, as though in alarm.

Loki blinks, and Odin’s gaze is its normal steely calm. “You have something you wish to discuss?” Odin says.

Walking up and around until he stands just a pace from Odin, his back to

Valli and Nari, Loki says, "Let my sons go."

"I don't think you understand how dangerous Valli and Nari have become," Odin says, his one eye unblinking.

Scowling, Loki says, "You're wrong." They aren't strong in magic, not like Helen.

"No," says Odin. "I am not." Sighing, Odin says, "You know I will do anything to preserve the safety of the nine realms."

Loki waves a hand. "Yes, yes, I know. Even allowing the death of your own beautiful son." Tilting his head he sneers. "I'm not that selfless."

"Loki," Odin says. "There are things happening now, new passages opening between the realms that should remain closed, branches from other realms approaching ours. Asgard cannot afford to be divided by this idea they have...this democracy..."

Rolling his eyes, Loki says, "It's more of a proto-democracy, hardly a threat."

"Heimdall and the Diar demand this," Odin says, thumping his spear again. "For the stability of the realms, for order, I must do what must be done."

Loki's eyes flick to the immobilized figure of Heimdall, the "all seeing god" of order. He and Loki do not get along well.

Loki looks back at Odin. How long has he carried the weight of Odin's desire to preserve the nine realms? How long has he carried Odin's secrets? How often has he, as the Christians say, turned the other cheek...after Helen?

For Helen alone Odin owes him. "Let them go," Loki whispers. "Or you make me your enemy."

Odin blinks, and for a moment Loki imagines he sees hesitation. The other man's face softens, perhaps in compassion or understanding. Odin certainly can't be afraid of Loki. For a moment everything is worth it: obeying Odin, playing the fool, letting himself be cast as the coward, the shirker. But then Odin bangs his spear down three times and Loki feels the air

pressure behind him drop.

“Hurry and you might catch them,” Odin says, his face flat.

With a cry of rage, Loki pulls the pin from the grenade, hurls it into the air, and rushes up the stairs of the dais. The sky is already opening up to the Void, a long tear in space time, like the funnel of a tornado twisting downwards.

Loki sees Valli spin so his back is to Nari’s side, and then they are gone, sucked up into the blackness. With a cry Loki follows, dimly aware of the ring of the grenade behind him.

In the glow of starlight, and nearly spent and broken magical objects, Loki sees his sons hovering before him, their mouths and eyes open wide, Vali’s hands desperately clasped around Nari’s scabbard. They’ve never been in this place before, but Loki has. Fifteen seconds. They can survive 15 seconds in the vacuum of space. Loki tries to use the threads of magic to move towards them, for what purpose he doesn’t even know. So they can all die together?

It is the only plan he has, but as he tries to implement it, something sucks him backwards.

Loki looks down in panic. A renegade branch of the World Tree, another tear in space and time has caught him...but there shouldn’t be one here. He looks back up for an instant and sees his sons vanish. Were they pulled backwards by another renegade branch? Suddenly there is a flash of color, and then he is blinded by sunlight, gasping in hot, humid air and falling backwards to the ground.

He failed. His world is gone. Blackness overtakes him.



LOKI HEARS A VOICE, like a child’s, say, “Zd`rastvuyte,” and then, “`Kak `Vas za`vut?”

He opens his eyes. Loki has the gift for tongues, but it takes him a moment to recognize the language. A very powerful magical something is saying, “Hello. What’s your name?” far too cheerfully in Russian. He looks around — he’s in a forest on Earth. Instead of Russia, the stars overhead suggest the continent of North America. There is magic in a thick red glow around him like a mist. Whatever it is, the magic is very powerful. But there are no magical creatures on Midgard anymore, just beasts and humans, with their one, very weak, though intriguing, magical trick.

“Loki,” he says. Whatever the Russian speaking mist is, he doesn’t want to annoy it.

“You hear me, Comrade!” says the thing, still in Russian. Its voice fades; the mist dissipates.

Loki is alone on the ground. He is too filled with despair to worry about the magical Russian-speaking creature. Sitting up, he pulls up his knees, leans forward and buries his face in his hands. He sees Sigyn slumped in the chariot, he sees his sons’ terror-stricken faces in the Void flash before his eyes. He remembers the way they clung together, Valli clasping his hands to Nari’s scabbard.

...The scabbard! Nari’s scabbard. Long ago Loki gave it to him as a gift. Nari is an anglophile and the scabbard comes from that isle. It is enchanted to protect the bearer from harm. Is it powerful enough to save its bearer in the Void? Perhaps it could suspend them in time, just as Odin did to the crowd with Gungnir?

It is such a slim hope that Loki drops his hands and laughs. But he has to believe it. Not because it’s likely, but because he must believe it or he might stay here, in this spot, in this forest for a millennium.

He swallows and assesses his situation. Physically he is unharmed, but he’s very hungry. Using magic always makes him famished, and resisting whatever Odin did with his staff drained Loki tremendously.

He opens the knapsack quickly and pulls out the grenades. When he stole

the grenades he also stole C-rations for their novelty. He scowls. The C-rations aren't there. Belatedly he remembers discarding them decades ago. But there is something else, something wonderful. A small book, bound in white leather, the size of his palm. It is the Journal of Lothur. Hoenir must have packed it. Loki presses the book to his forehead and squeezes his eyes shut. More than a journal, it is a book of magic with maps of many of the secret back road branches of the World Tree. Having it is a small miracle.

Not that he can open space-time to travel any of those branches now. He is famished, and exhausted.

He sees a far off glow in the distance. Perhaps it is a human habitation where he can steal food. Climbing to his feet, he starts trudging towards the glow. There is the cry of a raven above his head, and for a moment he panics. But when he looks up at the shadows of the trees he sees only common ravens, not Odin's messengers.

He hears a roar not far away. He hasn't been here since the 1940's, but he recognizes it as the sound of a roadway. It will be far easier to travel if he walks along it. That thought is just through his mind when he trips over something. Nearly falling to the ground, he curses, and a spurt of flame rises from his hand to the treetops. In the flame's orange glow he sees an outcropping of stone rising at his feet.

His flame dissipates, and he does his best to walk around the rocks in the dark.

His brain, as it is wont to do, starts to scheme. After he gets to the human village and eats his fill, then what? How will he find Valli and Nari in the Void? No, not the Void, they disappeared before he did. To what realm? He'll have to search them all.

Swallowing, he tries not to let the enormity of the task overwhelm him. He is rather good at achieving impossible things. Even Odin will give him that. Scowling at the thought of the would-be executioner of his sons, he feels his body go hot.

From up ahead he hears the sound of tires screeching and some loud noises he can't identify. He's too hungry to be curious. He just steps onto the gravel on the side of the road. Concentrating, he creates an illusion of the attire that was popular the last time he was on this planet. His armor is still on. If anyone touches him they will feel it, but he will look like he belongs. With a deep breath he starts walking towards the lights of human habitation.

An automobile approaches him. It has a shape he's never seen before, trapezoidish, large and boxy. Thinking perhaps that the driver will give him a lift, he raises his hand. It slows for a moment, and Loki sees a flash of white hair, but then it speeds away. Loki scowls and keeps going, every step dragging more than the last.

Far up ahead the boxy, trapezoidish automobile slows and stops. Loki hears a voice in the distance and something that sounds like a growl and maybe a yelp.

A few minutes later he feels something. Something that makes every hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It's something he has not felt in centuries, the one, small, intriguing human magical trick: A prayer.

*Someone, anyone, help me.*

## CHAPTER 2



AMY LIES ON THE GROUND, one side of her face pressed in the dirt, the other side with the cold end of a gun to her cheek. She can hear her breath in her ears, or is that his breath? The guy's knee is on her back. He's silent. The hand is trembling. In fear...or...she swallows...or excitement.

Closing her eyes, she tries to remember her self defense courses she took with Grandma. The first rule was to verify that your attacker's weapon is genuine.

Licking her lips, she says, "Is that a...a...real gun?"

He laughs. "You want me to take it away from your cheek, don't you? Don't you?"

He pushes the muzzle more tightly against her, and Amy screws her eyes shut.

From the grass towards the road there is the sound of a high-pitched growl punctuated by occasional whimpering.

Fenrir! Screwing her eyes tighter, Amy desperately thinks, Fenrir, please, just distract him...

From the direction of the man's van comes another voice. "Fenrir?" Amy's heart stops. There are two guys? Oh, no.

"Who's there?" shouts the man that's holding her down. The trembling of the gun's muzzle stops and steadies.

Amy hears the snap of a twig close to her and Fenrir's pathetic growl and tiny yips a little further off.

"I'm not moving this gun from her face!" the man says.

The whimpering disappears. The high-pitched growl changes and deepens.

"What the..." her captor stutters and pulls the gun away. Amy darts into the car, rolls over and tries to yank her keychain out of the ignition, but it's jammed. Fumbling, she manages to detach the pepper spray.

She hears the sound of gunshots and the man cursing. Looking out the window, she sees an enormous wolf the size of a small pony, muzzle white with foam, crouching as though about to spring. The bullets seem to have no effect on it, and Amy draws back further into her overturned car.

And then there is a shadow over the window, a dull thudding noise over and over again, and then the sound of a crack. The deep growling is gone. There is just Fenrir's pathetic whimpering.

The shadow moves away and Amy blinks in confusion. And there, just visible in the indirect light of her headlights, is the man who was attacking her. He's face down on the ground. The white hair on his head appears slick, black and shiny. Just beyond him is Fenrir, licking her tiny jaws, and wiggling forward on her belly.

A new face pops too suddenly into the window, younger, clean shaven, with sharp features. He's wearing a fedora. "It's going to be all right —."

It's the fedora that freaks her out. Amy fires the pepper spray. In slow motion it arcs towards him in a long stream.

The stranger throws up a hand just before it reaches his face. He blinks and then screams. "Aaauuggghhhhhh!!!!"

Jumping back from the window, he shouts, "That stings!"

Unable to bear the sound of Fenrir's whimpering, Amy scoots forward and out of the car. The man is shaking his hand. He seems to be shimmering. It looks like he's wearing a fedora, a white shirt and dark, well-tailored pants

that are sort of retro looking. And it also looks like he's wearing a suit of weird armor, a sword waving at his hip.

Shaking his hand, he turns to her, "That's how you reward someone, anyone, who saves your life? Firing snake venom at them?"

He slumps to the ground, still shaking his hand. The fedora, white shirt, and black pants seem to solidify around him. "I don't know why I bothered."

A shape wriggles towards him on the ground, whimpering and wagging its body.

"Fenrir!" Amy says.

Looking in the little dog's direction, the man says, "Fenrir," his voice sounding a little far off. Still shaking his one hand, he holds his other out to Amy's dog. Fenrir tries to lick it.

Running forward, Amy holds up the pepper spray. "Don't you dare hurt her!"

The look he gives her. It is such a look of what-are-you-some-kind-of-idiot that it actually makes Amy think he really won't hurt Fenrir — or her. Also, Fenrir is licking his hand. Fenrir doesn't lick men's hands.

Fenrir is limping, actually almost crawling. Forgetting all about the stranger, Amy goes into full diagnostic mode. The angle of her leg, the way her hip is jutting..."Fenrir," she says, "You've dislocated your hip. Oh, poor Baby."

Fenrir turns to Amy and pants. She was trying to save Amy a few minutes ago...with a dislocated hip. Sitting down next to her, Amy says, "You are the best doggie in the world, thank you, thank you, thank you." Fenrir wags her body and whimpers again.

"I am so sorry about this," Amy says to Fenrir. She looks at Strange Man. "She likes you. Would you hold her front steady?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

"Hold her," says Amy, her brain going into fix-the-injured-little-creature mode.

Sighing, the man wraps his hands around Fenrir's torso.

"I'm so sorry about this, Fenrir," Amy says. "She may bite you," she says to the stranger.

Before he can withdraw his hand, Amy's already got her hands on the dislocated joint. It takes only seconds to relocate Fenrir's hip. The dog yelps pitifully, but amazingly doesn't bite. As soon as Amy's done, she wiggles and jumps into Amy's arms.

"That was well done," says the stranger.

"Thank you," says Amy. Her eyes fall on the man lying prone in front of her overturned car. The enormity of what has happened suddenly catches up to her. Looking down, she says, "And thank *you*."

"Do you have any food?" the man asks. "That would be thanks enough."

Clutching Fenrir to her chest and rubbing her sore neck, Amy looks towards her car. She has a cooler in the back seat if she can get it out, but... Her eyes fall to the man on the ground.

"I don't think you have to worry about him," the stranger says.

Amy's eyes widen and she squeezes Fenrir a little tighter.

The stranger is silent. Somewhere an owl hoots.

"Your first time to see a corpse," says the stranger softly. Amy looks quickly at him. "No," she says, "I've seen plenty in the anatomy lab."

He stares at her for a moment. His face is young, he can't be much older than she is, but his expression is weary. "Do you have food in your automobile?" he says.

Amy blinks at the non-sequitur. "Yes, in the back seat. In the cooler."

"Cooler?" he says.

Nodding her head towards the car, she says, "Just the cheap Styrofoam white box you get at the convenience mart..."

The stranger stands up quickly and goes to her car. Amy's not really paying attention to what he's doing. She thinks she hears a car on the road. Running up out of the ditch she just catches sight of a car's retreating rear

lights. She almost swears. They didn't even stop!

Putting Fenrir down, she goes back to her car and crawls through the window. The stranger is already pulling the cooler out of the backseat. It takes a while, but Amy finds her iPhone.

She tries to dial 911 but gets the no-service message.

Scowling in frustration, she stares at the man on the ground. She doesn't want to stay here, not with the dead or dying man — oh, God, should she check if he's dead? Will she be charged with manslaughter if she doesn't? Will Strange Guy be charged with murder?

Crawling out of her car, she feels for a pulse. She can't find anything and is both relieved and disgusted by the fact that she is relieved.

She has to get out of here. She begins frantically patting down the dead man's body.

“What are you looking for?” Strange Guy says.

Amy glances up to see him sitting on the bank of the ditch, a box of Life cereal between his knees, Fenrir sitting in front of him. He throws a handful into his mouth and tosses a piece to her dog.

He looks so much calmer than she feels, and it's not fair. She begins patting down the man again.

Not finding what she's looking for, she murmurs, “They're not here.”

“What?” Strange Guy says.

Amy looks up at the minivan. Getting up from the ground she runs around the corpse and out of the ditch. She lifts the latch on the passenger side door. It's open. Maybe his keys are in here. She can drive the minivan to find help.

Stranger's voice comes from close behind her. “I don't think you should go into that man's automobile.”

Ignoring him, Amy opens the glove box. There's a narrow folio in there, long and leather bound.

“Don't,” says Stranger, and his hand is suddenly coming from behind to

grab it from her. But it's too late. Amy's already opening it, and pictures are spilling out. There are pictures of women in there, but mostly of children. For an instant the pictures shake in Amy's bloody knuckles, and then she screams.

The man behind her says something, a curse or a swear or an exclamation. Whatever, he sounds shocked and horrified and the photo album bursts into flame.

Amy drops it, and the man says, "I'm sorry...I didn't..."

Some sense finally coming back to her, Amy begins to stamp out the fire with her foot. The people in the pictures...their families will need to know.

When the last of the flames are out she backs up — right into Stranger Guy's chest. He feels weird, too hard. She's in shock. Obviously. He brings a hand to her shoulder; it is warm and comforting and normal.

In the distance she hears sirens — maybe the car that drove off didn't belong to an ass after all. Stranger starts to pull his hand away. "Don't," she says, turning to him and looking up. He is really tall, maybe 6' 3" or 6' 4". She's not afraid of him anymore. She presses his hand more tightly and wills him not to go.

His jaw goes tight. And then he says, "All right, I won't."

When the man had a gun on her, she was terrified. But now, after seeing the pictures and what she almost did not escape... Her whole body trembles. The sirens in the distance get louder. Clutching Stranger's hand to her face, she begins to cry. She's safe now, she knows it. The words, "I am so afraid," are on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn't say them.

"I know. I know," the Stranger says. And in the pit of Amy's stomach she can feel it. He does understand. He does know.



*LOKI IS about eleven years old. He is in Asgard. Odin is off on a campaign in*

*the realm of the dwarfs and Loki's snuck off to play with Hoenir — Odin discourages Loki's visits to Hoenir's hut when he is home. Odin claims he doesn't want Loki disturbing Hoenir while he works. Hoenir never seems to be disturbed by Loki. In fact, Hoenir always seems happy to drop whatever he is doing when Loki comes about.*

*At the moment Loki and Hoenir are squatting in the grass outside Hoenir's hut. The hut is in a meadow between a copse of trees so high they completely shield the rest of Asgard from view. The trees are a gift from Frigga, Odin's wife and Loki's adoptive mother. She calls Hoenir's hut an eyesore.*

*Unlike all the other dwellings, buildings, and monuments in Asgard, Hoenir's hut isn't touched by any illusions that would make it conform to the current fashion for Egyptian architecture from the Old Kingdom. It looks as it always has. Made of rough wood, it leans slightly to one side. The chimney is made of natural stone and is crumbling slightly. The roof is thatch, and there are always little creatures peering out from the straw. Sometimes the creatures are recognizable, sometimes they are Hoenir's own invention — squirrels with bird beaks and peacock tails, snakes with butterfly wings, and birds with cat faces. These creatures are real, unlike the illusions created by Loki and Odin.*

*The hut normally has a glow about it, golden white, the color of Hoenir's magic. All magical beings have a color to their magic, but one can never see one's own color. Loki's been told, though, that his own magic is white, blue, orange and red — like a flame Mimir says. Or, as Odin says, because Loki is too fickle to pick a shade.*

*Loki isn't thinking about magical color, or paying attention to the denizens of the thatch. He is peering over Hoenir's shoulder and through a magnifying glass, a magical device Hoenir is holding over a small twig.*

*Hoenir, like Odin, doesn't look particularly youthful. He is balding and is a little round around the waist. Next to Hoenir is the severed head of Mimir*

*the giant, propped up on top of an overturned crate. Like Loki, Mimir is wearing a wide brimmed hat to shield him from the sun.*

*Since Hoenir is mute, Mimir speaks for him. “Now you see, Loki, the magnifying glass captures and concentrates sunlight and turns it into heat.”*

*Loki bends closer to the ground. He can see the concentrated beam of light Mimir speaks of. He waves his hand through the beam but only feels a disappointingly faint amount of warmth. The normal yellow golden glow of Hoenir’s magic isn’t present though, which means the glass needs none of Hoenir’s magic to work. That is something, Loki supposes.*

*“The way a magnifying glass captures, concentrates and transforms sunlight is very much like how magical creatures capture, concentrate and transform magic,” Mimir intones.*

*Loki nods at Mimir’s head. Loki knows about magic. Most men of Asgard don’t deign to toy with it, believing it makes them unmanly. But Odin and Hoenir are both powerful magicians, and Odin is king, and Hoenir is — Hoenir is Hoenir. Loki respects him as much as Odin. And he wants to be like them. At eleven he sees and feels magic everywhere, and is nearly as good at creating illusions as Odin. Loki gets the feeling that most people are uncomfortable with that, but Hoenir and Odin encourage his ability.*

*Looking back down to Hoenir and the magnifying glass, Loki asks, “May I try?”*

*“Ummmm...” says Mimir. “That might not...”*

*Hoenir hands Loki the magnifying glass.*

*Just as Loki takes the worn wooden handle in his grasp, he hears a loud shout, “Loki! Loki! Loki!!!”*

*Standing up in shock, Loki sends the concentrated beam of light dancing across the grass and the overturned crate Mimir sits on. In its wake, flames flare to life.*

*“Helllllpppppppppp!” shouts Mimir.*

*Dropping the glass, Loki jumps over and pulls Mimir from the rising*

flames.

“Wow,” Loki says, momentarily forgetting the shouting that distracted him. “That magnifying glass has powerful magic!”

“Ummm...no...” says Mimir. “Thank you, Loki. Turn me so that I face Hoenir.”

Loki does as he is bidden and instantly regrets it.

“Hoenir, you had to expect that would happen if Loki touched the glass!” Mimir says, his voice so accusatory Loki feels pain on Hoenir’s behalf.

Stamping out the flames, Hoenir just raises an eyebrow in Mimir’s direction.

“What? He should know!” says Mimir.

Hoenir shrugs. Mimir says, “Pfffttt to what Odin says.”

“Loki! Loki! Loki!!!” come the shouts again. Dropping Mimir on the ground, Loki spins around. “What was that?”

“What was what?” says Mimir, eyes staring at the sky.

“The voices calling my name!” says Loki. He doesn’t recognize them. They sound almost like a chorus.

From Mimir there is silence. Loki looks to Hoenir. A quiet look is passing between the man and the severed head on the ground.

Blinking, Mimir says, “I suppose we might expect you to hear them early...”

“Hear what?” says Loki.

“Close your eyes, Loki,” Mimir says. “What do you see?”

Loki tilts his head. Magic. He smiles. Closing his eyes, he finds he does see something. “I see the village by the lake from our camping trip this spring.”

“Are you sure?” says Mimir.

How could he forget the place? Odin, Hoenir and Loki had gone camping on Earth. Their trip had been interrupted by some humans. It was the first time Loki had seen the creatures. In person they were smaller and more

*pathetic than he could have imagined. It seemed horribly cruel that Hoenir and Odin hadn't gifted them with magic.*

*The humans had spoken to Hoenir and Odin at length, and then Loki had been sent home under the watchful eyes of Huginn and Munnin, Odin's ravens. Nothing more had been said of the incident.*

*The scene behind Loki's eyelids changes, and he gasps. He sees something more. "I see a man with skulls around his belt!" Loki swallows. The skulls are too small to belong to adults.*

*"Do the voices in your head...do they say anything else?"*

*Loki's eyes open. "Yes, they say the giant's body has knit itself together, and he has sent a messenger from his fortress. In the morrow he will come to claim his sacrifice."*

*Hoenir's jaw drops. Mimir's eyes go wide. Swallowing, Mimir says, "Loki, the giant calls himself Cronus. I don't think he is the Cronus; he was Greek, and Odin, well, Zeus, well...Odin sort of..."*

*Loki's brow knits together.*

*Licking his lips, Mimir says, "Anyway, Cronus is not Aesir or Jotunn, but something other. He has been terrorizing humans for generations. Last fall, Hoenir hid the boy that Cronus chose to be a sacrifice as wheat in a field — and Cronus found him. Odin disguised the boy as a swan, and Cronus found him yet again. Fortunately, Odin was able to kill Cronus."*

*Loki nods. Of course, Hoenir wouldn't have been able to kill Cronus. Loki's never heard of Hoenir killing, or even hurting, anything.*

*Swallowing, Mimir says, "Or so we thought. If what your peasants say is true, Cronus was able to reassemble himself and seeks to claim his sacrifice again."*

*"Odin must come back!" Loki says, looking to the skies. He was sure he saw Huginn and Munnin, Odin's raven messengers earlier. If he gets their attention they can alert Odin.*

*Mimir sighs. "Loki, Odin is busy saving multitudes of children. He cannot*

*come back for just one.”*

*Loki swallows. In his head the voices rise again. “Loki! Loki! Save our son! Save our children!”*

*Loki starts walking to the Center and the World Gates. “I have to go.” He feels as though the voices are pulling him by a thread.*

*“You won’t be able to use your tricks of illusion against him!” Mimir says.*

*“I’ll think of something,” Loki says. He has to. The voices in his head...*

*He hears footsteps, and then Hoenir is at his side, Mimir in his hands. “You always do,” Mimir says.*

*Loki blinks and Mimir winks at him.*

*Loki, along with Hoenir and Mimir, arrives at the village well after nightfall.*

*Even though Loki is only eleven, he is nearly as tall as the tallest man in the village — though that man is broader in shoulder, and probably stronger. The humans smell less than pleasant. Their clothes look like rags. Many are missing teeth, and some have horrible scars. He is horrified by them, and at the same time, when they look at him their hope is palpable. It makes Loki feel older, wiser, and more powerful than he has ever felt before.*

*And the boy that is to be sacrificed, Jonah...he is so small, he hardly comes up past Loki’s waist. His eyes are so wide, frightened, innocent and trusting; Loki simply has to succeed.*

*Loki scans the horizon. As he does, the old man, who had talked to Odin and Hoenir last year, says, “We have tried to fight him, but our weapons bounce off, and he is terribly strong.”*

*Loki blinks. Loki can’t make weapons bounce off of him, but he knows it takes immense concentration. A surprise to break Cronus’ concentration is needed.*

*A boathouse on the bank of the lake catches Loki’s attention. He looks at the small stature of the humans and, to his own wonderment, he does think of*

something.

*“Jonah,” Loki asks, “can you swim?”*

*The boy nods.*

*Standing taller and trying to look important, Loki begins to tell Jonah, Hoenir, Mimir, and the assembled villagers his plan. When he is done, Jonah is quaking with fear.*

*Loki bites his own lip. He is very nearly a child himself, and he can relate. Kneeling down, he puts a hand on Jonah’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. All the time you are with Cronus, I’ll be there with you.”*

*Next to him, in Hoenir’s arms, Mimir says, “Wait, now — ” but Hoenir slaps a hand over his mouth.*

*In the morning before Cronus arrives, Loki casts an illusion over Jonah so he looks like a fish and commands him to go swim in the lake. Loki knows that Cronus will eventually see through the illusion, but he needs to buy the village men some time to enact their part of the plan.*

*As soon as Jonah is in the water, Loki goes off to meet Cronus. Cronus isn’t tall for an Aesir, Vanir, or Jotunn, but he can see why the villagers think him a giant. Compared to the humans, he is immense. He has white hair and a face that is disturbingly pleasant, almost baby like in its roundness. It is in stark contrast to the belt of children’s skulls that hangs at his waist. The belt is terrifying, but what is more frightening is the blanket of magic that hovers over him.*

*Cronus doesn’t get angry when the villagers don’t bring Jonah forward. He just smiles. And then he says, “I think I will go fishing.” With that he turns around and walks to one of the boats on the shore. That was faster than Loki anticipated. Racing after Cronus he shouts, “Wait, I’ll come with you.”*

*“Of course, Little Giant,” Cronus says with a laugh.*

*When they get in the boat, Loki says, “Let me row for you, Sir.”*

*Narrowing his eyes, Cronus says, “Very well, Little Giant.”*

*Loki takes the oars and proceeds to row in the wrong direction...as slowly*

as he can.

Smiling again, Cronus says, “You’ll have to row faster than that, Little Giant, if you want your death to be an easy one.”

Loki sits bolt upright and nearly drops the oars.

Laughing, Cronus says, “Oh, come now, you’re a little bigger than I like, but you are very pretty. You don’t think I’d let you get away?”

Fear unravels in the pit of Loki’s stomach; it’s all he can do not to quake in his seat.

With a wave of his hand, the oars fly from Loki’s grasp and fall at the bottom of the boat. With another wave, Cronus sets the boat in motion again — this time in the right direction. Loki swallows. The sun is bright, and its cheerfulness feels like a mockery of Loki and Jonah’s plight.

Loki tries to confuse Cronus by illusioning schools of fish beneath the boat, and it does work somewhat. Cronus sees the fish, slows the boat, and drops the net that sat at the boat’s stern. But after a few empty hauls, he sees through Loki’s scheme. He weights the net down and dredges along the bottom.

By late morning he has Jonah in the net, and as soon as he lifts him into the boat, the illusion drops. With a gasp, Jonah runs to sit by Loki. Taking the smaller boy’s hand, Loki squeezes — not sure who he’s trying to reassure.

Cronus just smiles at them, waves a hand and the boat heads toward shore. As soon as the boat hits ground, Loki waves his hands and an illusionary wall of flame rises up in the middle of the small craft, a few hands lengths away from Cronus’ nose. Pulling Jonah from the boat, Loki yells, “Run!”

They tear as fast as they can through the shallow water, out of the bright sunlight, into the boat house. Cronus, in a frenzy, follows right behind. He is nearly on them when his head runs straight into the trap Loki had the men set for him, a spear at just the right height to hit a full-grown Aesir, Jotunn or Vanir squarely in the head.

*Dazed, Cronus takes a step back. “Now!” screams Loki. From the shadows village men come forward with axes. One presses an axe in Loki’s own hand.*

*Loki has received a warrior’s training. And he has killed animals in the hunt. But now, when he needs it most, he seems unable to fight. He just stands frozen. The human men do not hesitate. They begin furiously hacking at Cronus’ limbs with their axes, and the boathouse fills with the thick smell of blood. Loki sees a leg separate at the knee. Almost instantly it reattaches. Loki’s eyes go wide and Cronus laughs.*

*“Think you’re clever, Little Giant? I disguised how quickly I can heal from your brother, Odin! But I don’t want you to get away.”*

*With a roar he heaves one of the villagers through a wall.*

*Loki’s mind uncoils. He doesn’t know if it is fear or bravery which sets him in motion. “Keep going!” Loki shouts to the remaining villagers, running to the wall and grabbing several iron nails.*

*A villager separates the other leg with an axe, and this time, Loki stabs a nail into the severed knee, preventing a clean bond of the severed flesh. Cronus gives a cry of rage and tries to bend down to remove the nail, but the humans sense his weakness and redouble their efforts. An arm falls away, and again Loki is there, stabbing another iron nail into the wound.*

*They can’t get to the head before all the limbs are severed and the joints secured from reattachment. Cronus is unaffected by loss of blood, and he manages to throw a few more villagers off of him with the power of his mind alone. But at last, when he can barely move, when he’s just a torso and a head, he looks at Loki and his eyes open wide. “You,” he says. And then he sneers, “Plan to flush me down the river like you did your brother?”*

*Loki feels like he’s been struck. He wants to demand to know what Cronus is talking about but then a villager’s axe falls down on Cronus’ neck and his eyes go blank.*

*Loki falls back gasping. He starts to shake; he’s not sure why. He’s safe*

*now...safe...*

## CHAPTER 3



SHERIFF KEN MCSPADDEN sits in his office, the driver's license of Thor Odinson in his hand. It's an Oklahoma driver's license, just like Amy Lewis' license. The picture on this license is definitely the man who saved Amy Lewis by killing Ed Malson — a name that was soon to go down in serial killer history.

On his computer monitor Thor's license information is displayed again. It took a while to pull the record up. They had some computer problems first.

Thor's social security number checks out...but that's a little weird, too. Like the license details, before Thor's social security number cleared they had computer trouble, a flicker, an error...and then...everything was okay.

Thor's got a clean record as far as the criminal databases are concerned. McSpadden tried Googling him, too — but all he got was a comic book character.

Leaning back in his chair, McSpadden taps the armrest in agitation. It's not the comic book name, the computer glitches, or the girl's story about a wolf distracting Malson that's really putting him on edge. It's Deputy Patches, the station cat.

Patches is a very fat cat. Sometimes the officers affectionately refer to her as a bowling ball. She's famously lazy, but right now she is rubbing her head vigorously against the edge of his computer monitor. McSpadden puts the

license down. Patches begins batting it with her paw, and then chewing its edge. Abruptly she hops down from the desk and begins chasing an imaginary mouse around the room.

McSpadden sighs. Patches hasn't been this excited since they found that crazy carpet at the edge of the road. Darn thing kept rolling and unrolling, and then it would levitate a few inches off the ground before collapsing. Patches had scratched and rolled over every part of it until the thing was covered with fur.

Nix that. She had been more excited by the monkey paw. McSpadden's dogs had found it while he'd been out coon hunting with the boys. The dogs had formed a circle around it and growled up a storm. McSpadden picked it up and put it in his pocket. It had been a long evening, he was hungry, and he found himself wishing for a pastrami sandwich. Not five minutes later he and the boys discovered the hiker — dead for days, a rotting pastrami sandwich miraculously not eaten by scavengers in his hands. That's when McSpadden remembered reading a horror story back when he was a kid about a monkey's paw that granted its bearer's wishes — but at a price.

McSpadden feels a chill run up his spine at the memory. He wouldn't have put two and two together, but after the carpet incident and all the damn unicorn sightings in Mark Twain National Forest, he had the sense to bring the paw back to the station and call it in. Patches had thrown a hissing fit. She has a sense for these...weird things. Some of the boys call it magic.

“Yo, Colbert!” McSpadden calls through the open door.

Deputy Colbert tears himself away from CNN and comes into McSpadden's office. “Give this back to Thor,” says McSpadden.

Colbert opens his mouth to speak, but McSpadden points to Patches. She hops up onto McSpadden's desk again and starts rubbing her head against the computer.

Colbert's eyebrows go up at Patches' unusual display of activity. Nodding, he takes the license and leaves the office, wisely not saying a word.

McSpadden picks up Patches and carries her outside. It's 4 a.m. and still dark. He walks over to one of the cars in the parking lot and sets Patches down on the hood. She sprawls out and does what she normally does best. She sleeps.

Feeling a little more confident and a little less watched than he did inside, McSpadden pulls out his cell phone. He clicks on a contact he's never actually met, but he's all too familiar with.

After three rings the call's picked up on the other end. "Laura Stodgill here, U.S. Department of Anomalous Devices of Unknown Origin. McSpadden, what do you have for me in your vortex of weirdness?" Her voice sounds sleepy and a bit disoriented.

"You mean this shit isn't happening all over?" McSpadden says.

Suddenly sounding very alert and awake, Laura says, "I can neither confirm nor deny that. What do you have?"

"The question is who do I have," McSpadden says.

Laura sounds distressingly nonplussed by that response. "Does he or she have pointy ears or green skin?"

"Uh...no," says McSpadden.

"Speak English?"

"Yes," says McSpadden.

"Do you have a picture?"

"On my phone, sending it now," says McSpadden. He actually took it by accident when they first brought Thor and Miss Lewis into the station. Damn camera button was too easy to hit — he has hundreds of pictures of the inside of his pocket.

"Got it," says Laura, "Sending it through the proper channels. Now tell me everything that happened."

When McSpadden is done, Laura says, "Get his signed statement and go through the usual rigmarole. I'll be back to you within a few hours. Don't treat him like a criminal...he may be one of the good guys, and even if he's

not, you really don't want to tick him off.”

“What?” says McSpadden, but Laura's already gone.



LOKI SITS in a small room in the sheriff's station. Next to him is the comely wench of the extraordinary bosom who he had rescued — and the dog inaptly named Fenrir. At his feet is the knapsack. His sword is invisible at his waist. Killing the man-beast they've identified as Ed Malson would have been far cleaner with his sword, but since swords have fallen out of fashion here on Earth, it raises too many questions. Hence he settled for beating him to death with a small log.

The snake venom and hunger made him irritable, and he'd slipped out of character right after rescuing Miss Lewis. But now he sits with his shoulders slightly slumped, his face schooled into an expression of solemnity and a bit of intimidation — just like a 25ish year old man who had never killed someone and found himself in a police station would look.

He's not sure a human 25 year-old would be eating from a bag of Ghirardelli 60% dark chocolate chips — a gift from Miss Lewis — but he is so very hungry and these chips are so very good.

He looks over to Miss Lewis. Her knuckles are bandaged, but she still is tapping away at the little device called an iPhone. She's called her grandmother in Chicago and is now “texting agents of insurance.” He's learned a lot about her from the things she's babbled to the police so far. Primarily that she is of no import to this world whatsoever.

But he heard her praying, three times. Before he killed Malson when she was begging for help, when she commanded Fenrir to distract him, and afterwards, when he wanted to leave before the police arrived — he heard her asking him not to go, and telling him how afraid she was.

He understands her fear. He thought the memories of Cronus were buried

deeper, but something about Malson — his sadism, his white hair, even his baby like features, brought the memories to the surface.

He shakes his head. He hates remembering himself as so helpless and vulnerable.

Scowling, he pops another chocolate chip in his mouth. Why did he hear her prayers? None of the Aesir, or Loki, for that matter, hear all the prayers sent to them. Only some filter through. Odin believes that only requests relating to the receiver's higher purpose are heard. So she's important to Loki, in some unfathomable way. Maybe just to see that he eats something?

He looks down at the chocolate in his hands. He's too weary to World Walk right now. He might as well be here. Maybe he'll learn something about how their latest technology impacts criminal investigations. It will be very helpful if he and his boys are forced to stay on Earth for a while and need to rob banks to support themselves. Bank robbing was very lucrative for Loki in the 1940s. Granted, it was more bank burglary — no humans were harmed, or even noticed his presence. Hoenir is fond of humans, and Loki wouldn't purposely upset Hoenir.

But would his sons even accept burglary? Valli might...he is a bit twitchy, but since Nari infected him with his idealistic zeal for political reform even Valli might be repulsed by the idea of a life of crime...unless Loki somehow managed to convince him it is for "the greater good." How could any children of his be so fatally idealistic? Where did he go wrong? He warned them Odin would turn a blind eye to all sorts of mischief unless it threatened the throne.

For a moment his boys' faces, frozen in that instant in deep space, hover before his eyes and he blinks. He can do nothing right now.

To distract himself, he looks over Miss Lewis' shoulder. The small device called an iPhone has no resemblance to a phone at all. It is, in fact, a small computer that has phone-like capabilities — it doesn't work everywhere, apparently. Last time he was on Earth, computers occupied whole rooms and

had to be tediously programmed with punch cards. The boxes on the sheriff's desk are impressive enough, but this one fits in her palm. It has a calculator in it, a location device, a camera, music, flickering little games, and a way of connecting with other computers all over the world through a thing called the Internet. All these "apps" interface with a tiny keyboard that disappears and reappears at her touch. It's fascinating, and the sort of thing he could ordinarily be very distracted by.

A noise at the office door catches his attention. He looks up to see Deputy Colbert walk in. "Here's your driver's license...Thor," he says handing Loki a little card. Loki takes it and taps it against his knee; he can feel the deputy's suspicion in the air. It's actually Miss Lewis' card; Loki has made it look like it belongs to his current alias: Thor Odinson. Choosing the name of his sons' betrayer was just a little game — to tick Odin off, to test the humans, and to give himself a quiet laugh.

It turned out to be not such a great idea. Thor Odinson, that bastard, is apparently a hero in a "comic book" and "movie franchise" and they thought he was lying. Hence, stealing Miss Lewis' ID after they'd "photocopied" it — whatever that meant — and proffering it to the sheriff with an apologetic smile and a smooth excuse of "thought I lost it in the scuffle." The fake social security number he gave them wasn't enough.

They ran the license and the social security number he provided through their computers. It was an interesting challenge, making the computer screens appear as though his alias' info checked out. Fortunately, Loki can project his consciousness — even create immaterial doubles of himself if he wishes to. He hovered over their shoulders while they used their devices to pull up Miss Lewis' info. He was able to create the same screens for Thor Odinson. The magic involved put the station's cat in a happy tizzy, but he's sure the humans are oblivious to the reasons for the cat's joyful frolics.

As Colbert leaves the room with a small nod, Miss Lewis turns to Loki. "I heard you tell them that you..." Taking a breath she licks her lips. "...don't

have a permanent address. And I want you to know, if you need it, my grandmother has an apartment over our garage that isn't occupied. You're welcome to it...until you get on your feet."

Loki blinks. What an utterly naive, far too trusting offer. For some reason it puts to mind a childhood story about a wolf, a little girl and her grandmother.

...But he isn't really the wolf, is he?

Trying to keep the bemusement from his features, he says, "Thank you... Miss Lewis."

She flushes, and looks down at her phone. "You can just call me Amy."

Loki raises an eyebrow. And then, taking a purposefully loud breath, he says, "I will consider it." Smiling softly and as non-threateningly as he can, he adds, "Is there food there?"

Glancing back to him, Amy smiles...just a little, and says, "My grandmother will feel it's her duty to make sure you're positively stuffed."

Well, that sounds promising. But he doesn't want to seem too eager. He looks at the device in her fingers. "What are you searching for on your iPhone?" he asks.

"Oh," she says, turning to it. "I'm trying to find bus schedules. My car isn't going to be repaired for at least a week, and I can't stay here."

What a wonderful device! "That information could be useful to me as well," says Loki. "Perhaps I can lean over your shoulder?"

"Sure," says Miss Lewis — Amy — and Loki watches with fascination as she navigates through the iPhone's many screens.

He jerks his head up with a start when Sheriff McSpadden and Deputy Colbert come back in. Colbert has the cat in one arm.

"We're going to need to get your statements. Miss Lewis, you can stay here. Mr. Odinson, will you come with me?"

They're going to question him. He isn't surprised by this; he spent a little time with the police in the 1940s. Humans have fallen so far since the early

days when they'd just throw you a party when you killed a monster. But it can't be helped.

Nodding, he scratches his leg and uses it as a distraction to grab his knapsack. Cradling the chocolate chips in the other hand, he stands. "Of course."

As they leave the room, the cat perks its ears in Loki's direction. Walking down the hall, he hears Amy say, "He's not going to be in any trouble, is he? He saved me." It's a bit touching, actually.

The room he is taken to has no windows, only a single table with a small gray mechanical box on it, and a mirror that undoubtedly is a window to another room. McSpadden inclines his head towards a chair, and Loki sits down. He's not afraid. The sword is in easy reach, he has enough magical energy left to make himself invisible if he needs to, the lock on the door is a non-issue; and actually, he's very curious.

Before they begin to talk, the sheriff presses a button on the small box on the table and says, "We'll record this whole conversation." Loki watches with fascination as two little wheels in the box start to turn, and the man says, "You kids, never seen a cassette recorder before..."

The question and answer session that follows goes as well as these things can. Loki fabricates details of "Thor's" past from his last journey to the realm.

And then they get to the immediate present.

"So, after the trucker you were hitching a ride with kicked you out of the cab, you heard Miss Lewis call for help?" says the Sheriff.

"Yes," says Loki.

"She says Malson said he'd kill her if she opened her mouth," says the Sheriff.

For a moment, Loki thinks he's being cross examined and feels the corner of his lip start to tug upward into a cruel smile. But then he realizes McSpadden's body language is still non-confrontational. He seems

almost...confused.

Loki schools his features into a look of sympathy. “Yes.” He blinks. “She thinks she saw a wolf, too. But...” he shrugs. “There was only her little dog. She is understandably distraught.”

“Yes,” says McSpadden. “The wolf...”

There is a knock at the door, and McSpadden excuses himself from the table. The door opens and Colbert is there with the cat. “She’s clean, but Patches didn’t like the dog. Thought you might like her...”

Before Colbert can finish the sentence, the cat launches itself out of his arms and walks over in Loki’s direction, tail swishing madly back and forth.

Loki’s eyes go up to the two men in the door. Both of their mouths are slightly agape.

“Do you want me to stay?” Colbert whispers.

They know the cat senses magic! But how have they even come in contact with magic before? Loki closes his eyes a moment. Of course. The same branch of the World Tree that sucked him here from the Aesir magical dump. They’ve had other things drop in...possibly very unpleasant things.

Loki looks back to Patches. Holding out a finger, he says, “Here, Patches, no need to worry. The Sheriff and I are just having a little chat.” Patches approaches Loki slowly. She sniffs his finger carefully, and then rubs her head against it.

Loki looks up to McSpadden. The Sheriff straightens. Loki restrains a smile.

“I’ll be alright, Colbert,” says McSpadden.

Loki tilts his head. As the door closes and McSpadden sits down again, Loki projects a warm cloud of warmth around his hand. As he expects, Patches’ caution quickly evaporates. She begins purring and rubbing her head and body against his fingers.

With a smile Loki reaches down and puts her on his lap, settling another warm bubble of air around her. Patches lies down on his knee and begins

purring loudly, kneading her claws, and staring in McSpadden's direction. Cats are utter whores for a warm lap.

Loki can't restrain his smile. "You have more questions?"



IN THE INTERROGATION room McSpadden's phone buzzes with a text message. He looks down. It's from Laura Stodgill. He carefully peeks at it beneath the table.

*Positive match. In discussion as to what to do. Don't make him angry.*

Well, that's comforting. Tilting his head, he looks back up to Thor.

"...and so you are on your way to the Dakotas to take part in the oil boom," says McSpadden. It's plausible; in fact, out in the main lobby CNN has been running a show about just those very jobs this evening. McSpadden scowls — is that a coincidence?

"That's right," says Thor. Popping a chocolate chip into his mouth, he smirks slightly. It's a smirk that says, I know you know I'm lying, and it doesn't bother me at all. In Thor's lap Patches is rubbing her head against his stomach, purring so loudly that McSpadden knows the tape recorder is going to pick it up.

On the one hand, he's glad she's not hissing. On the other hand, he can't even imagine he's in charge of the situation here.

Before Patches came into the room, Thor had every appearance of a vaguely disoriented, slightly frightened young man who had almost inadvertently saved a young woman from terrible tragedy. As soon as Patches started acting up, he seemed to pick up exactly on what was going on. Apparently he decided a facade wasn't worth maintaining anymore.

Now Thor sits straight up, eerily light blue eyes focused down on McSpadden. McSpadden isn't a small guy at 6' 2", but Thor's got a couple of inches on him. Thor isn't cocky, not like a petty thief. No, he's confident, like

he knows he can get up and leave at any moment; he's just playing along because this is some sort of amusing game to him. Before the weirdness in McSpadden's neck of the woods he would have written Thor off as crazy. Now with Laura's response, and Patches' response...McSpadden sighs. Ah, for the good old days.

"I don't suppose you have any idea how the pictures caught on fire?" McSpadden says.

Thor's jaw goes hard. "They were very disturbing."

Which isn't an answer but is definitely true. McSpadden had gotten to the point in his job where he thought he couldn't see anything worse than he already had. He'd been wrong.

"Well," says McSpadden. "We'll need to type this out, and then have you sign it and then..."

Thor raises an eyebrow.

...and then normally it would be McSpadden's call to decide whether the guy should stay or go.

Frustrated, McSpadden turns off the tape. Thor blinks and bends over to look closer at the cassette player. It's the first time since Patches came in that he looks even slightly less than in complete control.

Thor looks up at McSpadden and straightens. "You have no say over my being allowed to stay or go, do you?" says Thor.

McSpadden rubs his eyes. He should lie, but frankly, he's a little fed up — fed up with not being in charge of what went on at his station, and fed up with the Department of Anomalous Devices of Unknown Origin for not filling him in on what the Hell is going on.

"Nope," McSpadden says.

Thor cocks his head. "Thank you for that bit of honesty." He reaches a hand into the bag of chocolate chips, and then scowls down at it. Picking it up, he peers inside and the scowl intensifies.

And suddenly McSpadden has a bit of a quantum leap. Maybe The

Department of ADUO won't talk to him, but maybe Thor will.

"I was told to be nice to you, though," McSpadden says.

Thor looks up.

Standing up, McSpadden says, "While we get this and Miss Lewis' statement typed up, you're welcome to have breakfast with us."

Thor's eyes widen. "I would appreciate that, Sheriff."

McSpadden smiles at his own guile. "Just bagels and cream cheese — maybe some lox if Sherrie is feeling like going all out." Patting his stomach he says, "Gotta fight the stereotypes."

Thor just blinks at him.

"Come on," says McSpadden, opening the door.

Thor puts Patches down and walks with McSpadden towards the break room, Patches at their feet.

"I don't suppose you can tell me where you're really from?" McSpadden says.

A mischievous smile comes to Thor's lips. "I already have."

McSpadden can sense he's not going to get any more of an answer than that. Instead of pressing he says, "Could you at least tell me when the weirdness will stop? The carpet was kind of funny, but the monkey's paw..."

Thor stops walking, and his eyes widen. "You found a monkey's paw?"

McSpadden nods.

Shaking his head, Thor says, "I knew there had to be at least four of them..." He eyes McSpadden. "What did you do with it?"

"Gave it to the proper department," says McSpadden.

Thor's jaw goes hard. "And you'll give me to the proper department?"

McSpadden's stomach drops. He swallows.

Thor's eyebrow quirks. "You mentioned breakfast?"

McSpadden nods and starts leading him down the hall again. "I suppose I shouldn't worry about the unicorns..."

"Unicorns? There shouldn't be unicorns." Thor says.

McSpadden shrugs. “We’ve had a couple of sightings. I suppose they are harmless enough.”

Thor stops abruptly and takes McSpadden’s arm so quickly McSpadden spins around. Expression very serious, Thor says, “Sheriff McSpadden, in deference to your honesty with me I will tell you this. Unless you are especially pure, never, never, think a unicorn is harmless. If you value your life.”

“Uh....” says McSpadden looking at the hand.

Dropping his arm, Thor turns his head and sniffs. “Do I smell smoked fish?” Without waiting for McSpadden to take the lead, he heads straight to the break room and McSpadden jogs to keep up. Miss Lewis is already sitting there with Colbert. She’s reading over a statement in front of her. Her dog, Fred, or something, starts growling at Patches and the cat takes off. Amy looks up at Thor. The man’s face suddenly takes on the look of bewildered young man again and he nods at her. “Are you alright?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, smiling softly and then turns back to her statement.

“I’ll get your statement for you in a few minutes,” says McSpadden.

Thor looks at McSpadden and gives him a wink.

McSpadden blinks. Thor is definitely dangerous. Clenching his jaw, McSpadden remembers the half burned pictures from Malson’s van...and other things they’d found in the back.

Being dangerous isn’t the same as being evil. Turning on his heel, he leaves the room.

When he comes back Colbert and Miss Lewis are gone. Thor is sitting with his feet up on the table, munching on a bagel with lox. Patches is on the ground, pawing at his lap.

“Where — ” says McSpadden, looking around the room.

“Miss Lewis had a bus to catch,” says Thor.

“Well — ” McSpadden starts to say, when his phone starts to buzz with another text.

He picks it up. It's from Laura. He clicks on it.

*Word on high is he's the good guy. He's free to go. Jameson furious.*

McSpadden scowls. Jameson is the director of ADUO — how can anyone be higher than him?

Thor's voice comes from just over McSpadden's shoulder. "Well, that is interesting."

McSpadden jumps away fast and turns. He almost draws his gun.

Thor takes a bite out of his bagel and looks towards the window, his face vaguely contemplative. "The good guy," Thor muses aloud.

McSpadden goes over and picks up Patches. She is utterly uninterested in his phone — so the message from Laura is not just enchanted...or magical...or whatever. Wiggling out of his arms, she hops to the ground and runs over to Thor.

Smirking at McSpadden, Thor picks up a bottle of water off the break room table and takes a swig. "Sheriff McSpadden, I thank you for your hospitality, but waiting for my statement at this point would be superfluous."

"Uh, I gotta keep you here until you sign it," McSpadden says, straightening. "Procedures and all that."

Rolling his eyes, Thor says, "Remember what I told you about the unicorns."

And then he disappears. McSpadden looks around the break room. The bagels, cream cheese, and lox are all gone, too. For a brief few moments Patches does an impression of a whirling dervish, running like mad in circles. Then she stops abruptly in a beam of morning sunlight, licks her back once, and promptly lies down and goes to sleep.



LOKI MAKES himself and all the food in the break room invisible. Holding the bagel he is eating between his teeth, he stuffs the rest into his knapsack, right

in front of McSpadden. Patches hops madly around his feet. He's a little worried she'll try to follow him, but when he runs for the door she doesn't pursue.

He exits the station, the door swinging on empty air behind him. He glances at the sky. Not a raven in sight — Odin's messengers or otherwise, but he remains invisible anyway. Seeing Amy and Deputy Colbert in the distance, he runs to catch up. His hunger is nowhere near sated, and it takes more effort than he expects.

Amy is just stepping up the bus' steps when he can't bear the strain anymore. He drops the invisibility and gasps for breath. Fortunately, he's behind Amy, the deputy has already turned away, and the bus driver's facing away.

Amy spins with a start.

"Thought I'd take you up on your offer," he says, swallowing and trying to appear pathetic and non-threatening. The effect may be slightly undone by his heavy breathing.

Her mouth opens. For a minute he thinks that maybe his illusion of Earth fashion has dropped, but he looks down and it's still there. Then in his mind he hears, *Please don't be a bank robber or anything*. The fact that he hears her is disturbing; the fact that she's praying that he doesn't rob banks is very disturbing.

"All right?" he says slowly, not sure if he is agreeing not to rob banks, or asking if her offer is still good.

She swallows. "Do you need me to buy you a ticket?"

He winces.

The bus driver says, "Buy it for him online when you sit down! We've got to get a move on!"

"Okay," she says. From a shapeless bag on her shoulder, Fenrir gives a happy yip.

"Is that a dog in there?" says the bus driver.

“No!” say Amy and Loki in unison, quickly hurrying up the steps.

As they settle into their seats which are a might bit cramped, Amy complains about being in a “cattle car.” Loki says nothing. He actually thinks the vehicle is fairly amazing. It’s not one of the litters of Odin’s wife, Frigga, and the seats are not proportioned for someone his size, but even with his legs splayed wide, one knee awkwardly out in the aisle, it is much more comfortable than a horse.

His brain churns with questions. Why did Odin’s spell leave him so drained? And how did he escape it? How is he the good guy? Could they possibly mistake him for the real Thor? And unicorns... How in the nine realms are they slipping over here? They certainly didn’t come from Asgard’s orbiting garbage heap.

He closes his eyes. He should pull out his book and look for branches of the World Tree in the vicinity of Chicago.

Instead he falls asleep.

## CHAPTER 4



MAYBE IT IS the steady hum of the engine. Maybe it is that there are people all around. Or maybe it is just exhaustion. Whatever, even though Amy wouldn't think it possible, in the bus, just a little before St. Louis, she dozes off. She wakes up with a start, vague memories of darkness and Ed Malson in her mind.

She takes a breath. Fenrir pushes her nose out of the bag in Amy's lap and licks her hand. Amy pats the dog's head. She is safe. Thor Odinson saved her. She rubs her eyes. His parents must be lunatics for giving him a name like that. Lunatic parents may be something they have in common. Thinking about Thor, she blinks. Wincing from the pain in her neck, she rolls her head to look at him across the aisle. Her eyes widen. Thor's head is bent down against his chest; his eyes are closed. He's shivering, his lips are moving, a scowl is on his brow. She can tell instantly he is having bad dreams, too.

But that isn't what's making her eyebrows touch her hairline.

He's wearing armor. What looks like the handle of a sword is poking out of the knapsack that sits on the floor between his feet.

Another passenger walking by looks down at him and blinks and then walks back to his seat, a confused expression on his face.

Amy's heart starts to beat fast. This is too weird. Not just that he is wearing armor, but that he was dressed like a rock-a-billy, hipster, wannabe

when he got on the bus. Where did he stow the extra clothes? Not in the little bag. But she saw the armor before, didn't she, when she hit him with pepper spray?

Her train of thought is interrupted when Thor whispers something strange and guttural. Fenrir pushes herself out of the bag, runs across the aisle, and hops into his lap.

Amy looks up and down the aisle. No one seems to have noticed. She looks at Thor. His eyes are blinking open. Fenrir pants on his face and his head jerks up, in surprise or because Fenrir's breath has been especially bad since the road kill incident.

Raising an eyebrow, he puts a hand on the wiggling Fenrir. "Hello beast that looks like a dog," he says in the proper East Coast tones she first noticed in the police station, when the shock of everything had started wearing off.

...or maybe the shock didn't wear off. He's wearing armor.

The Art Institute of Chicago has some suits of armor from the middle ages. They look like barrels with metal tubes for feet and arms. What Thor is wearing is very different. It fits like a second skin. It seems to be a dull metal that picks up the colors around it — it almost blends into the seat. There is a chest plate, and some interlocking horizontal strips about the width of a finger that fall to his belt. The same thin strips rise up his neck. There are more plates around his legs and arms, between them more of the interlocking finger-width pieces of metal.

Thor glances at her. His eyes open a little bit when he sees she's awake, and then he looks back to Fenrir, who has rolled over on his lap. Wrinkling his nose and scowling a bit, Thor gingerly scratches Fenrir on the chest with a finger.

Thor is very pale, and at the moment very scruffy, his hair is disheveled, and it looks like he hasn't had a shave in days. His face is narrow, and his features are somewhere between sharp and delicate. He's definitely not unattractive, but you wouldn't mistake him for the rugged actor who plays his

namesake in the “Thor” movie franchise.

She stares at him. As he scratches Fenrir, the armor makes no sound at all. She would expect the metal to clink or something.

Turning to her, Thor scowls a little bit. “Is something wrong?”

Amy opens her mouth, but no sound comes out.

“Yes?” he says tilting his head.

Biting her lip, she points at him. “Ummm...” she says. “You’re wearing...armor. Kind of weird SWAT meets elven Lord of the Rings armor.”

His eyes go wide and he looks down. Almost to himself he says, “Well, that’s never happened before..”

“Am I still asleep?” Amy says. “Is this a dream?”

He looks at her and the corner of his lip twitches. Tilting his head he says, “You are dreaming.” Reaching down into his knapsack and pulling out a bagel, he says, “Close your eyes. Enjoy the comfort of this magnificent vehicle.”

That doesn’t help the moment feel real. “It’s a bus,” she says.

He scowls a little. “I know that.”

“It isn’t magnificent,” she says. And it brings back bad memories of other bus rides she’s had to take.

He blinks. “Go to sleep. When you awake, I will be wearing the normal attire you saw me in earlier.”

“It wasn’t normal.”

“What?” he says, brows rising.

“It was totally retro, 1950s-esque,” Amy says.

His mouth twitches. “Was it really so conspicuous?”

“Well...” Amy says. “Sort of... I mean some people wear that kind of thing, but it isn’t precisely normal.”

He stares at her a moment, and then he says, “Go back to sleep. When you open your eyes I’ll be totally retro again.”

Amy settles back against the seat, takes a breath, and closes her eyes. Someone says, “Is that a dog?!” in a very accusatory tone.

Amy’s eyes bolt open to see an older man glaring down at her lap. Her fingers tighten around Fenrir. “Ummmm...” she says.

The man backs up. “Oh, I must have been mistaken.”

Amy looks down. In her lap is a shaggy gray teddy bear that looks immobile — but she feels a wiggling Fenrir in her fingers.

Amy looks across the aisle. Thor is wearing retro clothing again. “You are dreaming,” he says softly.

Staring at the seat in front of her, Amy scowls. “That is the logical explanation.”

She doesn’t feel safe anymore. She has this horrible feeling that she didn’t escape Malson, that she is dying in a ditch somewhere and her brain is making up this long dream to save her from the pain.

“Close your eyes,” he says.

She doesn’t want to know if this is real or not. Squeezing her eyes shut, she says, “I’m not opening them until we reach Chicago.”

“Shhhhhh...” he says softly. “When you wake up, things will return to normal, and when they’re normal you’ll know you’re safe.”

His voice sounds so confident, so sure, as though he knows exactly how she’s feeling.



*THE VILLAGERS PICK up the pieces of Cronus’ body. They laugh and smile. Loki is still sitting on the floor of the boathouse, arms wrapped around his knees. Hoenir and Mimir haven’t entered yet. Both of them would have been useless, of course.*

*A villager comes up and hands Loki a flask of something. Patting Loki on the shoulder, he flashes a smile missing several teeth. “Well done, Loki!*

*Drink this.”*

*Loki takes the flask; it smells strongly like alcohol. Loki’s had watered down mead before, but not often. Frigga’s handmaiden, Eir, is talented in the healing arts. Eir has Frigga convinced that alcohol is particularly harmful for young developing minds and livers.*

*Odin says in his day everyone drank. Brusquely taking the flask, Loki takes a long swig.*

*It burns, and he has to fight hard to keep it down. The man laughs again. “We are burning his body, building you a throne, and will kill a calf in your honor! Come! Celebrate with us.”*

*He pats Loki on the shoulder and offers him a hand up. Loki accepts and tries to hand back the flask.*

*“You keep it!” says the man. “You’ve earned it.”*

*Loki looks down at the flask. He knows as soon as he exits the boathouse, Hoenir will take the drink from him. That seems unmanly. Tipping the flask back, he proceeds to drain it, even though tears run down his cheeks and some of the liquid runs down his chin. When he’s done, he wipes his chin and hands the flask back to the villager.*

*Eyes wide, the villager says, “You are a god.”*

*Loki smiles triumphantly. Suddenly humans are streaming into the boathouse, men, women, and children. They throw their arms around Loki and then hoist him onto their shoulders. Warmth spreads through Loki, and he sees Hoenir and Mimir over their heads and waves happily.*

*Soon the bonfire is roaring, and Loki is sitting on a rough chair that is too wide for him. They call it a throne. He would call it branches, but he smiles, and the villagers smile, and it’s all like a wonderful dream. He calls the little boy Jonah over to sit with him, and the villagers seem to think that is hilarious and fantastic. They bring over some weak beer; Jonah accepts it readily, so Loki does too. Nearby Loki hears Mimir say, “Well, I suppose one little drink won’t hurt him...”*

Soon after, there is food and more beer, and then there is music and dancing around the fire. Hoenir and Mimir try to pull Loki away, but Loki tells them something to the effect of, “in just a minute,” and dives into the dance with the villagers. Someone must have thrown some new kindling on the fire just then because the flames seem to rise halfway to Asgard. Or maybe he is just drunk. But he is happy. And after today, and the boat, and Cronus, and staring into the faces of the humans around him who are so kind, so fragile, so mortal, and who love him so much it is almost a physical pain...

Someone hands him another flask. Hoenir is nowhere in sight and he takes a long swig. He spins around the fire with the humans and the flames leap.

It is dark when someone says, “Loki, our God of Gods!”

Laughing and quite drunk, Loki stands upon the throne. “No!” he shouts. “I am the God of Fire!” The fire chooses that moment to send a shower of sparks into the air. The villagers howl in delight. “The God of Spirit,” he says, shaking the flask. The villagers laugh again. “And...” A group of three young girls standing near him giggle. It’s not like Loki hasn’t noticed girls before, but at that moment it seems for the first time he really sees them. They look so soft, so inviting...and what they are inviting him to isn’t so vague and abstract anymore. “...girls,” he says. Jumping from the throne, he takes a spinning step in their direction. A piece of wood in the fire breaks with a thunderclap, and the villagers gasp.

A heavy hand comes down on Loki’s shoulder, stopping his spin. Somehow he knows without looking who it is, and the dream-like quality of the night comes crashing to an end. He feels his cheeks going red with embarrassment. He also feels an odd sense of relief, as though if that hand weren’t there he might spin so fast he’d leave the ground.

The music stops. A hush comes over the villagers. Only the fire is still crackling. Odin’s voice rings through the night. “The God of Mischief is

*more like it!”*

*Loki’s legs crumple beneath him, and there is some laughter from the villagers that sounds far off and uncertain. Before he hits the ground, Odin catches him. Hoisting Loki up in his arms, Odin cradles him like he would a babe, or a woman. Loki scowls. And then he realizes if Odin did throw him over his shoulder like a proper warrior, he would probably throw up.*

*“Come on, Loki,” Odin says, not unkindly. “We’re going home.”*

*Loki smiles and waves at Jonah, and the villagers, and the girls. He is embarrassed. A little. Or maybe a lot. He is too drunk to properly gauge the emotion.*

*And Odin coming to spoil his schemes is so normal...he suddenly knows at last he is safe.*



WHEN THE BUS drops them off at the intersection of Canal and Lake Street, Loki’s head immediately turns to the south east and downtown. Chicago is hot, sticky and tall. Very, very, tall. Across a dreary parking lot and the river, skyscrapers tower. It’s all he can do to keep from gaping. Every single building seems to be as tall or taller than the Empire State Building. And nearly all of them seem made of glass. Some of the windows are darkened, but others are bright mirrors that reflect the large white clouds in the Midwest sky — they seem to Loki to be gigantic moving canvases. And to think they’re all solid, and real, not dependent on illusions like the buildings of Asgard.

“Yes,” says Amy. “Lovely parking lot. You can see the pollution on the horizon. But it’s Chicago. What can you do?”

Loki blinks. There is a bit of haze low to the ground, but... “It’s cleaner than I remember,” he says. And it is certainly cleaner than Victorian England. For a place that doesn’t have a Void to dump the garbage from their misspent

magic, Chicago is doing rather well.

“Huh,” says Amy. “Let’s catch a taxi.”

She holds out a hand, and a white vehicle that is very similarly shaped to the chariot of her would-be-abductor screeches to a stop.

As Amy and the driver wrestle her bag and a rather large trunk into the back, Loki slips into the interior. It is blessedly cool inside. He stops and peeks between the seats to the front. The dashboard is alight with glowing numbers. One is clearly the time, another is the temperature, but all the others are completely incomprehensible. He blinks. Computers are everywhere.

The buildings, the computers — Earth is turning into a place that is almost magical. It temporarily makes him forget about the hunger that is beginning to gnaw at his stomach and the exhaustion tugging at his limbs. Odin’s spell to stop time drained him more than he thought possible — how Loki resisted it is a mystery.

He shakes his head. He won’t solve that puzzle now. Leaning forward, he tries to get a better view of the numbers on the dashboard.

The driver and Amy slip into the car and put on their seat belts. “814 N. Hermitage,” Amy says and the cab driver steps on the gas so fast Loki falls backwards in his seat. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Amy staring at him with a look of pure confusion on her face. Even Fenrir is cocking her head in his direction. For a moment he thinks that his illusion of totally retro clothes has fallen again, but he checks, and it’s still there.

As they speed away from the center of the city along Chicago Avenue, the buildings get noticeably lower. Many are also noticeably older — two and three story row houses of stone and brick that are visibly sinking into Chicago’s soft soil. These familiar buildings are interspersed with newer abodes with tremendous windows that can’t be sensible for temperature regulation or for warding off potential intruders. It really is a good thing that Asgard put a stop to the Jotunn plans for a new ice age on Earth — and took care of the troll situation.

As they drive further west along Chicago Avenue, shops and restaurants begin to appear. Many of the names are in Spanish, and Loki notices a great many people who seem to be of South American descent walking among the natives of European and African origin.

They turn up a green, leafy street. About a third of the houses seem to be very new, a third are old and decrepit, and a third look old but lovingly maintained.

Amy says, "This is good," and the cab stops so fast that Loki braces his hands on the front seat.

The cabbie, who had been so solicitous when Amy got into the cab, doesn't do much more than throw Amy's bags on the street after she pays him. As he speeds away, Loki watches as she tilts the trunk up and tries to drag it while simultaneously trying to heave a large cylindrical cloth sack.

It occurs to him that he's probably supposed to help. He is from Asgard. Centuries ago, Asgardians would occasionally take humans as servants. It never works the other way around... But plenty of Asgardians have mocked Loki for his lack of pride before.

"May I help you?" he asks solicitously.

Shaking her head, she says, "No...that's okay...I can manage it." Dragging the trunk along the ground, she bumps into the curb and nearly topples over. The trunk and the bag fall to the street.

He tilts his head. She seems to know her Norse mythology, so he says, "Don't be such a Valkyrie." The winged warrior women are always so touchy.

"What?" she says. Apparently his gentle jibe didn't translate well. Rather than explain, he just bends down and grabs the trunk by both ends.

"Don't..." she starts to say, coming forward.

He swings it over one shoulder with ease.

"It's heavy," Amy says, touching his free arm before he can move away.

She stops and looks down. He looks where her hand is. She feels his

armor, even if she can't see it. Her gaze meets his and her brows come together.

He's saved from having to say anything by the sound of a woman's voice. "Amy! Amy!"

They both turn to see an old woman coming down a narrow walk from an old brick two-story house of the lovingly maintained variety. Ivy climbs nimbly up the walls and spills out over the yard.

Loki tilts his head. He isn't used to the elderly. Their wrinkled papery skin and white hair remind him pleasantly of gnomes, but the old have a brittleness to them that gnomes don't share. Aging seems such a terrible affliction.

The old woman is wearing a dress that wouldn't be out of place last time Loki was here, but she wears the same leather-like shoes with stripes and laces that Amy wears.

She wraps her arms around the girl and Fenrir begins yipping up a happy storm.

"I'm so glad you're home! Don't ever travel alone again! Take a plane, take a train, take a bus!" the old woman says.

"Oh, grandma, it was a freak incident..."

Pulling back, the woman says, "Don't go quoting me statistics about lightning strikes and how unlikely this is ever to happen to you again. It happened once! That's enough."

"Grandma..." says Amy.

But the old woman is coming towards Loki, arms outstretched. "You're the man who saved my darling granddaughter!"

Loki's eyes widen. She'll embrace him. Loki's not squeamish about physical contact with humans, unlike some Asgardians...Asgardians like Heimdall, that stuck up stickler for protocol and station, but she'll feel Loki's armor. Picking up Amy's remaining bag, he says, "Careful, I don't want to drop these on you."

She stops and closes her hands together. She beams at Loki. His head roars with the sound of She's all I have left in the world, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Loki blinks. More human prayers in his head? But the saving of lives is done. This is so very odd.

Despite the torrent in Loki's mind, all the old woman says is, "Oh, yes, of course." But she continues to smile at him, and something in his gut constricts. He's always thought of prayers as a weak trick, but he's beginning to think they're deceptively powerful. He's not sure he likes it.

"Thor, this is my grandmother, Beatrice," Amy says.

Shaking her head, Beatrice says, "Such an unusual name. My late husband would have loved it." And then turning she says, "I hope they lock up that horrible Malson man and put him away forever."

Loki looks at Amy. Apparently she hasn't been entirely truthful with Beatrice. Catching his gaze, Amy winces and holds a finger to her lips. Loki raises an eyebrow. There was a time on Earth when even grandmothers would have reveled gleefully in stories of heroics, no matter how gory.

Up ahead Beatrice says, "Come inside out of the heat!" and waves them both up the narrow walkway. "I can have food on the table in thirty minutes. Everything's ready; I just have to heat it up."

Mouth watering at the word food, Loki follows them in. Looking very uncomfortable, Amy says to him, "Um, if my bags are too heavy you can put them down..."

He's tired. He's hungry. But they're not heavy. "Where do you want them?" he asks.

Amy jumps a little at the sound of his voice. Being hungry always makes him cranky; it's beginning to show, evidently.

"This way," says Amy. He follows her up a narrow staircase to a small sleeping room.

Setting them down on the ground, he says, "Whatever your grandmother

is cooking smells deli— ”

A tiny ping rings through the room.

He stills at the sound.

Ping.

There it is again, and the most infinitesimal of pressures on his back. Scowling, he spins around. Amy has her fingers outstretched, a guilty look on her face. It takes him a moment but he puts it together — she pinged his armor with her finger.

“What do you want?” he says, the words coming out harsher than he intends.

Backing up a little, Amy looks down. “To know I’m not dreaming.”

Loki sighs and rubs his eyes.

Ping. Ping.

He feels a light pressure now on his lower arm.

He opens his eyes and Amy has her fingers outstretched again. This time she doesn’t look guilty. Just confused.

“You shouldn’t go ping,” she says. “I have to be dreaming.”

He stares at her a moment, beyond irritated. He’s saved her life, sat through a tortuously long questioning session, carried her bags for her — and he’s hungry. Yet she has the gall to question her good fortune, to question him, and to ping his armor.

He suddenly has the desire to be a little cruel. “You’re not dreaming,” he says. Dropping the illusion he stands before her in his armor. “Does this help?” he says with a smile.

“No!”

The sound of footsteps on the stairs makes the girl turn her head. “Change back,” she says. “Don’t frighten my grandmother.”

Loki would rather not frighten anyone who will feed him. He slips back into the illusion of “totally retro” clothing.

Beatrice comes around the corner, a stack of linens in her hand. Loki

smiles benevolently at her.

“Amy, why don’t you show him the spare room?” Beatrice says.

Taking the load from her grandmother, Amy says, “This way.”

As she leads him out of the house, Loki looks up at the sky. He sees no sign of ravens, the spies of Odin. He doubts Heimdall can see him. Heimdall has to know where to look first. Just in case he puts on his helmet, disguised as a fedora, before he follows her across the tiny lawn and into an alley behind the garage. Amy unlocks and lifts the garage door. Inside, off to one side, is a large vehicle. It reminds him vaguely of a Jeep.

Amy leads him past the vehicle to a door. She unlocks it and says, “It’s a little inconvenient,” and then leads him up a flight of stairs. Every step upward the heat becomes more and more oppressive.

Loki lets the illusion of Earth clothing drop again. It’s a game, and she started it.

At the top of the stairs she turns around and jumps at the sight of his armor. She does have one of the lovelier bosoms Loki has seen on this or any other world, and the bounce does rather nice things. He smirks.

Thrusting the pile of linens at him, she says, “Here.” And turning around again she walks into a medium-sized room. There is a bed in one corner, and a couch. “The shower is that way,” she gestures towards a door, “And the swinging door takes you to a kitchenette. I think there are glasses. There isn’t any food, though. Do you need me to show you how to turn on the air conditioning?”

That’s it? No more questions?

...Air conditioning?

He is a Frost Giant, and the room is rather uncomfortable, even if his armor does have some temperature control.

“I would like help with the air conditioning,” he says.

She walks over to a boxlike thing in the window, plugs it into the wall, and shows him how to operate the dials. And she hands him some keys, and

walks towards the door. Just before leaving she turns. “See you in about 20 minutes.”

He tilts his head and looks down at his armor. He blinks. “You’re not bothered?”

Her eyes go wide, and she looks down. “I’m probably going crazy and dying at the bottom of a ditch somewhere, but you know, this is an interesting dream, a better dream than that reality, and you’re responsible, so I’m grateful and I’m just going to go with it until I wake up...” She swallows. “Or not wake up...or whatever.”

Well, now he actually feels like a heel. And a little foolish. Really, she’s quite lovely and just his type. Although he’s currently not in the mood, he certainly has no issue with indulging in passing carnal pleasures with a human. No use burning bridges.

Going forward, he takes her hand. “Miss Lewis,” he says in his calmest, most reassuring, most courtly tone — he is in armor, no use disguising his origins anymore. “You are not dying. You are home, you are safe, and the gentleman from the forest is no more. I do regret that my lapse in control has caused you to doubt this. If I believed it were prudent, I would offer to erase your memories and allow you to forget seeing Fenrir as a wolf, the portfolio pictures bursting into flames, and my armor. But memory erasing is a tricky business, and...”

He looks down at her hand. It is shaking. Pursing his lips, he says, “This is not reassuring you.”

“Not at all,” she confirms.

“Damn.” With a sigh he makes to kiss her hand. It is a courtly gesture, one he would bestow on a lady in Asgard had he distressed her accidentally.

To his shock, she rips her hand away before it even touches his lips. “That really doesn’t help,” she says.

Eyes wide, Loki holds up his hands. “No offense meant.”

Scowling and looking away, she says, “See you in a few minutes.” And

then she turns and disappears down the stairs.

Tilting his head, Loki turns in the direction of the shower, thankful that he knows what one is.

He's just rinsing his hair when he sees the red mist again. It wraps around him in the shower, and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end. The child's voice comes again in Russian. "The petty bourgeois are keeping the grander house to themselves and leaving you the meaner accommodation."

Blinking the water from his eyes, Loki restrains a shudder. "I'm grateful I don't have to rob banks again for food and a place to stay," Loki says. Stepping through the red mist and out of the shower, he grabs a towel.

"My Josef robbed banks, too," says the child voice. "For the revolution." In a voice that sounds slightly ashamed, it adds, "And food...and soft ones."

"Josef?" says Loki. Obviously, the mist wants to talk to him, and Loki isn't so foolish as not to comply.

"He woke me. He touched me. But he wasn't like you. He couldn't hear me."

Slipping on his breeches, Loki says, "You have a corporeal form?"

"Yes," says the mist, its voice sounding fainter, the red magic ceding to pink.

"Where are you?" Loki asks.

"It is impossible to know position or momentum with certainty," says the voice, barely audible now, the mist almost invisible.

Leave it to a magical creature to stumble over the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. Magic really was just expanded quantum theory.

"Yes, that's true," Loki says, trying to remain patient. "But you can think of your position in relative terms to mine and then give an estimate of location..."

There is no response. Loki exhales heavily in frustration. He is very curious. But he doesn't have time for this right now. He needs to eat and sleep to give himself enough energy to open a gate to the World Tree. He

needs to find Valli and Nari.

He slips on a shirt that was in the pile of towels and sheets. Stepping out of the bathroom, he looks at his armor and sword laid out neatly on the bed.

Beatrice is going to touch him. He just knows it. He goes to his knapsack, pulls out his book and slips it into his pocket. Closing his eyes, he briefly projects his consciousness out of the small room, through the roof, and into the sky. There are no ravens in sight.

Jaw tight, he heads for the stairs.

## CHAPTER 5



THOR, the weird maybe figment of Amy's imagination, shows up for dinner wearing a chambray shirt that used to belong to Amy's grandfather. Her grandfather was a tall man, but it still barely comes to Thor's waistband. He's rolled up the sleeves so they don't look too short.

He's shaved and his hair is clean and combed back from his eyes. It's disturbing, but he of the inappropriate King-Arthur-esque come-ons cleans up nicely.

She shakes her head. Remember the armor, Amy. Remember the ping when you flicked his back.

Remember he saved you...

She sighs. She is probably just imagining all of this. It's too much to think about, so she focuses on the spread on the table.

Beatrice has pulled out the stops for Amy's rescuer. Amy's grandmother is of Ukrainian descent, and the table shows it. Stuffed cabbages, sausages, boiled potatoes, and homemade sauerkraut. Amy prefers to eat vegetarian, and in deference to that her grandmother has also laid out some cheese sandwiches and mushroom soup with dumplings.

Thor sits down with a big smile and proceeds to eat everything. He doesn't eat fast, doesn't shovel food in his face, but he's like a machine. He just keeps going, and going, and going.

Her grandmother asks him questions, and he answers quickly and vaguely and turns the conversation back to Beatrice. He asks all the right questions about the neighborhood, and Beatrice is happy to expound on how it had once been predominantly Ukrainian but now is filled with yuppies and Mexican “foreigners” — Beatrice doesn’t quite catch the irony in her being from the Ukraine and a foreigner. Thor doesn’t comment.

He seems so much like the nice, kind of shy awkward guy she remembers from the police station. Beatrice seems utterly enchanted by him. It takes nearly half an hour for her to turn to Amy and say, “How did your final exams go, dear?”

Putting down her sandwich, Amy says, “Oh, great, Grandma. I think my exam for Equine Theriogenology went really well.” Her grandmother looks at her pointedly, and then tips her head in Thor’s direction. Amy belatedly remembers it’s not nice to use words people probably don’t understand. Licking her lips she prepares to explain theriogenology is the study of animal reproduction when Thor says, “Oh, really? Was the curriculum theoretical or practical? I’m no expert on theriogenology myself, equine or otherwise, but I have had the opportunity to be present for a foaling here and there. And my friend...Homer...was always hatching odd things.”

Amy blinks. “The class was theoretical and practical...”

“Oh, excellent,” says Thor. “It’s so lovely watching foals clamber up on their wobbly little legs, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Amy, her mouth threatening to pull into a smile.

“Did you grow up on a farm?” Beatrice asks Thor.

“No,” he says. “But there were stables nearby.” Helping himself to the last of the stuffed cabbages, Thor says. “What are in these cabbages? They are delicious!”

Beatrice giggles like a young girl and Amy restrains a sigh as her grandmother begins to tell Thor exactly what’s in them. Instead, going to the stove, Amy ladles another bowl of mushroom soup for herself. Actually,

listening to her grandmother talk about ground pork and seasonings is beginning to make her feel like this isn't a dream.

Didn't Dream-on-the-bus Thor tell her she'd know she was alive when things became ordinary again? And maybe Armor-in-the-garage-attic Thor was just another dream? She hasn't gotten a good night's sleep in days now. Maybe she drifted off to sleep when she came out of her shower and lay down on her bed? Of course! That must be what happened.

She's just going back to the table when the CD player, which had been playing some mellow shoe gazing electronica, switches to her grandmother's Glenn Miller CD.

Thor sits up straighter as the opening bars to "In the Mood" comes on. "I know this song," he says.

Sighing, Beatrice says, "I learned to dance the Swing with this song."

Thor grins. "So did I!" Setting his napkin on the table, he stands, bows slightly and holds out a hand. "Beatrice?"

Beatrice puts a hand to her mouth. And then she smiles and says, "Oh, why not? But let's go to the living room. There's no space in here."

Taking Thor's hand, she leads him to the other room and Amy follows.

"No dipping or throws!" Beatrice says, "Remember, I'm old!"

"Nonsense," says Thor, putting a hand on her back as they step in front of the fireplace. "You don't look a day over 65!"

Beatrice laughs and holds up her hand for him. "I'm closer to 85, young man!"

Taking her hand in his, Thor pauses. "No, really, I meant it, you don't..." The look on his face is genuinely perplexed. But then he blinks, says, "Good on you!" and they begin to dance. Thor is very gentle for such a huge guy and Beatrice smiles from ear to ear — if she feels anything weird beneath Grandpa's old shirt Thor's wearing, she's not showing it. Amy leans against the mantle and just watches. She hasn't seen Grandma this happy since Grandpa died, and it makes her a little misty eyed. Even if this is all in her

head, for Beatrice's sake, she doesn't want it to end.

And then it almost does. The light in the living room flickers and goes out, and there is an instant of darkness. But then, all at once, every single candle on the mantle lights up. Amy jumps, as her hair nearly catches fire.

"Oh, candles! Lovely!" says Beatrice.

Thor smiles at Amy. "Thanks for lighting those!"

Amy decides not to say anything. Aren't hallucinations part of sleep deprivation?

As the music winds down, she just follows her giggling grandmother and Thor back into the kitchen.

Breathing a little heavily, Beatrice sits down and smoothes her hair.

Thor slides into the seat across from her and starts helping himself to the last of the boiled potatoes and sausage.

"You are too much fun to be Thor!" Beatrice declares.

Thor's body stills, a spoon full of potatoes hanging in the air. "Oh?" he says. His voice has just the barest hint of an edge to it, and Amy tenses. "Who am I then?"

Something mischievous enters Beatrice's eyes. "I'd say you're more a friend to Hoenir than you are a Thor."

Thor puts the potatoes down. "Friend to Hoenir..."

Winking, Beatrice says, "It's a kenning, young man. You can Google it later."

"Google?" says Thor.

"I'm a very tech savvy Grandma!" says Beatrice. "I email my granddaughter every day! It's so wonderful."

"Email..." says Thor.

"Kenning?" says Amy.

Looking at Amy, Thor says, "A kenning is a conventional poetic phrase used in place of the name of a person or thing. For instance, storm-of-swords means battle."

Beatrice blinks, “Very good! How about whale-road?”

Putting a potato in his mouth — the whole thing, but it really isn’t that big a mouthful for him, Thor smiles, chews a moment, swallows, and then says, “The sea!”

The next half hour or so consists of Beatrice throwing kennings at Thor. Thor gets all the old obscure ones, like gore-cradle for battlefield, and battle-flame for the light on a sword, but he misses the new ones, like beer-goggles. When Amy explains it he laughs heartily. He doesn’t get surfing-the-net either; when Amy tries to explain that one, he only looks befuddled.

Thor’s cleaning up the last of everything on the table when Beatrice says, “Well, I think I’ll offer you dessert and then call it a night.” She looks at Thor’s plate. “Unless, of course, you still would like more meat and potatoes...”

She’s just being polite, of course; anyone can see it.

But Thor nods vigorously. “I could eat more meat and potatoes if you’ve got them.”

Beatrice blinks at him. “Well...I do have a cold smoked ham in the fridge I was thinking of serving my church group...”

Smacking his lips, Thor says, “That sounds delicious! I love ham!”

Beatrice stares at him, then shaking her head, gets up and says, “I forget how much young men can eat!”

Amy helps her grandmother put a huge ham on a serving plate in the middle of the table. Beatrice hands Thor a carving knife — and a loaf of bread for good measure, and then excuses herself. As she is leaving, she turns and says, “Friends of Hoenir are always welcome in this house.”

Thor smiles. “Well, Hoenir is a lovely man. I’m sure any friend of his is exceptional.”

Beatrice laughs. “Hoenir’s friend did put the gods in their place on more than one occasion,” and Thor looks absolutely befuddled again.

Beatrice leaves the room, the old floorboards, and then the stairs,

creaking as she goes up to her room.

An awkward silence settles on the table. Thor rips off a piece of bread, looks down at his plate and says, “Friend of Hoenir...”

Amy whips out her iPhone and Googles it. She sits up straighter. “It’s Loki,” she says. She swears the lights flicker just a bit. At her feet, Fenrir makes the same noise she makes when she spies a rabbit.

She looks up and sees Thor staring at her, as though gauging her reaction.

Amy doesn’t move. She feels like pieces of a puzzle in her brain are falling into place, but the picture that is forming is too weird and too impossible to be real.

He looks down at his plate. “Hoenir was a good friend. From the beginning...even willing to risk his life...” Thor stirs the food on his plate, but says no more.



*LOKI IS 12 YEARS OLD. A mist is settling over the gardens outside the palace in Asgard. It is early evening, and he runs as fast as his legs can carry him down dark garden paths, his breathing loud in his ears.*

*He doesn’t stop until he gets to Hoenir’s hut. As he bangs at the door, a little gray mouse with eight black insect legs and no tail drops down from the eaves on a silvery trail of spider silk. Loki loves spiders. Ordinarily he’d pet the little creature, but now he’s too flustered to even raise a finger to it.*

*The door opens and golden light spills out. Hoenir is wearing an apron and gloves of the kind falconers wear. He steps silently aside and Loki bolts in.*

*Loki never knows what he’ll find when he comes into the hut. On the outside, it looks like a single room just a few paces wide, but on the inside it has many rooms, and is much larger than it looks from the garden. He never knows which room he’ll step into. Sometimes it’s a sitting room with comfy*

chairs and a roaring fire, sometimes an enormous library grander even than Odin's, sometimes a kitchen, or sometimes, like tonight, he enters a workshop. There is a long workbench as high as Loki's chest and some tall chairs next to it. From the ceiling hangs a large lamp-like thing that glows orange and nearly touches the bench top.

Mimir is standing on his neck by the lamp. "Ah, Loki, we were just about to do a hatching. Would you like to select an egg for us?"

Hoennir gestures towards an enormous basket, as big as Loki, filled with eggs, all rather long and oblong instead of the regular shape of a bird egg. Loki finds one that is about twice the length of his outstretched hands and about half as wide. It is leathery and soft.

"Excellent," says Mimir. "Why don't you bring it here and set it beneath the lamp."

Hoennir leads Loki to a tall chair close to Mimir and the lamp. Loki climbs up on it and puts the egg beneath the light. The lamp gives off a lot of heat.

The three of them sit staring at it for a long time. At last Mimir says, "So, Loki. What brings you to our hut at this time of night?"

Loki shrugs.

For a few moments Mimir says nothing, and then he says, "So have you seen baby Baldur? I'm not such a fan of babies myself, but Odin and Frigga's child...why I've never seen such golden curls on a newborn. And even his cries sound musical."

Loki scowls. "His curls aren't golden. His hair is thin and black and straight. And his cries sound just like every other baby's cry. They're loud and I wish he'd shut up."

"Now, now," says Mimir. "I've seen Baldur, and he most definitely has golden curls, and rosy cheeks and..."

"No," says Loki, staring at the egg. He thinks he sees it moving. "His hair is black. And his skin is pale and nearly blue...like mine. He looks more Jotunn than Aesir. And there's magic all around him...gray magic, so dark

*it's nearly black."*

*What Loki doesn't say is how just being around Baldur makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. How he feels a chill just being near the baby.*

*"Did you tell Odin what you see?" Mimir asks quietly.*

*Loki can only swallow.*

*"Oh, dear," says Mimir, and Loki glances up to see Mimir looking at Hoenir. Hoenir looks very distraught.*

*"I'm afraid to ask..." says Mimir.*

*Loki stares as the surface of the egg rips apart and a tiny hole appears. "Odin told me to leave the palace and never come back."*

*It was the only time Odin has ever screamed at him — usually there have been maids and governesses for that. Loki has taken his designation as "God of Mischief" rather seriously. Mimir and Odin have stressed the Aesir aren't really gods — more gardeners of the World Tree, but Loki likes his moniker. It's great fun to make an illusion of a snake in a laundry basket and then explain it to Odin as his "sacred duty." Such things never fail to make Odin chortle.*

*But telling Odin what Baldur looked like to him...that had not gone so well.*

*Beside him he hears Hoenir scoot back in his chair. The egg starts to shake.*

*"What sort of creature's in the egg?" Loki asks. He doesn't want to talk about Odin or his exile from the palace.*

*"A hadrosaur," says Mimir, his voice soft.*

*"One of Hoenir's creations?" asks Loki.*

*Mimir raises his eyebrows, "No, well, only distantly. It was created by evolution."*

*Loki wonders who Evolution is but asks the more pressing question. "What is a hadrosaur?"*

*“It is a sort of herbivorous dragon,” says Mimir.*

*Loki puts his hands down on the counter and rests his head on them. The egg starts to shake some more; a tiny hole splits into a tear.*

*The tear splits down the side of the egg, and then a tiny dark green head peeks out. The creature has eyes set in the side of its head; its mouth is slightly agape. Its teeth look strangely sharp for a herbivore — maybe they’re just baby teeth, sharp for splitting the egg’s leathery shell?*

*“Wait a minute...” says Mimir.*

*Loki and Hoenir lean closer.*

*Blinking hawk like yellow eyes, the head emerges on a long ungainly neck, followed by two tiny little arms with little hands and long sharp claws. Powerful hind limbs follow and a long thick tail.*

*“That isn’t a hadrosaur,” says Mimir.*

*The little creature tilts its head towards Mimir, then catches Loki’s eye. Seemingly changing its mind, it looks back to Hoenir.*

*“No!” Mimir screams.*

*Hoenir backs up, but too late. The creature springs from the counter and sinks its claws and teeth into Hoenir’s arm. Hoenir stares at it wide-eyed as though in shock.*

*“Loki! Stop it! Stop it! ” Mimir shrieks.*

*Jumping forward, Loki grabs it by the neck like he would a snake. He pinches its jaws on either side, pushing the gums into the creature’s own sharp teeth. It releases Hoenir with a hiss and thrashes in Loki’s hands.*

*Mimir sighs. Loki holds it at arm’s length. “What should I do with it?”*

*Putting a hand on his chin, Hoenir looks around the workshop, seemingly unconcerned with the blood dripping from his arm.*

*Loki readjusts his grip so one hand is on the neck and the other is wrapped around the creature’s writhing torso. It really is quite interesting. He squints to get a better view of its tiny, razor teeth when the door to the hut bursts open.*

*Odin stands in the door frame for an instant. Then he walks over to Loki with quick strides that leave Loki paralyzed with fear.*

*Ripping the little dragon from Loki's hands, he wrings its neck and throws the lifeless body across the room. Hoenir's eyes open in horror. When Odin speaks, the hut's windows rattle. "A velociraptor! I thought we discussed this. Never. Again!"*

*"We thought it was a harmless hadrosaur," Mimir says. "We were hatching it for the elves — "*

*Odin grabs Loki by the collar and shakes him so hard his teeth rattle "It's your fault," he says. Heaving Loki against a wall, Odin says, "What did you expect, Hoenir, inviting this little agent of chaos into your workshop? He should never come here!"*

*Loki can only gasp for breath. With a sneer Odin tosses him to the side.*

*"He can't help what he saw!" Mimir shouts as Loki falls to the floor.*

*Hoenir runs between Loki and Odin, and Mimir says, "You can't kill Loki, Odin. Not really. Not without killing Hoenir, too."*

*With a cry, Odin tips over the workbench. Mimir's head lands with a crack and then goes rolling across the floor. Laughing maniacally, Mimir says, "Oh, come now, don't be paranoid of Hoenir and Loki's friendship! They can't help it."*

*"Shut up, Mimir!" Odin roars.*

*"I won't shut up! We don't agree with how you treat him! Calling him the God of Mischief! You trivialize him!"*

*"I'm trying to give him a childhood! Doesn't he deserve that?" Odin yells.*

*"You're trying to control him!" Mimir shouts. "But as soon as he sees something you don't like..."*

*Odin goes stomping in Mimir's direction. Next to Loki, Hoenir meets Loki's eyes and then looks towards the door. Loki nods. As Hoenir runs between Mimir and Odin, Loki darts out into the night.*

*The last thing he hears as darkness falls upon him is Mimir saying, “It’s not just chaos that gives birth to monsters.”*

*Hours later Hoenir comes for him. In one hand he carries a lantern with a flame that he holds aloft. In the other hand he has a lantern hanging at his side, but where the flame should be is Mimir’s head.*

*“Come with us,” Mimir says. “Odin will recover, but you’ll be staying with us for a while.”*

*Loki scampers up from where he’d been huddled on the ground. He’s relieved, terrified, and confused. He says nothing that night. But a few days later, when he is sitting in Hoenir’s kitchen, he says to Mimir, “What did you mean, Odin trivializes me?”*

*Mimir sighs. “Nothing, Loki. I said it in anger. Odin is very good at what he does...tending the branches of the World Tree, and keeping things running smoothly. I should not have questioned him in that way.”*

*“I like being the God of Mischief,” Loki says. He does. There is a freedom in being a mischief maker; he can skirt rules and expectations. Sometimes he does it for fun, but sometimes he does it because it feels right. Like when a group of boys were saying cruel things to Sigyn, a girl Loki fancies. He sidled up beside her and made it appear as though both he and Sigyn were Valkyries with wings and flaming spears. To most male Aesir pretending to be female, even a Valkyrie, would be shameful. But it was so much fun as the boys ran away to shout, “What’s wrong! Afraid of girls?”*

*Mimir says nothing for a few moments. But then he says, “Loki, about Baldur...It is alright for a man to be enchanted by his newborn baby.” Sighing, Mimir says, “And...Odin grieves for him.”*

*“But he’s not dead,” says Loki.*

*Mimir does not respond.*



“I DON’T REMEMBER DOING anything for Hoenir except causing trouble,” Thor says, the words tumbling out suddenly after a long silence. His eyes flick up quickly to hers.

“You don’t remember doing anything...” Amy blinks. The puzzle pieces that fit together in her head, they’re just crazy. He isn’t Loki. The police let him go, he has a clean record, he’s got a social security number that checks out, for heaven’s sake. They’re obviously playing a little game here. She can play along. Raising an eyebrow, she says, “You’re Loki now, not Thor?”

He shrugs nonchalantly, but his eyes are glued to hers and there is a wicked glint there. “So you say,” he says.

Shifting her eyes back down to the iPhone she says, “Here it mentions you saving Hoenir while he was held captive by some dwarfs.”

“That never happened — it was Lopt who rescued Hoenir,” he says, too forcefully to be funny.

Tapping her screen with her thumb she says, “According to Wikipedia —”

“Wikipedia?”

Amy feels a chill go down her spine. “How can you know what a kenning is and theriogenology and not know what Google or Wikipedia are?” She shakes her head. He is really good at this game. She blinks.

Or wait. Maybe he was raised by one of those fundamentalist religious groups that home school and don’t allow modern technology? She remembers how shy and polite he was at the police station. Even his awkward clothes. Yep. Rural religious fundamentalist home school escapee. It all makes sense.

Smirking at her he takes another bite of ham. “We don’t have Google or Wikipedia in Asgard,” he says.

Okay, now the game is funny again. “Uh-huh,” she says.

“So really,” he says leaning toward her from across the table. “What are they?”

Amy smiles. “Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that everyone can contribute to.”

His eyes widen and a happy smile plays on his face, as though he’s just worked out something monumental. “Online means the internets?”

She does not snort. But it is a near call. “Yeah, the internets.”

Brow furrowing, he says, “If anyone can contribute, doesn’t that put the authenticity of the information in question?”

She smiles and looks down at a picture captioned, *Loki as depicted on an 18th century Icelandic manuscript*. “Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how unflattering the first picture of you is.” It really is hideous.

With a scowl he holds out a hand.

She passes over her iPhone.

His scowl deepens and he says, “The artist makes me look like a dwarf!” His irritation seems so genuine, she almost laughs aloud.

“And they gave you such a big nose.”

He pushes the iPhone back to her. Without taking it she says, “The picture of you and Sigyn isn’t so bad.” It isn’t a good likeness of the guy in front of her, but at least it isn’t ugly.

He stares down at the iPhone.

“Scroll with your finger,” she says.

He blinks. “Is any sort of special concentration needed?”

It takes her brain a little while to comprehend the randomness of the question.

Leaning forward, he says, “It’s like magic, isn’t it? Don’t I have to picture what I am doing in my mind?”

She purses her lips. “No,” she says softly. “You just have to move your finger.”

Swallowing, he gingerly puts his finger on the surface of her iPhone and then drags it down. Smiling, he says, “It works!”

His joy seems so real, it makes Amy’s eyes widen.

And then his smile vanishes. “Ah,” he says. “My 200 year imprisonment. It wasn’t as bad as depicted here. There was snake venom, but no snake, and I was shackled but could walk around a bit.” Squinting at her phone he says, “This looks nothing like me. Nice likeness of Sigyn, though...although I don’t remember the Bible-esque robes being in fashion then...”

Holding the phone up he smiles wryly at it and says, “Ah, yes, memories.”

And that’s a little too much. Who knew homeschoolers could be such great actors? She takes the iPhone from him. “Okay,” she says. “Enough of this game.”

Shrugging, he says, “You started it.” And then he picks up his fork and starts to eat again.

Amy looks down at the iPhone and the Wikipedia entry on Loki. “Says here you are a shape shifter.”

“Um...” he says.

She glances up and he looks distinctly nervous.

She grins and reads aloud, “Loki gave birth—in the form of a mare—to the eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Says the dad was some special stallion...”

Putting his fork down hard, he says, “Now, how can shape changing even possibly work? We are all formed by immensely complex instructions coded into our cells and by the environment. It’s hard enough to just create simple elements, and so energy consuming. But for living things, the concentration, the imagination involved...How could anyone — well except maybe Hoenir and I’m not sure about that — ever hope to match the splendid complexity of all the subtle interactions — ”

Grinning wider, Amy says, “I’ll say you have a little experience foaling.”

He rolls his eyes and she snickers.

Glaring at her he says, “It’s not true.”

Amy snickers, “Of course it’s not true.”

Narrowing his eyes, he says, “I can only create illusions of other forms.”

Amy blinks, Fenrir barks, and across from her is a woman with Thorish strawberry blond hair wearing Amazonianesque armor that is more of a glorified girdle squeezing in an impossibly small stomach and supporting enormous breasts.

The woman gestures to said breasts and says in a voice that sounds exactly like Thor's, "I mean, if I had these, would I ever leave the house?"

Amy stares at her hallucination for a fraction of a heartbeat, and then she bursts out laughing. She laughs so hard she convulses around her middle and hits her head on the table.

"It wasn't that funny," says Thor.

Rubbing her sore head she says, "No, no, no, it's just, this dream is too wacky happy and unoriginal for me to be dying in a ditch somewhere. I'm at home and I'm hallucinating and I'm going to be fine."

"Unoriginal?" says Thor, back in his more Thor-like form.

Snickering at how scandalized he sounds, Amy stands up and stretches. "I'm going to go to bed, or slip from REM to Stage 1 sleep. Why don't you go now...if you're even here."

He stares at her a moment. Turning to the food on the table, he says, "May I take the ham?"

Shrugging, she says, "Go ahead." She looks towards the living room. Flickering light is coming through the door. "I should put out the candles even if I am only dreaming." Just to be on the safe side.

"Good idea," he says. "How did you light them so quickly? Electricity?"

Turning back, she points at her head. "With the power of my mind."

Brow furrowing, he says, "Don't toy with me," and waves a hand. Beneath the table Fenrir barks.

Amy turns around; the other room is dark. She peers around the corner; all the candles are extinguished. She's not even bothered anymore.

She looks back at the table. Thor is already standing up with the plate of ham in one hand, and the loaf of bread in the other. He's not smiling.

“Pleasant dreams!” she says.

He nods at her. “Likewise.”

She shrugs. “They already are!”

After Thor’s out the door, she heads up the stairs to her bedroom. To her surprise, her grandmother is standing on the landing in her pink nightgown, looking towards the door Thor just exited.

“Sounded like you had a lot of fun chatting with Hoenir’s friend,” she says, eyes narrowing to slivers.

Amy just snorts.

## CHAPTER 6



AMY HAS MORE dreams later that night. They aren't as pleasant and she has trouble falling to sleep again. In desperation, she pulls Fenrir up near her pillow. Still, she doesn't go to sleep until the very early morning. When she wakes up, it is to Fenrir whimpering by the door. She blinks at the light and then does a double take. It must be nearly noon.

Amy gets up quickly, dresses, and heads down to the kitchen. Beatrice has her apron on and is leaning over the sink washing dishes. She smiles up at Amy. "Good morning, Dear."

Thor is sitting at the table, in his retro outfit, a Chicago Transit Authority map spread out in front of him. How did he get invited to breakfast? Or brunch, or whatever.

"Good morning," he says. He looks like the guy she remembers from the police station. A little ruffled, shoulders not quite square, expression soft. The sort of shy guy who filled her with trust. He doesn't look like the mischievous guy in her dream last night, the one who turned himself into an Amazon, or the guy in the armor.

She blinks as she lets Fenrir out the back door. The kitchen is flooded with warm yellow light. Thor is complimenting Beatrice on her cooking; there is a bowl of freshly scrubbed strawberries on the table; the room smells like coffee, bacon and toast.

...and it feels even more dreamlike than Amy's dream of Thor the Amazon.

"Amy? Amy?"

Beatrice is suddenly standing very close to her.

"Are you all right?" her grandmother says.

"Yes," says Amy.

"Sit down," says Beatrice. "I'll get you some coffee."

"No," says Amy. "I'll make some myself."

She goes to the cupboard and takes out a cup. It crashes to the counter but doesn't break. Amy shakes her head and rights it. She lifts the coffee pitcher off the base and starts to pour. The stream of hot fluid bounces around, some spilling on the counter. She wipes it up quickly with a dishtowel and goes to sit at the table.

Taking a sip, she notices that her grandmother's and Thor's eyes are on her.

"I'm alright," Amy says.

Her grandmother tilts her head. "You've had quite a shock."

"I'm alright," Amy says again, more forcefully this time.

"I'm sure you are," says Thor. Turning to Beatrice he says, "Thank you for the map — and of course, for breakfast."

Picking up a cup Amy knows contains chamomile tea, Beatrice nods, "You're always welcome at this table, of course." There's something about the way her eyes are narrowed and the way she peers over the cup that tells Amy something isn't quite right.

Thor doesn't seem to notice. "I think I better go now," he says with a warm, sunny smile. He stands up from the table, the Chicago Transit Authority map and a tiny white book in one hand. "Oh," he says suddenly. "You must have dropped this last night. I found it on the floor." He puts her driver's license on the table and slides it towards Amy. She doesn't remember taking it out of her wallet since the police station.

A few minutes later he's gone. Amy scowls. "Did you invite him in?"

Beatrice nods and looks towards the door. "It's better to make sure he's always invited."

Amy stares down at her coffee. What does that mean?

Tilting her head, Beatrice pulls the tea bag from her cup. "Of course, it is nice to be able to cook for someone again," she says brightly.

Amy reaches over and grabs her license. "I need to get ready for an interview at a new temp agency." The one she used to work for went out of business.

Beatrice blinks. "Are you sure that's wise? You don't seem quite yourself."

Amy stares at her coffee. She isn't herself. But she just has to get over it. It's not like this experience is completely new; it is just extreme. She's dealt with creeps before. What woman hasn't? She'd been felt up on the 'L' one time — and had elbowed the guy so badly he'd sputtered and nearly puked. Some really lovely gentleman had followed her home from the bus stop one night and she'd unslung her backpack, screamed at him like a banshee, and chased him away.

She puts her head in her hands. She didn't escape this time. She was rescued. It turns out maybe there is a big difference. And if she hadn't been rescued...She screws her eyes shut and starts to sob.

"There, there," says Beatrice.

"Grandma," she says. "If it wasn't for Thor..." she can't talk about the pictures, can't say what she saw in them — or them bursting into flames. That part was real, the fire, wasn't it?

She takes a big gulp of air. She isn't sure of anything anymore. "Should I have invited him home?" she says. "He, he, he..." What? Has featured prominently in some weird dreams, or... "Maybe I trust him more than I should because he saved me, but he could be crazy, too." She shakes her head.

Beatrice's hand stops. "Oh, I don't think you or I have anything to worry about from our guest." She looks around the kitchen, "Other than that he might eat us out of house and home. Always better to invite him to the party, though..."

"Grandma?" says Amy.

Beatrice blinks. "Oh, nothing."

Amy stares at her grandmother for a few moments. She looks tiny and frail. But she's not — or she wasn't.

Beatrice's parents put Beatrice and her two brothers on a boat to the free world back in 1940, just before the Nazis invaded. Before they left they'd already lost family members and friends under Soviet rule — some disappeared in the middle of the night, others simply died in the great famine of the early 1930s.

Beatrice lost her entire world. Amy feels like her world has changed forever, that she's lost something precious — but compared to Beatrice, Amy has lost nothing.

"How did you do it, Grandma? When you got on the boat..."

Beatrice blinks. "What?"

Swallowing, Amy looks down at her hands and plays nervously with her fingers. "I was just wondering how you kept going...after you lost everything."

Beatrice sighs and looks down at her tea. "You just do."

Standing up, Amy wipes her face. "I'm going to get ready to go."

Beatrice looks at her for a moment and then nods.

Amy manages to get ready for her interview, and she gets out of the door with plenty of time to spare — even though leaving her home shatters her sense of security.

What she doesn't manage to do is drive. She stares at her grandmother's Subaru Forester, keys in hand, and decides she'd rather take the bus. She's not sure if it's because of the rollover, or if she just wants to stay around

other people.

As she walks out to the front walk and heads towards the ‘L’, she sees an older man, perhaps in his 50’s, buying an ice cream from one of the Mexican ice cream bicycle carts that frequent her neighborhood. He’s got a stern square jaw and is completely bald on top. Amy notices him because he’s wearing a gray suit despite the heat. The suit looks too nice to belong to an old timer from the neighborhood, but he isn’t young enough to be a yuppie. As she walks by, he tips his head at her over his drumstick ice cream cone. Not wanting to be rude, she nods back.



LOKI CONSULTS the CTA map and his book. The location is right.

The building in front of him looks to be about 100 years old. It has not been maintained very well. The facade of brick and cement is crumbling. Cutting straight through the heart of the building is a covered brick alleyway that leads to a dismal inner courtyard. There is a decorative iron gate that is rusted and blood colored. Loki scowls — it is strange that mortals tend to erect physical gates where World Gates reside. Another strange bit of human magic? He tilts his head; fortunately the iron gate is now open and won’t be in his way. Beyond the iron gate, on the far wall of the courtyard in peeling paint, are the words, “Graphic Arts Co.” Set into the walls are boarded up doors and windows covered with graffiti.

Loki looks around. He sees a few men down the street unloading a small van. They don’t seem to notice him. Loki has altered his Midgardian attire considerably. As he walked here — only a few short miles — he observed the natives and gradually modified his clothing. He now appears to be wearing a gray tee shirt, breeches of a thick blue fabric, gray shoes with laces and stripes, and dark glasses. And he appears to have a black rectangular bag slung over one shoulder.

He is actually wearing his armor, with his helmet on, visor down. Over one arm he's slung his army knapsack filled with the two remaining grenades, some of last night's ham and bread, and a large bottle of water he nicked from a store on the way.

Moving beneath the overhang towards the iron gate he closes his eyes. An instant later he is invisible to anyone who looks in his direction.

Loki walks until he feels a shiver snake its way up his spine. The World Gate is here. He can feel the tug of magic in the place where time and space are weakly defined.

He begins to murmur a childhood rhyme he used to recite to his children. It isn't a spell, per se; but it helps him focus his mind. Lifting his hands, he closes his eyes and begins to imagine pulling back a heavy curtain. The gate opens surprisingly easily, and a swirling vortex of color spins before him.

Loki steps forward...

...and feels stone beneath his feet. He takes a deep breath, drops the invisibility spell to conserve magic, and opens his eyes to the bright white-blue sunlight and silvery hues of Alfheim, land of the Elves. He looks down; beneath his feet is a silver road. That is right. The realm is right. But...

Scowling, he spins around...On both sides of the road is dense forest. On one side of the road the tree trunks are light lavender; the undergrowth is sparse and dotted with blue and yellow flowers. On the other side the trunks are deep indigo and nearly black; the undergrowth is dense and dark. Above the dark trees is an ominous swirl of dark gray magical clouds. He is certain he sees eyes peering at him from beneath the dark branches.

Unsheathing his sword, he switches to the tongue of the Dark Elves and says, "Don't even think about it." Just to be on the safe side he concentrates his magic towards the undergrowth and imagines the molecules there swirling and dancing together. There is a burst of flame, just as he intends, and a curse from his onlooker. He hears stirring in the undergrowth as the Dark Elf disappears into the forest.

Letting the flames dissipate, Loki consults Lothur's journal. His jaw goes tight and his brow furrows. It's colder here than in Chicago, but he feels himself getting hotter beneath his armor. He should be so close...but the entrance point is wrong.

Narrowing his eyes, he lets his consciousness fly to the air. He sees what he is looking for, the palace of the queen of the Light Elves about 100 miles down the road. Once this World Gate would have dropped him right outside her door, but the branches of the World Tree grow, and as they grow, they shift.

It is said the elf queen, like Odin, Heimdall, and possibly Hoenir, can see all that happens in the Nine Realms if she wishes. She may be able to tell him where his sons were deposited. Since Heimdall and Odin aren't likely to be helpful at the moment, and Hoenir will be difficult to reach, the elf queen seems like Loki's best option.

Most of the way the road abuts the dark forest. The Dark Elves won't harass travelers on the road by day; but by night it will be another matter.

There are other ways to get to the elf queen's palace besides the road. If he takes those ways, when he emerges on the other end, he won't be helpless, but he will be much weaker, very tired, and ravenous. Not a way to make a good impression, and definitely not good if his reception is less than welcome.

He lets his consciousness sink back into his body. There is a part of him that wants to instantly go forward. The information he needs is so close...and he is strong again. Yesterday it was easy to be patient, he was too weak to be otherwise. But now, it is a struggle not to be impetuous.

He takes a sharp, frustrated breath and considers his situation. If only he had a carpet or...

Sheathing his sword, he turns and steps back to where the World Gate has shut. Closing his eyes he begins to tug at the gate again until it is open as wide as it will go. Furrowing his brow and concentrating to keep it open, he

quickly measures the width by pacing the length. It is just wide enough.

Nodding to himself, he is just about to leave Alfheim, when a flash of something white on the light side of the road catches his attention. Turning towards it he scowls.

Sure enough...

Unsheathing his sword, Loki stands before the semi-open World Gate and glares at the unicorn emerging from the wood. What it wants in Midgard Loki can't imagine, but it's not coming through Loki's gate. Hoenir would never hear the end of it if he let such a vicious temperamental creature loose in a major Midgardian metropolis. Lifting his sword high like a spear, Loki says, "Don't you think about it either."

The beast lowers its head and snorts. The air between it and Loki shimmers with heat. With a curse, Loki forces the excited molecules to quiet. Lowering the sword, he pulls a knife from his belt and hurls it in the beast's direction, but the monster vanishes and the knife explodes harmlessly against a tree.

Narrowing his eyes, Loki shouts, "You'd taste good on an open spit!"

There is no sound. Loki doesn't turn his eyes from the forest. Rather than risk being gored in the back, he makes himself invisible, carefully backs up through the World Gate...and promptly collides with the iron gate on the other side. He feels like Thor has just heaved him against a wall — in anger, or worse, enthusiasm. Loki doesn't curse, but it's a near call.

He lets the World Gate dissipate, turns around and surveys the situation. There is a plate on the gate that looks like it may have had a locking mechanism at one point, but now it's partially rusted through. Instead, the gate is held by a simple padlock on a rusty chain. It takes hardly a thought to make the padlock spring open. He pushes at the gate gently, but it's hanging so low on its hinges that it scrapes the ground. A tiny push isn't going to do it. Loki grasps the metal plate and lifts. Pain shoots up his hand and he lets go. There is a loud clang as the last bit of the ancient plate falls to the ground.

He does curse.

Someone shouts something from an open window.

Scowling, Loki lifts the gate again — this time using one of the great rusting vertical iron bars. It opens easily enough and he slips out of the alley and onto the street.

He walks down the block until he finds a vehicle that he thinks will suit his purposes. A Mercedes-Benz emblem is on the hood; he recognizes it from his journeys through Nazi Germany. What's more important is that, as odd as the shape is, sleek and low to the ground, it has a visible stick shift. Most of the cars don't. Loki's last attempt at navigating a human vehicle didn't end well, and he's afraid of trying to master a new and more difficult technology on short notice. He puts a hand towards the lock, reaches out...

The car begins honking. Loudly.

From down the street he hears a man's voice. "That's my car!"

The car is calling to its master! Humans have crossed the divide between makers of machines to makers of living things!

A window opens. "Shut it up!"

Loki is invisible. He does not need to run. But he does anyway.



WHEN AMY TURNS up Beatrice's front walk it is still light out and the Mexican ice cream bicycle cart is still wheeling up and down her block, its bell ringing cheerfully.

She really should have stopped by the vet clinic and the restaurant where she normally hostesses over breaks. She doesn't want to risk coming home after dark though. Not yet.

She feels like she is covered with a second skin of pollution, dried sweat, and grime. Chicago in summer. She sighs.

As soon as she is inside, she heads to the shower. When she is clean and

feeling human again, she curls up with her iPhone on a big chair in the living room. She frowns at her phone. There are several missed calls. One from Chris, a guy she briefly dated. Chris is very nice, on a track to success, and a good, solid person. Someone Beatrice would like and Amy should like, but couldn't. She thinks of their awkward fumblings in bed that never quite worked for her and blushes. Chris said she'd get it with time...she swallows. In the end she'd just made herself unavailable. He deserves someone better.

She scrolls down and sees her vet-wannabe friend Andrea called. Andrea will be sympathetic and probably make her laugh. Andrea will probably press her to see a shrink...but after she's done with that they can talk about their Equine Theriogenology course and everything will be good. Suddenly possessed not just with the desire, but the need to call Andrea, Amy puts the phone to her ear. That's when Beatrice walks in.

"It's been awfully quiet today," says Beatrice, sitting down on the sofa.

Putting down her phone, Amy looks up at her grandmother.

Reading the unformed question on her lips, Beatrice says, "I guess I just expected that the police would call. Or maybe the press..."

Amy blinks. "Please don't call the press, Grandma." The last thing Amy wants right now is flash bulbs and interviews.

Beatrice snorts, and Amy smiles. Good, strong, private, Ukrainian Beatrice wouldn't want that.

"I don't think I'd worry," Amy says. "The police have my contact info. And they kept Thor and me for a really long time. They let us both go — the evidence was pretty..." Amy trails off.

"Oh, my!" says Beatrice. "I forgot. I have to go buy a new ham for my church group. Do you think you'll be okay if I go out?"

"Sure, Grandma," says Amy. She's actually looking forward to calling her friend Andrea. She might tell her some of the details she didn't tell Beatrice.

Beatrice gets up a little stiffly and heads towards the front door. A few

minutes later, Amy hears the door slam and picks up her phone. She's just about to dial the number when there is a knock at the back kitchen door. Fenrir dashes towards it, and Amy scowls but gets up and follows.

Thor is standing right outside on the stoop.

Amy remembers her conversation with Beatrice earlier when she questioned Thor's trustworthiness. For a moment she hesitates, but then Fenrir does her happy dance, wagging her whole body and hopping on her feet. Fenrir doesn't like anyone, except maybe Beatrice and Amy. The whole reason Fenrir's name is Fenrir is because man-hating-bitch-from-Hell is too much of a mouthful, and you can't say it in polite company.

Amy tilts her head and looks at her ecstatic little dog. Pursing her lips, she opens the door.

"Amy," Thor says as Fenrir twines around his feet. He's wearing clothing that looks more decade appropriate, and she wonders how he got it. "I need your help."

Amy's brow furrows, waiting for him to explain. He lifts his hand to push back his hair, and she notices his hand is bleeding.

"Oh, wow! Your hand," she says. "Come in. I'll get the first aid kit."

He looks down at his hand as though puzzled but doesn't protest, just steps into the kitchen.

"Better wash it out in the sink," she says going to the cabinet for the first aid kit. "How did you do that?"

"Rusty gate," he responds.

Looking over her shoulder as she pulls down the kit she says, "I hope you have a tetanus shot."

He blinks as he puts his hand under the sink. "Tetanus?"

Raising an eyebrow, she says, "Tetanus, it's a disease caused by bacteria; it's also called lockjaw. A very bad way to die."

"Oh, a bacteria...I am safe from that." He lifts his hand up and stares at it. There is a huge gash running down the middle of his palm. "It's really not as

bad as it looks,” he says.

Shaking her head, Amy takes his hand. He doesn't resist.

“It's not going to heal very well. Every time you bend your hand it's going to open again,” she says, staring down at the cut. “I have some Nu-Skin; it's a liquid adhesive bandage. It's probably your best bet.”

“It's not necessary,” he says.

“It is necessary...” Amy stops. The cut is melding itself back together before her eyes.

She gasps. “How?”

“Just a little concentration,” he says. “I can heal myself quite well. Unfortunately, I can't do it for others.”

Amy is suddenly aware that they are standing very close, and that she barely knows him. She should back away, but instead she pulls the hand closer to her, fascinated. The skin on his hand is fresh, new, and unmarred. She lifts her eyes to his face.

He smirks. When he speaks his voice oozes bitterness. “There's something in my nature, maybe it's a manifestation of my selfishness, my self-centeredness...but I can't heal anyone else, no matter how I might wish to. Even Thor, though he detests magic, has exceedingly good healing skills.”

“What are you talking about?” Amy says quietly.

“Come on, Miss Lewis,” he says. He's so close she can feel his breath against her hair when he speaks. “You already have discovered who I really am. And I've given you ample proof.”

“You're crazy,” she says, finally dropping his hand and backing up. “Or I'm crazy.”

He takes a step forward. “No, you're not crazy. The wolf, the armor...” he smirks again. “The lovely lady you found yourself talking to last night. All real...or perfectly serviceable illusions.”

Amy feels her back hit the wall. “No.”

He grimaces. “And the picture folio catching fire and the candles last

night were probably me, too — but I didn't mean for those to happen.”

“Stop it,” Amy says, moving sideways to the kitchen door. “Just stop it.”

“No,” he says, moving forward and catching her wrist. The clothing he is wearing seems to shimmer, like heat waves above a road on a hot day, and there he is in his armor again. “I need your help,” he says, his face very close to hers, and Amy can see his blue eyes are so pale they're almost white. “And you owe me.”

“I don't owe you anything! Let me go!” Amy says, trying to twist her hand from his grasp. When that doesn't work she tries stomping on his feet...but he's not there.

From behind her his voice comes again. “Your life is worth more than a bed, some ham, and stuffed cabbages, Girl. You do owe me, and you will pay up.”

Amy spins around. He's blocking the door from the kitchen to the living room.

She spins around again to run out the back door but he's already standing there, his head canted forward, a scowl between his brow. “I really do not want to hurt you. I need your cooperation, my sons' lives — ”

“I won't!” Closing her eyes, she shouts, “Fenrir!”

From the floor comes a happy yip. She scowls down at the dog. When did her brave mutt become so unreliable?

“Just hear me out,” he says through gritted teeth.

“No!” Amy says. “You. Are. Crazy.”

“What do you want...Loki?”

Amy turns her head. Beatrice is standing in the doorway, purse in her hands; she is trembling slightly.

“Grandma?” says Amy. “I thought you were going to get a ham...”

Not taking her eyes off Thor...or Loki, or whoever it is, Beatrice says. “I forgot my wallet. What do you want, Loki?”

Straightening, mystery weird guy says, “A car ride.”

Beatrice swallows but then juts out her chin like she does when she's about to complain to a store clerk. "You could have just asked."

"To Alfheim," he says.

"Oh..." says Beatrice. "Land of the Elves. Oh, my."

Amy runs to her grandmother and grabs her shoulders. "Come on, Grandma, let's go."

"No," says Beatrice, her eyes still on whoever it is. "You are worth more than a few cabbage rolls, Dear."

"Grandma," says Amy. "This is crazy, he isn't..."

"Amy," Beatrice says, meeting Amy's eyes. "He just changed his clothing into armor, and I saw him shape shift last night. We don't want to be in his debt."

"Good point, Beatrice."

Amy turns her head. Loki, Thor, or crazy fundamentalist home schooling escapee is walking towards them.

Shrugging, he says, "I'm sorry to be so insistent. Really, I've had a lovely time with the two of you. But I've recovered, and I can't dally anymore."

"Will you bring me back?" says Beatrice.

"Grandma!" shouts Amy, shaking her head. Beatrice brings one hand up to her shoulder and squeezes Amy's hand.

Bowing, he says, "Of course."

Beatrice narrows her eyes. "Do I have your oath?"

Whoever it is stops. He stands up straight. For a moment he says nothing. And then, tilting his head he says, "That is too broad a promise. You have my oath that I will do everything in my power to bring you back safely. More than that — " He lifts his hands and lowers his head, eyes locked on Beatrice.

"Grandma, you don't drive!" says Amy. The only reason Beatrice has a car is because the ten-year old Subaru in the garage belongs to Amy's grandfather and Beatrice doesn't have the heart to part with it.

"But I can," says Beatrice. Turning, she nods at the crazy man. "I will do

it, Loki.”

Crazy man beams. “It actually might be good fun for you. The Light Elves have nothing against humans.”

Shivering a little, Beatrice smiles. “Might be worth it to see Alfheim, before I die.”

“There’s no such thing as elves!” Amy says.

“On Earth,” says Crazy Guy. Bowing in her grandmother’s direction, he says, “Beatrice, you are a true lady. If you were a few hundred years older —”

Beatrice’s smile drops. “Stow it, Silvertongue. How long will this take?”

“This is crazy, Grandma!” says Amy, dropping her hands. Her grandmother doesn’t even meet her eyes.

“About a day,” he says, face going serious.

“Take what you think we’ll need from the refrigerator. I’m going to get ready,” says Beatrice. She turns around and starts walking towards the stairs.

Amy glares at Crazy Guy. “I’m not letting her go alone anywhere with you!”

“You’re more than welcome to join us,” he says, going to the fridge.

“You fucking jerk!” Amy hisses. “Taking advantage of an old woman like that!”

Loki-Thor-Crazy Person scowls over his shoulder at her. A rag on the counter bursts into flames. Amy’s eyes widen. She looks at Crazy Guy. He is staring at the fire with eyes wide as hers. Turning to her quickly, he says nervously, “I didn’t do that!”

Frantically pushing the burning rag into the sink with a stray fork, Amy douses it with the faucet. “Of course you didn’t. That would be impossible,” she whispers.

She’s got to convince Beatrice not to go with this guy. As soon as the flames are out, she runs up the stairs and finds Beatrice packing a small overnight bag in her bedroom.

...and she gets nowhere with her cajoling, arguments or pleas.

“I said I will drive him and I am going to drive him,” her grandmother says.

“But it’s crazy! You can’t drive to Alfheim! Alfheim doesn’t exist!”

“Then maybe we’ll drive a bit and come home,” says Beatrice.

“He’s a lunatic!”

Putting a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste in an overnight bag, Beatrice smiles. “A charming lunatic.”

“So was Ted Bundy!”

Zippering up her bag, Beatrice blinks at Amy. “Who was he?”

“A serial killer!”

Beatrice’s eyes go hard. “Do you really think Loki is a serial killer? Really?”

Amy remembers the picture in the van going up in flames, and Thor...Loki...nearly stammering, *I’m sorry...I didn’t mean...*

Shaking her head, Amy closes her eyes. “No, but that is not the point.”

Putting her bag on the floor and wheeling it out into the hallway, Beatrice says, “Well, then what is your point?”

“This is madness.”

“I said I would drive him,” says Beatrice, beginning her agonizingly slow descent of the stairs.

Strong, independent, stubborn, Ukrainian. She hasn’t driven in years — Beatrice behind the wheel is probably more dangerous than Thor-Loki-whomever.

Swallowing, Amy shouts, “I’m driving!”

## CHAPTER 7



A FEW MINUTES later they are standing in the garage in front of the Subaru. Fenrir is dancing happily next to them. It is not a great city car, but Amy's grandfather liked fishing and escaping the city on weekends. Thor-Loki-Whoever-It-Is is carrying a cooler. He is back in a tee shirt and jeans, a black messenger bag over one shoulder. He is looking at the late afternoon sky. "We'll have a few hours of daylight left."

Amy rolls her eyes. "This is crazy," she mumbles, hitting the unlock button on the Subaru's remote.

The SUV beeps, and Whoever-It-Is jumps. "Will it accept me since I am with you?"

Amy looks at Beatrice. Beatrice looks at Amy. Fenrir cocks her head at the man who may or may not be Thor.

"Yes," says Amy. "It was just saying hello."

"Hello, Car," says Thor, leaning tentatively forward.

Amy's eyes go wide, but she says nothing as she slips into the driver's seat and hits the back door release. Thor puts the cooler and Beatrice's bag in the rear, closes the back door, and helps Beatrice into the back seat. All very chivalrous. He also closes the garage door after Amy pulls forward. For a moment Amy considers hitting the accelerator and leaving him there in the alley, but she doesn't. She'll just play along, this will come to nothing, and

maybe on the way home she can drop Thor off at a hospital where he can get professional help.

As Thor slips into the front seat, her foot goes to the non-existent clutch and her hand goes to the non-existent stick, but of course it's an automatic. For a moment they go nowhere.

Thor shakes his head. "This new advanced transmission system seems more trouble than it's worth."

Amy decides to say nothing. She just puts her foot on the gas and heads to the gas station to fill up the tank — because Thor insists the journey is about 200 miles. And then she heads towards Peoria and Randolph streets, just a mile and a half away. It's an area known for overpriced restaurants, not elves.

The building Thor directs her to is not a restaurant. It's one of the ancient warehouse buildings just south of Restaurant Row. There is an old iron gate that is thrown open, and a dark dirty alley leading to a neglected looking courtyard.

"Go in here," says Thor, pointing to the alley.

"Are we allowed to do this?" says Amy. It doesn't look like a regular alley. There is an archway above the entrance. "I don't think we should go in there. It looks like private property."

"For Heaven's sake, you can say you're just turning around," says Beatrice.

"Grandma?" says Amy.

"Go," says Beatrice.

Amy pulls into the alley, just up to the iron gate, and Thor says. "Stop here!"

Opening the door, he turns to them. "In a moment, I'm going to get back in the car. As soon as I do, pull forward. It's very difficult to keep the gate open."

Thor gets out and goes a few feet more into the alley. For a moment he

bows his head and stands motionless. Then he flings out his hands as though pulling back a curtain. He moves quickly to either side, raising his hand, as though pulling the imaginary curtain back a little further.

Behind her, Beatrice is leaning forward. “Maybe this is crazy, Amy, but it can’t hurt to indulge him, can it?”

Amy sighs and rubs her eyes. For the first time since this episode began, she feels genuinely sad for him. He did save her life. He’s obviously mentally ill, probably schizophrenic, and he can’t help that.

She takes a breath. She needs to get him to a doctor. They have treatments for schizophrenia now that are much better than in the past. He saved her life and she does owe him.

She blinks. She saw his armor, and the wolf, and the fire...maybe she needs drugs, too?

Ahead of her, Thor turns around quickly and runs back to the car. Opening the door he jumps into his seat. “Go now!” he shouts, shutting the door.

Amy sighs. “Here goes nothing,” she says pulling forward. She hits the gas gently and drives forward...and the front of the car disappears.

“What!” screams Amy, putting her foot on the brake. “Oh!” says Beatrice.

“Just go!” yells Thor.

And Amy isn’t sure why, but she hits the accelerator. Maybe it is her disbelief that propels her, because she certainly wouldn’t have driven forward if she actually believed her car had dematerialized in front of her.

As the car goes forward, the dashboard, and then the steering wheel, disappear under her hands, and Amy is alone, surrounded by all the colors of the rainbow for the briefest of moments, her foot on the pedal of what would be the gas pedal if...

...and then her foot is on the gas pedal, behind her Beatrice is screaming, and next to her the man who still might be crazy is bracing his hands on the

dash. “Stop!” he shouts.

Amy hits the brake.

Thor-Loki-Whoever, Beatrice, and Amy all take a deep breath. Fenrir whimpers.

“Have you recovered from your shock?” says Whoever-It-Is.

She had let the wheel go a little bit, and they might have run off the road. Amy turns her head to him. He’s wearing armor again.

Her hands are shaking. “No,” Amy says. “I really don’t think so.” Her eyes go to the window. Outside is a road, only a little wider than the alley — definitely not made for two way traffic. For some reason she isn’t surprised it is yellow brick. On either side of the road is a dense forest. But...she peers either way. On one side it is dense and foreboding. On the other side it is open and light, and she has the urge to crack open the cooler and declare it time for a picnic right away.

He takes a long breath and rubs his face. “How can I help you recover?”

Amy looks around. “Can I get out?”

Thor-Loki-Whoever looks at the sun. “I would say yes, but it would be best if we reach our destination before sunset.”

Amy looks towards the dark wood and then looks back to her grandmother. She is looking in the same direction.

“That side doesn’t look friendly, Loki,” says Beatrice.

“Exactly,” says Thor-Loki-Whoever-It-Is, his voice grim.

Amy puts her foot gently on the gas. “Loki,” she says. He really might be Loki.

“Exactly,” says the man sitting next to her, and this time she can hear the smirk in his voice.

Amy wills herself to breathe and keep her eyes on the road. Which is hard. She wants to stop and look. The trunks of the trees look lavender on the light side, the leaves almost blue. On the dark side, the tree trunks look so purple they are nearly black.

“There was color when we...crossed,” says Beatrice. “Like a rainbow — ”  
“Yes,” says the man who actually might be Loki. “Time acts like a prism at the edge of the World Gates.”

“The rainbow bridge,” says Beatrice quietly.

Loki tilts his head. “I believe that humans did call it that once.”

“The light,” says Amy. “The light here is different.” Everything seems a little bit blue.

“The star that is this planet’s sun is much older. I believe you would call it a white dwarf,” says Loki.

“Oh,” says Amy. She blinks. “We’re on another planet.”

“Yes. In a whole other solar system,” says Loki.

“My, my,” says Beatrice. Amy looks in the rear-view mirror and sees her patting Fenrir on her lap. “My, my.”

For a few minutes, Amy drives in silence, too overwhelmed to speak. Beatrice must feel the same because she says nothing. After a while, Amy hazards a glance over at...Loki. His mouth is set in a firm line, his eyes focused far ahead. He looks handsome, noble even.

“Can you drive faster?” he says. The question sounds genuine, not like he’s second guessing her driving skill.

Amy looks down at the speedometer. She’s going all of 20 miles per hour. “Can I expect any oncoming traffic?” The road is narrow and straight, and there are a few rolling hills that could be dangerous.

He closes his eyes. “There is none for at least 30 miles.”

Amy glances sideways at him. “How do you know?”

He tilts his head and then blinks. When he speaks he sounds slightly awed. “Astral projection. The concept has entered your vocabulary in the last sixty years. Even though you’re incapable of it.”

She’s on another planet, on a yellow brick road; astral projection doesn’t seem like that much of a stretch of the imagination. “Good enough,” she says and hits the accelerator.

For a few minutes, no one says anything. She glances and sees Loki's eyes focused on the road, his mouth a thin line. She focuses directly ahead, her brain churning.

“Why so solemn?” says Loki suddenly with joviality that sounds a little forced. “From you, Amy, I would expect it, but from you, Beatrice — ”

He turns towards the back seat and then says softly. “She appears to be asleep.”

Amy peeks in rear view mirror. Beatrice is slumped slightly to the side, her head bent, her eyes closed. Amy looks at the clock in the car. “Yes,” she says. “She normally takes a nap this time of evening.”

“This isn't exciting to her?” says Loki.

Amy tilts her head. “It is exciting, maybe so exciting she needs a mental break...and...” Amy bites her lip. “People tend to nap a little bit more as they get older, and then not sleep so well at night. That doesn't happen to...your people?”

“We don't get old,” says Loki.

“Oh,” says Amy. She tilts her head. “Lucky.” She goes back to focusing on the road. Another planet...and Loki said something about time bending at the edges of the World Gate so —

Loki sighs loudly. “Come now, there will be plenty of time for silence when you're dead, and I'm...” He waves a hand dramatically, “Gagged with wire or stuck in a cave. Surely you have questions for me?”

Amy's eyes widen. “Sorry, I'm just over here quietly revising everything I thought I knew about the universe.”

He chuckles. “What a novel way of expressing it.”

And then Amy has a thought. “Astral projection isn't one of your powers in the myths, but it is in the movies and comic books.”

“I'm not sure I'm clear on how comic books and movies differ from myths,” says Loki. “Except in the medium.”

“Well, myths exist for the purpose of explaining the universe and

imparting moral values,” says Amy.

“Don’t leave out entertainment,” says Loki.

“Okay, and entertainment,” says Amy. “And comic books and movies, well, the type of movie and comic book we’re discussing, are for entertainment.”

Out of the corner of her eye she can see Loki turning towards her, puzzlement on his face. “They don’t impart moral values or attempt to explain the universe?”

Amy is about to say no, but then she blinks. “Actually...I guess they do. But in a more round-a-bout way.”

“Myths aren’t exactly straightforward,” says Loki.

“Touché,” says Amy, scowling at the road in front of her.

“...or completely accurate,” he mutters.

Amy smiles. “Yeah...no shape shifting. Right. Are you Thor’s brother? In the comic books you are.”

There is a snort. “No.”

Amy grips the steering wheel and narrows her eyes. “What about Sif’s hair.” It’s probably the most famous Loki myth. Sif was Thor’s wife. Loki cut off her hair as a prank and paid dearly for it, if she remembers right.

She can hear the grin in his voice when he says, “Snip! Snip!”

“Really?” Amy says, twisting her hands on the steering wheel. “Why?” It sounds positively childish.

“To prove that she was a lying, cheating whore.”

“How does cutting someone’s hair prove they’re a whore?” says Amy, gripping the wheel more tightly.

“It is the traditional punishment for female adulterers.”

Remembering the story as her grandfather used to read it to her, Amy scowls. “So you sneak up on her in a glade and cut off her hair and that is supposed to prove she is a ho?”

There is a moment where the only sound is the hum of the engine. And

then Loki erupts into what can only be described as cackles. “I didn’t sneak up to her in a glade. I fucked her!”

Amy’s eyes go wide. “Fucked?”

“Am I getting the verb right? Fac, from the Latin, ‘to do’. Oh, wait, no that isn’t right. I fuck — ”

“I understood!” says Amy. She glances at him, her mouth agape.

He is blinking at her, smiling, looking very pleased. “It was really very selfless of me. No one really appreciates that. Everyone knew she was a whore, but no one else was brave enough to bring it to Thor’s attention. Well, except Odin, but he went about it in this convoluted way where he disguised himself as an old man...” There is a snort. “...like that was difficult. And told Thor to his face, but as a stranger. I delivered proof.”

She thought he was handsome? She thought he looked noble? Amy’s lips curl up in disgust. “Wasn’t Thor, like, your best friend?”

There is silence again. Amy glances over and immediately looks back at the road. She swears his eyes are glowing. “No,” says Loki, and the air seems to ripple with his voice. “No, not then. Not at all.”



*LOKI IS close to 50 earth years old. He and Thor, not much younger, are waving goodbye to a group of happy human peasants who are jumping up and down and waving at them. The humans haven’t changed since Loki’s first visit here. They are small, dirty, smelly, and lacking many teeth. But their love is still palpable — which keeps Loki from sneering at them, or picking disdainfully at the troll guts sticking to his armor.*

*Said troll lies dead behind Thor and Loki. It was a particularly large creature, nearly as big as an Earth Asian elephant — they had a few in the gardens of Asgard when Indian clothing and architecture were in vogue.*

*“Heimdall! Bring us home!” Thor shouts to the sky.*

*There is a flash of light, a blur of color, and then Loki and Thor are facing Heimdall in the great circle of Midgard's World Gate on Asgard.*

*"Four times!" roars Thor with a smile on his face. "Four times I've been to Midgard troll hunting and not once did I find a troll. The one time I bring Loki, this beast — " he gestures with his hand towards the felled troll. "— this beast sets upon us immediately."*

*"It is a fine trophy, my Lord," says Heimdall, and his voice holds only reverence. Since Thor's return to court, Odin's bastard son has done nothing but make friends. Mostly because Baldur the beautiful, crown prince, son of Odin and Frigga, has taken a shine to his "big brother" and declared Thor "fitting to be in a court among Gods." Baldur possesses a type of magical glamour that not only makes him beautiful, but allows none to gainsay anything he says. Even Frigga has decided she likes Thor now.*

*Before Loki knows what is happening, Thor swats Loki's back with his hand. Stumbling forward, Loki barely manages to keep his feet. "From now on you come with me on every troll hunting expedition, Loki!"*

*"Lovely," says Loki, scowling down at the troll innards on his armor. Not that he doubted it would be otherwise. Just before this trip Odin informed Loki that his job as retainer now was to accompany Thor on all his quests.*

*"We should tell Baldur!" Thor declares, pulling Loki by the arm away from the World Gate. "We'll invite him to come with us on our next adventure."*

*Loki's stomach twists and he scowls. He detests Baldur. He detests that everyone thinks Baldur is beautiful, brave and wise. He detests that they think Baldur is good. And he detests that Mimir has suggested that the reason for this seething dislike is jealousy...and that there may be some truth to that.*

*Loki would never be accused of being ugly, but his 'fair countenance' is almost an insult in itself. He doesn't look as roughly hewn or as square in the jaw as a typical Aesir, or even Jotunn. He's only of average height, and he's too thin, despite the fact that only Thor's appetite is a match for his.*

*And Loki's not considered brave. He's simply not much good at feigning battle lust or interest in killing trolls. If he wasn't ordered by Odin to watch after Thor, he would have spent the last few days in the library — he'd really like to master astral projection.*

*Finally, absolutely no one would consider Loki wise. He has too much fun with his magic. Loki knows he shouldn't take such delight in making himself appear like a Valkyrie upon occasion, or pulling the occasional flower from Odin's nose, but he just can't help himself.*

*Looking for any way to avoid a run in with Baldur, Loki says, "Shouldn't you go home to see your wife Sif first?"*

*"No, no, no," says Thor, walking briskly towards the palace, now under the illusion of Roman Golden Age architecture. "She'll understand. She is a fine wife, Loki, and doesn't begrudge me a bit my adventures and traveling — this is just a bit more of the journey."*

*Loki raises an eyebrow. She doesn't begrudge it probably because it leaves more time for her whoring. Sif is so easy with her affections, even Loki is uninterested in her.*

*Thor smiles and looks sideways at Loki. "But perhaps you'd just like to see your Lady Sigyn?"*

*"She is not my lady," says Loki, feeling heat rise to his face. Are his affections so obvious? Sigyn left the court for a few decades to live in the realm of Alfheim — the stay has given her an interesting perspective on a foreign culture and on Asgard's own. She is a rather fascinating companion for conversation. And she still seems to fancy Loki, maybe because Loki occasionally protected her with his magic when they were children, or maybe because she hasn't been steeped in court gossip — Loki does have a bit of a reputation. It is pathetic, but her genuine warmth towards him makes Loki go absolutely soft inside. And although he protests her decline of his physical advances he actually rather respects her for it. How many times after a physical conquest has he decided the prize was too dull to be worth keeping?*

*Even Freyja for all her beauty and charm was rather a bore after a while.*

*Loki blinks. Perhaps Sigyn does know his reputation.*

*“She hasn’t hooked you yet then!” yells Thor, slapping Loki’s back again jovially. Loki tries not to wince; it takes effort. “But she will!”*

*Loki keeps his eyes forward. The idea of being hooked by Sigyn is strangely not as unsettling as it should be.*

*They veer away from the palace proper to Briedablick, Baldur’s hall. As Briedablick comes into view, Loki scowls again. He’s heard the place is quite beautiful to others’ eyes; everyone tells Loki it glows. All Loki can see is the dark swirl of Baldur’s magic around the massive gray stone structure as they approach. As usual, when he is around Baldur, he feels the hairs on the back of his neck rise.*

*A few minutes later they are ushered into the foyer by a servant who bows and says, “I will go inform my master you are here, Thor.” Tipping his head first to Thor and then Loki, he leaves.*

*From down the hall in the opposite direction of the servant’s departure comes a feminine squeak and a rough male gasp.*

*Thor’s eyes go wide. “The servant went the wrong way!” he says delightedly.*

*Rolling his eyes at Thor’s childishness, Loki says, “So it would seem.” Tipping his head in the direction of the exit, he says, “We should go.”*

*Another male grunt echoes in the foyer.*

*Snickering like a little boy, Thor doesn’t move. “Who do you think is sampling Baldur’s beauty right now?”*

*Loki’s jaw tenses and he stares at the large man before him. Despite the fact that Baldur likes Thor, Loki doesn’t hate him. Thor is loud, gregarious, and far too trusting. But he actually complimented Loki on an illusion he cast to confuse the troll they killed — it is nice to have his abilities are appreciated for once.*

*And Thor isn’t stupid, no matter how he tries to hide his brain on*

occasion. They had a decent conversation about Troll nesting habits as they started out on their quest. Loki thinks he could actually like Thor, if he were to let himself. Even Mimir has said that Thor has the potential to be Loki's ally and true friend...and Loki can see that happening, if he just plays along and is nice.

But he can't quite do it. Smirking, Loki says, "Well, I think we can safely assume it isn't his mother."

Thor tilts his head, his childish grin fading.

Lifting an eyebrow, Loki crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the wall. "But other than that...really it could be anyone."

"I think you insult Baldur and a great many virtuous women," says Thor, a furrow settling in his brow.

Loki should stop, should apologize. Instead, he lets the truth slip from his lips. "Oh, I suppose the old men are probably safe, and probably the livestock, too." His lips quirk. "Maybe."

Thor steps forward, his face going a little red. "End this jest now, Trickster."

And Loki should, because Thor, like everyone but Loki, is blind to Baldur's shortcomings. Thor doesn't see how Baldur's charms, illusory though they are, are irresistible to all of Asgard. Thor doesn't see how Baldur abuses them.

Loki shouldn't test Thor this way, shouldn't set himself up to lose a potential comrade. There is a loud grunt from down the hall. Thor turns his head, momentarily distracted.

Loki should apologize. But he can't.

There is the sound of a door creaking. And then there is the sound of soft feminine footfalls. Thor, looking in the direction of the footsteps, smiles. It isn't a friendly smile.

Curious despite himself, Loki lets his gaze go down the hall...and sees a rumpled Sigyn emerging.

*Loki's mouth drops. He feels like he may throw up.*

*Thor pulls away from Loki to let Sigyn pass. Her eyes go up to Thor's and her face reddens. And then her eyes meet Loki's.*

*Her face crumples into a look of confusion and sadness. "Loki... I..."*

*Loki's mouth goes to a hard line, and he looks away from her.*

*From the corner of his eye, he sees her bow her head. Turning, she runs out the door.*

*Thor laughs lowly. "You should see your face."*

*Loki hears a grinding noise...it's his own teeth. He is suddenly angrier at Thor than he is angry at Sigyn or even Baldur. Sigyn was obviously charmed by Baldur's glamour, like everyone else. Baldur was just an ass, like always, and Loki expected no better from him — nor can Loki retaliate against the crown prince.*

*But Thor...Loki had hoped better of Thor. He had hoped for the bastard's friendship — some loyalty, some understanding. Loki uncrosses his arms and steps away from the wall towards the larger man. The air between them seems to shimmer. Thor narrows his eyes and his hands ball into fists.*

*At that moment Baldur comes down the hall. "Oh, brother! Loki!" Baldur says, and both Thor and Loki turn. Baldur is adjusting his shirt. Loki has seen paintings of Baldur, he knows what other people see, a crown of golden curls, tanned golden skin, blue eyes on a face chiseled like a roman sculpture, broad shoulders and height nearly as tall as Thor's. Loki sees a tangle of light brown hair, a slightly pudgy face with narrow hazel eyes and a soft body only as tall as his own.*

*"Loki," says Baldur, smirking slightly, though Loki has no doubt he appears to be smiling benevolently to Thor. "I think you know Lady Sigyn?"*

*"No," says Loki. "Not well."*

*He shoots a sidelong gaze toward Thor, daring him to contradict him.*

*Thor says nothing. But he smiles, a knowing, cruel smile.*

*That smile changes everything.*

Later that night at the banquet, Loki stands behind Odin at the table, behaving like a truly proper retainer — albeit a slightly drunk one. Thor is boasting of his exploits to a crowd of happy admirers. In a far corner, Sif has her own admirers. Sigyn is nowhere to be seen.

Odin, deep into his cups, slams his goblet down on the table. The clang is drowned out by the sound of Thor's laughter further down the table. Glaring in the direction of Sif, Odin snarls. "I have warned him about her. He is becoming a laughingstock!"

Pushing back from the table, Odin growls and stands from his chair. "I can't watch this."

Pursing his lips, Loki says, "If you permit me, sire, I'll take care of it."

Snorting, Odin says, "Good luck." And then the giant man turns and storms from the hall.

As soon as Odin has left, Loki walks over to Sif.

"Here to grace me with your silver tongue, Trickster?" the lady asks.

A reputation can be a helpful thing. Loki smiles. Very shortly afterwards he is in Sif's bedchamber.

After the "lady" falls asleep, Loki trims her golden locks. Gathering them in his hands, he ties them in one of her own ribbons. When Thor returns home Loki is waiting for him at the front door.

As he throws the shorn locks, the traditional symbol of an unfaithful wife, at Thor's feet, Loki smiles as sweetly as he can. "You should see your face," he says.

He completely expects the beating that comes next.

What he doesn't expect is for Hoenir and Mimir to be so unsympathetic when he comes crawling to the hut for help.

"You did what!" Mimir screeches. Loki winces from where he lays atop Hoenir's workbench, the self-satisfied smile slipping from his lips.

Hoenir slaps a hand down hard on a rib he is repairing. Loki's eyes go wide. Hoenir is actually scowling at him. Hoenir never scowls at him.

*“I gave Thor proof of his wife’s infidelity,” says Loki, and Hoenir’s hand comes down hard on another rib.*

*“You’re supposed to be helping me fix that,” says Loki lifting his head. Hoenir just raises an eyebrow.*

*“You’re lucky to be alive,” says Mimir. “Do you know what you would do if someone slept with your wife?”*

*Raising an eyebrow, Loki drops his head on the bench. “As I don’t have a wife and am unlikely to acquire one — ”*

*“I’ll tell you what you’d do!” Mimir says, voice trembling. “You’d cut him up into little pieces, that’s what you’d do.”*

*Loki blinks...there is something in that, something he can’t quite place. He raises his head.*

*Mimir’s face is livid. “And then you’d take all those pieces and flush them all down the — ”*

*“Mimir!” Odin’s voice rings through the hut.*

*Loki’s blood goes cold.*

*“Don’t talk about that, Mimir,” and Loki blinks because he almost thinks he hears worry in Odin’s voice. But a few moments more and Odin is leaning over him. He doesn’t look worried. Oddly, he doesn’t look as angry as he did after Baldur’s birth. He looks more...disgusted.*

*“You told me he was turning into a laughingstock,” Loki says. “I told you I’d take care of it, and I have. I delivered proof that — ”*

*“Sif has told everyone you used your magic to sneak in on her while she slept,” says Odin.*

*“And people believe that?” says Mimir. “From that trollop?”*

*Odin’s eyes don’t leave Loki’s. “What matters is what Thor thinks. He believes his wife. Which is lucky — otherwise you could be tried for treason.”*

*Loki swallows, his brow furrowing. He was only obeying orders. The fickleness and duplicity of royalty.*

*“— but he is only requesting your banishment,” says Odin, his eyes*

*narrowing.*

*The breath catches in Loki's throat. Odin doesn't mean banishment to Alfheim, Jotunheim, Vaneheim or any of the other civilized worlds. He can only mean Midgard. There is a very small part of him that wants to accept that fate, sees it almost as an open door from a cage, but his rational mind tells him what he would be accepting is a short, painful life, and death by plague — or in his case, more likely hunger.*

*Odin's lip curls up. "Fix this, Loki." He stares down at Loki for a few moments more, and Loki feels himself shrinking. And then Odin turns and strides from the room.*

*Loki looks at Hoenir. He doesn't meet his eyes. He looks to Mimir, and the head winces. "You owe Sif, Thor and Odin a very big apology."*



STARING AT AMY, Loki feels the heat of Thor's first betrayal, that first cruel laugh, itching beneath his skin. How could he have trusted Thor after that?

Beatrice's voice startles Loki out of his dark reverie. "So did you get Thor his hammer, Sif the golden wig, Odin Daupnir and Gungnir — and the boat for Frey?"

"Daupnir, Gungnir, boat?" says Amy.

Loki smiles a brittle smile. "Daupnir is a lovely little ring. The boat is called Skidbladnir. It has a clever way of folding into time so that all of it that remains in real-time can fit in the palm of your hand."

Amy's face lights up, "It sounds kind of like the TARDIS!"

"Tardis?" says Loki, somewhat amazed that she seems to have grasped the concept at all. Humans usually didn't.

"It's a phone booth," says Beatrice.

"Bigger on the inside than outside," says Amy. "And it can travel through space and time too. Can Skidbladnir do that?"

Loki blinks. “Humans have such a vessel?”

“No, no, no,” says Amy. “It’s just a story.” She frowns a little. “Just the way you described Skidbladnir, I thought it could be true.”

Slightly disappointed, Loki says, “Other than its compactibility, Skidbladnir is just a boat. We used it for camping trips. Until Odin gave it to Frey, chief of the Vanir.”

“What about Gungnir, the spear that can hit any mark?” says Beatrice.

Tapping his chin, Loki says, “I did give that to Odin, but that was a different...adventure.” Another one of his under-appreciated acts of self-sacrifice. Really, Odin should have appreciated what Loki did for Thor. It’s not like sleeping with Sif was any great prize.

“Did the dwarf sew up your lips?” says Beatrice.

“Grandma!” says Amy, sounding absolutely scandalized. The gifts to Odin, Thor and Sif were made by two rival clans of dwarfs in a contest. The prize was Loki’s head. At the last minute Loki convinced the winner that since only his head had been promised, it couldn’t be detached at the neck. Said dwarf chose to sew up Loki’s mouth in lieu of decapitation.

He’s not sure exactly why Amy sounds so disapproving, but he senses an opportunity for comedy, or at least shock value.

With just the barest bit of concentration, he creates an illusion of wire stitches over his lips. Turning to Amy, and Beatrice he says, “Mmmphhhff!”

Beatrice sits back in her seat, hand over her mouth.

Amy gasps. “How can you even joke about that?!”

Loki tilts his head. The serious answer, the truthful answer, is how can he not? Joking about pain is the only weapon he has. It is the way he thumbs his nose up at the universe. The way he proves he is unbroken, and if not the god of mischief, then at least mischief’s master.

But that isn’t the funny answer.

He creates an illusion of himself in the backseat next to Beatrice and lets that projection say, “Don’t worry, m’lady. I am not offended by my joke.”

“Ahh!” says Beatrice looking frantically back and forth between the illusion of Loki and Loki’s real self.

The car almost swerves off the road. “Don’t do that without warning me!” says Amy.

“Mmmphhfff,” says Loki’s real self, still feigning the stitches.

“Don’t you people believe in proportional punishment?” Amy shoots him a glance that looks angry, hurt and scandalized all at once.

Loki tilts his head. In the scheme of things, that physical agony was small. He had done a wrong. He paid a price. It was logical. There were other pains, other slights that were random and unjust. They hurt more. But he cannot think of them, much less speak of them. Instead, he lets his astrally-projected self lean forward and whisper near her ear. “But if I hadn’t had my lips sewn shut I wouldn’t have learned the art of astral projection — out of sheer desperation to wag my tongue.”

Beatrice snorts.

Loki lets the illusion of himself and the stitches fade. “And if Thor hadn’t had the opportunity to hold me down while the stitches were put in, he might not have felt that he’d recovered his honor and we might never have become friends.”

Amy shoots him a look that communicates both revulsion and disbelief.

But Thor and Loki had been friends, hadn’t they? They’d both risked their lives for one another. And for a long time Thor’s friendship had surely helped ease Valli and Nari’s dealings with other Asgardians. They had been known more for Thor’s patronage, and less as Loki’s sons.

In the end what good had it done them, though? Even, brave, noble, supposedly honest, Thor had caved to Odin.

Loki clenches his fists. He cannot believe that Valli and Nari have met their ends. They are somewhere, alive, if not well, and wherever they are he will find them. Loki is very good at finding lost things, and the more impossible the task, the more likely it is he will succeed. Even Odin gives

him that.

“So...” says Amy, eyes focused on the road ahead. “Can you tell us what we’re going to do when we find gala drill?”

“Gala drill?” says Loki. A party and a drill? He scratches his ear... Did he hear right, or lose the thread of magic? Something tickles in the back of his mind

“You know, elf queen, in the books?” says Amy.

“And movies!” Beatrice pipes in.

“Ahhh...a name from a new myth,” says Loki, the tickle becoming an itch. There is something about the name that feels almost, but not quite right.

Amy blinks. “I guess, maybe.”

Shaking his head, Loki says, “No king or queen of the elves would reveal their true name. It would mean sacrificing too much of their power.” Lifting his eyebrows, he tilts his head. “And believe me, power isn’t something elven monarchs are keen on relinquishing.”

Amy leans forward in her seat. She isn’t wearing the figure-flattering shirt she wore the other day. What she is wearing now is baggy, and goes too far up her chest. Loki has no idea why someone with such astonishing breasts would want to hide them.

“Uh....is she going to be unhappy to see us here?” Amy says, looking nervously out the window.

“You and Beatrice? Oh, no, you are fine. The elves resented Odin’s orders to withdraw from your realm. They saw it their duty to play an active role in shaping human culture. They’ll be delighted to see you. Me, on the other hand...” He puts a hand to his chin, and taps contemplatively. “I will need a disguise.”

“The elf queen can’t read hearts?” whispers Amy quietly.

Startled by the question, Loki turns to her. “Actually, the elf queen can read hearts, or minds rather. I’m sure that she’ll see through the disguise, but it will confuse her court, and give her plausible deniability should Odin pay

her a visit.”

“You’re on the outs with Odin already?” says Beatrice.

Choosing to ignore that question, Loki says, “As for what I want with the elf queen...I want a simple exchange of information.”

He sees Amy’s eyes lift to the rear view mirror and realizes she and Beatrice are exchanging a glance.

Let them wonder. He has been more than accommodating.

Amy squeezes Car’s steering wheel. “What sort of disguise?”

Loki tilts his head. “The best disguise is like the best lie. As close to the truth as possible.” He concentrates. His armor with its magical camouflage is too fine to belong to just any ordinary soldier. He dulls it to steel, painted dark gray. His hair he changes to brown, his chin and nose he broadens, and he increases his height and the width of his shoulders.

“Whoa,” says Amy, “you were big enough already.”

Unable to resist a chance to jest, Loki smirks. “Yes, yes, I was,” he says in a deep, husky voice.

Amy tilts her head. “What does that mean?”

Before Loki even has a chance to purse his lips at her disappointing inability to grasp that little bit of sly innuendo, Beatrice hits him on the back of the head.

That’s more like it!

“Argh!” Loki screams, feigning pain. He turns and smiles at Beatrice. She scowls at him.

“Oh, my God,” says Amy.

Loki smirks at her. “I’m not really a god, but I’ll pretend to be one for you.”

Beatrice hits him again. “Argh!” Loki cries, but he is unable to suppress a wide grin. There’s nothing like a bit of comedy to take one’s mind off a daunting quest.

“Was that an allusion to penis size?” Amy says, hands tightening on the

steering wheel so hard her knuckles turn white.

Loki's smile drops. Cringing in genuine distaste he says, "Must you be so anatomical?"

Amy is silent for a moment. Dipping her chin and scowling, she begins to chant. "Penis, penis, penis."

Beatrice whacks him over the head again.

"...penis, penis, penis..."

"Hit her, not me!" Loki cries.

"...penis, penis, penis," says Amy, looking angrier and angrier.

"You started it," the old woman replies.

Huffing, Loki says, "To return to the previous topic — "

Amy stops her chant.

"Thank you," says Beatrice.

"I will not try to disguise my Frost Giant nature, but I will go by the name of Fjölnir Thorsbruter. It's a common name among Frost Giants in Thor's legion, and won't raise suspicion."

"You look like a Frost Giant now?" says Amy, looking him up and down.

"Of course," says Loki, slightly vexed.

"You're not blue. In the movies Frost Giants are blue."

Loki stares at her, completely at a loss for what she could be talking about.

From the backseat comes Beatrice's voice. "Oh, my, how lovely."

Amy's eyes go back to the road. They have just come over a gentle rise, and now in the distance beyond cultivated fields, orchards, pasture lands, and a wide river, Alfheim's only city in the domain of the light elves is on full display.

"It's beautiful," Amy says.

Loki gazes at the city in the distance. Set into the side of a mountain, it sits beside the border road. The city's architecture is reminiscent of human European architecture from the 12th century. The entire city is made from

white stone. Thick walls and ramparts with small slitted windows encircle more buildings with the same small slitted windows. There are peaked tile roofs, all in green. At the center of the city, rising up above the other buildings, is the castle proper. Dark green ivy climbs along walls; trees with lavender leaves lift their crowns alongside the buildings.

Loki hasn't been here in over a hundred years. Squinting, he looks hard for any changes in the scenery, but even the ivy and trees within the city gates remain exactly as he remembers them. Absolutely nothing has changed.

"I suppose it's quaint," he says. He's not sure how the humans can be impressed. Chicago, with its riot of styles from only the last century or so, displays more variety of architecture in a single block than the whole city of Alfheim. And Alfheim's city is so small. It is only a few miles wide and the tallest tower can't be over ten stories.

"Like a fairy castle," says Beatrice, her voice awed.

Loki snorts. "Well, technically —"

"Are those dinosaurs?" Amy says, looking out at the fields.

Loki follows her gaze. A few hadrosaurs dot the pastures, and two are being ridden in neat formation along the city's main wall. From afar they look a lot like the velociraptors Loki hatched so long ago. They have powerful hind legs and smaller forelimbs. They do not walk on their hind limbs exclusively though, and their mouths are beak-like. They also get much larger than velociraptors — up to the size of a bus.

"Yes," says Loki.

He blinks. He's a bit surprised English has a word for dinosaur. Loki doesn't know English particularly well. He uses magic to translate languages. On Asgard they call it "The Gift of Tongues." Humans might call it a "spell," but it's more a state of mind. Loki doesn't fight the magic that flows through Amy and Beatrice that wants to interact with the appropriate neurons in his brain's speech centers.

The trick has its limitations: if there is no corresponding word between

languages, translations become difficult. But now there is a common English word for dinosaurs! Fascinating. Staring at the creatures, he realizes there is even an English word for specific dinosaur species. “Specifically, hadrosaurs, harmless herbivores,” he adds. Harmless unless they step on you, of course.

Tensing at the wheel, Amy looks nervously to the dark forest still on their left. “I don’t have to worry about T-rexes or velociraptors, do I?”

Loki’s mouth drops open. “You know what a velociraptor is?”

“I’ve seen Jurassic Park,” says Amy. Voice rising tremulously she says, “Are there velociraptors here?”

“No,” says Loki. “No....nasty creatures though, I’ll give you that.”

Amy turns her face quickly to him. She doesn’t look relieved for some reason.

Puzzling over that, Loki looks out at the road and his eyes go wide. “Look out for the hadrosaur dung!”

Amy hits the brakes and they screech to a halt just in time.

“It’s the size of a dog!” says Beatrice.

“It looks like bird poop,” says Amy. “White...but really lumpy. I wonder if I could get a sample and take it back to school? We have a thermos, don’t we? I have a friend from undergrad in the micro lab at UIC. We could compare the genome of the hadrosaur dung bacteria to the bacteria in bird guano. If elves were on Earth at one time, there is a possibility that the bacteria might share a common ancestor!”

Loki blinks.

“We probably don’t have time for that, Dear. Right Loki?” says Beatrice.

Loki stifles a laugh at Beatrice’s conspiratorial prompting, but he’s more impressed than repulsed. It’s something Hoenir would do — at this point Loki is quite inured to dung collection. Pursing his lips he says, “Maybe later. For now, perhaps you should drive more slowly? We are close enough to the castle for it to be safe after dark.”

“Right,” says Amy, steering the vehicle so it straddles the dung.

Loki hopes none gets on the axles; it is quite foul smelling. He sighs.  
Elves. No appreciation for any type of evolution.

## CHAPTER 8



AMY IS glad for the chance to slow down. It gives her a chance to look around. As they cross the neat fields of what looks like wheat, she can see little thatched cottages. She catches sight of goats, sheep, small shaggy horses, chickens — and sometimes hadrosaurs. From afar their scales are reminiscent of tropical birds, deep, almost iridescent green, with spots of red and yellow.

As they drive along, people — well, they look like people — come out of their little homes, take one look at them, and rush back inside. If they didn't seem so terrified Amy would probably stop the car and get out — no matter how much Loki might protest.

They are just a few miles from the city proper, when two knights come riding up the road towards them. She thinks they are knights anyway. They are wearing armor like the kind she is accustomed to from the Art Institute, are seated on shaggy little white horses, and are carrying lances. Their faces and ears are covered, so despite their proximity she can't see if they're Elves.

“Um...” says Amy.

Loki, now looking like a very pale Conan the Barbarian, looks at the door. “Where is the window crank? I'd like to address them.”

“The button,” says Amy.

“What button?” says Loki.

“Switch,” says Beatrice.

“Ahhhhh....” says Loki.

“Wait, I have a better idea,” says Amy. Pressing a button on the side of the door, she opens the skylight.

“Perfect!” says Loki smiling broadly. “I love this machine.” He looks at Amy, an expression of deep earnestness on his now broad barbarian face. “Do you think it could ever love me?”

Unsure if this is another one of his jokes, Amy just stares at him.

From the backseat, Beatrice says, “Loki dear, they’re jostling their sticks.”

Loki looks out at the knights who are raising their lances. “Just give me a minute,” he says, and then he stands up next to Amy. It puts his hips rather too close to her face. Her cheeks go hot and she’s on guard instantly. She’s really glad he’s busy talking to the knights; otherwise she’s pretty sure he’d have a bit of innuendo to throw her way just now.

A knight gives a yell, and Amy blinks and straightens. The knight is pointing at her car with his lance.

The words coming out of Loki’s mouth seem smooth, almost musical. But the knights raise their lances and then both of them are yelling at Loki. Amy starts gauging the feasibility of a three point turn. The sun is slipping down on the horizon, and Loki has warned against the wisdom of traveling the road at night, but...

From the direction of the castle eight more knights come riding out on horses, followed by knights on hadrosaurs at the rear. The giant creatures move relatively slowly, but they are intimidating. Loki is still talking, and the knights are still waving their lances.

Hand going to the gears, Amy gets ready to switch into reverse. “Loki! Should I turn around?”

Pulling himself back into the car, Loki smiles broadly at her. It’s even more disconcerting than it should be since he’s changed his appearance to be

more Conan the Barbarian-esque. Her brain is having a little difficulty wrapping itself around the concept that it is still the wiry guy with red hair in there. She wants to pinch his cheek or something, to verify everything is real, but the timing is a little inconvenient. And he'd probably misconstrue it as flirting. He's still in the middle of the front seat and way too close to her.

"No, no, we're fine!" he says, his voice still his own. Amy's not sure if it makes the Conan thing better or worse.

"Nothing to worry about," he says. "They're just giving us an escort."

As he says that, the first two knights run around their car, turn around and turn their lances on them again. In front of them the other knights bring their mounts around so their steeds and their lances are perpendicular to the road.

"See," says Conan-esque Loki. "Nothing to worry about."

"Oh, dear," says Beatrice, summing up Amy's feelings exactly.

Falling back into his own seat, Loki-Conan waves a hand forward. "Go ahead!"

Amy checks the rear view mirror. Going backwards doesn't seem much of an option. She puts her foot gently on the gas and drives through the gauntlet. There is a bridge just ahead of them, and a river as wide as an eight-lane highway beneath. Amy notices on the side of the river near the castle the water reflects the sky. On the side of the bridge where the water drains into the dark forest, the river is a muddy snake of churning brown and black. She follows the river's path into the dark forest with her eyes to where it seems to split into tributaries.

"The Delta of Sorrows," says Loki softly. She looks over at him and he's shaking his head, one side of his mouth curled up in a crooked smile. "Luddites and hypocrites," he mutters.

Amy blinks and focuses her attention ahead. The knights are falling into formation behind them.

"The first fork in the road past the river, take a right turn toward the castle," says Loki.

Amy swallows and nods. As they get closer to the castle, Beatrice says, “Oh, my, it’s even lovelier up close.”

And it is. It’s hard for Amy to keep her eyes on the road. The tremendous white wall on her left is covered with dark green ivy. Blue flowers are interspersed with the leaves.

“Yes,” says Loki. “You have to hand it to the elves, they can make even man-eating plants picturesque.”

“Man-eating?” says Beatrice.

“Let’s say you wouldn’t want to try and scale the wall by climbing the ivy,” says Loki.

“Oh,” says Beatrice. “It is so pretty, though...I wonder if it would keep the squirrels away from the bird feeder outside our kitchen window?”

“Grandma!” says Amy.

“It’s difficult to get clippings of the stuff,” says Loki. “It bites.”

“A shame,” says Beatrice.

Before Amy can say anything, Beatrice lets out a gasp. They’re closing in on the main gates of the city, and for the first time can see within. More knights are riding out, but others are holding back a crowd.

Amy pulls the car through the gates, into what seems to be a market square with brightly colored tents for stalls interspersed with lavender-leafed trees with white bark. Great buildings of white stone look over the square. They are able to see the people of the realm up close for the first time. They are slender, and not terribly tall. Most appear pale, but Amy sees every shade of skin tone. They seem to all be blessed with delicate, doll like features, and there is no mistaking the pointed ears.

“Elves...” breathes Amy.

Conan-Loki snorts. “You expected trolls?”

Neither Amy nor Beatrice bother to respond. A moment later the sun slips completely from the sky, and all around them great orbs of green light rise into the air until they reach a height just above the great wall around the city.

The car's headlights become brighter.

From the crowd there is a collective, "Ooooooh."

"Clever car," says Loki, patting the dash.

The elves in the market push against the knights holding them back and begin to smile and wave at Amy, Beatrice and Loki. Amy hears shouts rising up in the crowd. In the corner of her eye she swears she sees an elf raising his fist at the knights.

Amy cranes her neck for a better view, but Loki says, "Keep driving. The hadrosaurs can tip us over." He looks over his shoulder. "Or step on us."

That does wonders to focus Amy's attention.

They follow a knight through the market, and between buildings that are a few stories tall, the knights on hadrosaurs close behind them. In the glow of the orbs the white stone looks green. Some of the buildings have wide windows. Behind her Amy hears Beatrice say, "Oh, that looks like a dress shop, and that looks like toys maybe...Oh, my, the people are just darling."

Amy wishes she could look, but trains her eyes on the knight leading them. She tries to keep track of the way they're going. It's dark, and a little difficult to tell for sure, but it seems to be one main road that switches back on itself as it makes its way up the mountain.

They make a few more switchback turns and come to a street that has walls on both sides. On one side the wall is covered with the ivy and flowers.

"Oh, the shops are gone," says Beatrice.

"We're nearly on the palace grounds," says Loki.

The knight in front of them holds up a hand. Abruptly, the ivy on the wall slithers away like a mass of snakes and a metal gate is revealed. Beatrice gives a startled cry, and Amy swallows.

The gates swing open with a loud, metallic clang, the knight shouts, and Loki says, "Drive in."

Amy's foot is already on the gas. She eases through the gates. Up until this point they've been driving on a steady incline up the mountainside, but

before her the ground plateaus. There are trees, bushes, and masses of tall flowering plants. The road leads to what can only be described as a palace — it rises up at least ten stories. Its delicate towers and walls crawl with more ivy. Above the road hover the green orbs. All along the road are elves standing at attention, wearing what looks like chain mail. From the palace more elves are coming. Even at a distance, Amy can see they are not wearing armor of any kind. Male and female, they wear clothing that looks medieval, but Amy's pretty sure that human medieval clothing did not glow.

The knight in front of them barks an order. "Time to get out," says Loki.

He turns to them, his features sharp. "Remember, I am Fjölnir Thorsbrutter." He tips his head. "If Odin finds out I am here, it will be difficult for me to return you to your realm."

Amy hears the back door open. "I don't know if I'd mind staying," says Beatrice as the retinue of elves in glowing gowns draws to a halt in front of them. "My, my." With that she climbs out of the car.

Loki looks at Amy, his eyes wide.

"Don't worry, Amy says. "I don't want to stay anywhere that doesn't have antibiotics." Or a good laboratory. What fun was dung if she couldn't analyze it?

Mouth grim, jaw hard, Conan-Loki says, "Smart girl."

An instant later he is standing outside on the golden road, smiling broadly.

Amy slips the key from the ignition and watches him. He's like a chameleon, and not just in the way he changes his physical appearance.

Stepping from the car, she takes a breath and pockets her keys and attached pepper spray. The air is cool, clear and untainted by the car's air freshener or vents. The sun may be gone, but everything still smells like sunlight and grass, and floral smells she can't quite place. She looks up past the orbs. The stars are bright, but the Big Dipper is nowhere to be seen. Her mouth drops open, and then she smiles at the wonder of it. She is on another

world.

Smile still in place, she walks around to where Conan-Loki and Beatrice stand. One elf, a man dressed in subdued black who looks no older than Amy, is talking to Loki. The other elves are thronged around Beatrice.

“You human!” says a young man in a sing-song voice to Beatrice. His hair is golden and long. He is wearing long robes of dark blue velvet with embroidered stars that literally sparkle. He turns to Amy. “You, too! Come to feast!”

“First, clothes!” says a woman. Amy blinks. At her side is an elf woman with skin dark as ebony. She wears a dress of emerald green, cinched tightly at the waist, low cut on the front, with gold brocade along the neckline that seems to project its own light.

Small hands go to Amy’s arms and pull her forward, but then a heavier arm drapes over her shoulder. Conan-Loki’s voice whispers in her ear. “I told them I was accidentally drawn into your realm, and that I rescued you, and this is how you are repaying me. The only detail I’ve changed is my name. Fjölnir. Thorsbrutter. Don’t forget.”

Before Amy can even respond, Loki’s arm is gone, and he’s stepping around the crowd to the elf in black.

As the lady in emerald scoots up to Amy, Amy turns her head to see the man in blue, arm-in-arm with Beatrice.

Touching Beatrice’s hair lightly, he speaks with an oddly lilting accent Amy can’t place. “You like most beautiful gnome I have ever seen.”

Amy’s eyes bug out, but Beatrice just giggles and smiles.

“My name Belladal,” says the woman next to Amy in the same lilting tones as the man.

“Amy,” says Amy, trying to keep her eyes on Conan-Loki, walking ahead of the throng, towering next to the elf in black.

“Aaay Meeee,” says Belladal.

“Aaay Meeee,” say the other elves in unison.

Amy turns her eyes to them for an instant. Beatrice and Amy are positively thronged now. She smiles and they gasp. “You many teeth for human!” says Belladal. Confused, Amy blinks. Turning her head she tries to find Loki, but he and the elf in black are nowhere to be seen. Before she even has a chance to process that thought or be afraid, great wooden doors ahead of them open and light spills out of the palace.

She hears the elf man next to Beatrice exclaim. “No, no, no! You not 85! Humans not live that long!” She can’t hear Beatrice’s response. Her eyes are nearly blinded by the golden light in the palace, and elves in much simpler attire are running out of the doors singing or maybe talking in musical tones.

“Dresses! You get dresses!” says Belladal. “Elves like humans. Not see so long! You like dresses! Music! Feast! Happy! Happy! Happy!”

“Happp—eeee!” sing the elves.

And Amy isn’t sure if it is magic, or just that everything is magical, but she begins to feel her heart lift, and her lips pull into a wide grin.

Beatrice slips her arm into Amy’s as Belladal glides into the palace ahead of them, her dark skin warm and glowing in the light. Following the elven woman with her eyes, Beatrice shakes her head and whispers to Amy, “the elves have Negroes, too. I never would have expected that.”

Amy squeezes her eyes shut and resists the desire to facepalm. Beside her Beatrice doesn’t seem to even notice. She’s chattering away with the elven man.

Amy sighs and opens her eyes. At least Beatrice didn’t say anything about Belladal getting a position of lady or princess elf through affirmative action. She smiles ruefully; some of the magic of the place must be rubbing off after all.



AN HOUR or so and a magically altered dress later, Amy’s standing in a great

hall. Lining the wall are tapestries that glitter, glow and almost seem to move. A giant orb of gold is suspended in the air. The floor beneath her feet is white polished stone. To one side of the room are large ornately carved doors that lead, she's told, to "big feast...little wait only." Music that sounds like harps and flutes is floating through the air, but she can't see any musicians. She looks around the room a little anxiously. She hasn't seen Loki since they entered the palace.

Fenrir isn't here either. During the dressmaking session an elf woman had taken the dog away — Belladal said it was "so small beast no smell like dead things." Amy would have protested more, but it was true, her little beast still stunk. Fenrir's supposed to be back in time for the feast, though. Looking around again, Amy pats her skirts and feels the comforting lumps of her key chain and pepper spray beneath the fabric.

At the other end of the hall Beatrice is sitting down on an elaborately carved wooden chair, a throng of elves around her. Grinning ear-to-ear, she looks beautiful. Her dress is palest rose with an elegant princess neckline. Her white hair is lifted up in a bun that is crowned with pale pink flowers. It occurs to Amy that Beatrice must seem far more exotic to them than Amy herself does. No one in the hall looks older than 25.

Amy looks down at her own dress self-consciously. It's very pretty, creamy with emerald green trim. But the neckline is painfully low and wide. She's afraid if she bends forwards she might spill out. She tried to ask for something more discreet, but her protests were met with laughter. "Why hide best feature?" Belladal had said. And then Belladal's expression had contorted to one of genuine curiosity. "Are you wet-nurse?"

Remembering that comment did nothing to ease Amy's self-consciousness now. The elves, male and female, crowded around her speaking in their musical tones and staring at her breasts doesn't help either. Different ideas about propriety, obviously. None of them seem to speak English the way Belladal or the elf man in blue are able to, so commenting on

her embarrassment doesn't help.

Figures clad in black and gray emerging from a small door at the side of the hall catches her attention. It's Loki at last — still looking like a pale version of Conan the Barbarian. The elf in black is next to him. Grateful for a chance to escape her ogling little throng, Amy casts a smile around her, looks apologetically in the direction of Loki, and then back at them. The throng seems to understand because a narrow path opens up before her. She bolts through it without a backwards glance.

Loki catches her eye, says something to the elf in black, and then tilts his head towards a hallway off to the side. A few moments later Amy is there beside him. His armor is still the dark gray he changed it to in the car, and he's donned no other finery. His face is uncharacteristically pensive.

"What's wrong?" she asks, and he blinks.

"Nothing," he says. "I will be granted an audience with the queen during the feast." Her brows furrow slightly. She thinks they are alone in the small hallway, the noise of revelry at their backs, but she's not quite sure. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she leans close to him. "Are you worried she'll know who you are?"

Smiling a little sadly, he says, "I'm certain that she will. That isn't what disturbs me."

"Well, what then?" says Amy, a hand almost unconsciously going to his arm.

Not meeting her eyes, his lips quirk slightly, his expression looks sad instead of happy.

"I find myself nervous about the answer to my question," he says.

"You never told us what the question is," Amy says.

His eyes narrow, though the quirk of his lips doesn't disappear. "I try, as much as possible, to push it from my mind. If I think of it I might go mad." He looks so distraught, Amy has the urge to give him a hug.

Stepping back, he takes her hand. "But where are my manners? You look

lovely.”

From the great hall there is the sound of horns.

“Nice breasts,” says Loki, barely audible over the din.

Amy’s jaw falls. Every time she feels the slightest bit of sympathy for him, he just has to go and ruin it. “Did you just say nice breasts?”

He quirks an eyebrow. Leaning in he says, “Actually, I said nice dress.”

Amy blinks and reddens; how foolish of her. She’s about to apologize when still holding her hand, his eyes drift down and his mouth stretches into a leer. “But now that you mention it...”

Her hand connects with his cheek a moment later with a satisfying smack.

Rubbing his cheek, he just grins at her.

Amy points at her eyes and says, “Focus.”

The grin vanishes. “You’re right, I can’t be seen to be fraternizing with the help.” He smirks. “Who knows, the queen may want to take advantage of my silver tongue.”

“Huh?” says Amy, not seeing any connection.

The smirk vanishes.

Amy blinks.

Patting her shoulder, Loki sighs. “If I ever need to capture a unicorn I’ll be sure to let you know.”

Conan-Loki’s inappropriate leers are immediately forgiven. “I would love to see a unicorn!”

Putting a hand to her back, he guides her towards the hall. “And I’m sure one would love to see you.” As they step into the great hall, Loki says, “Dinner has just been called. I will see you later.”

The elf woman who had taken Fenrir away during the dressmaking session approaches, Fenrir at her feet, bathed, groomed and looking — well, almost like a dog. “This way,” the elf woman says.

Eyes going wide, Amy says, “You speak English!”

The elf blinks at her, as though surprised to be understood. “Yes. But

secret, please?”

Amy tilts her head, curious. But all she says is, “Of course.” She turns to look at Loki but he’s already gone.



AS THE REST of the guests are herded into the dining hall, Lionel, the steward, leads Loki to a small antechamber dimly lit by dancing fireflies. It’s furnished only with a tapestry on one wall, and two chairs facing one another, a low table in the middle. It is exactly the sort of thing Loki would have expected.

Closing the door behind them, Lionel presses his ear to it as though listening for something.

Loki tilts his head. Lionel meets his gaze, nods, and then moves quickly to the room’s only window and draws the curtains. Putting his finger to his lips, Lionel moves to the opposite wall and draws back the curtain. Pressing against a few of the white stones in rapid succession, Lionel backs up. The stones seem to dissolve, as though made of sand, revealing a dark narrow passage.

Lionel gestures with his hands for Loki to enter.

Loki does not move. “Where are you taking me?”

Lionel is small and thin even for an elf. He swallows. “The queen will speak a few words at the feast, and then she will retire to her chambers. She will meet you there.”

Loki stares at him for a few uncomfortably long heartbeats. Not because he doesn’t believe Lionel’s words — Loki can’t read hearts, but he has a sense for lies. It is the truth, but still unbelievable. Loki is nowhere near the queen’s station, whether a member of Thor’s personal legion or as Odin’s retainer...*former* retainer. Having him in her chambers would be scandalous, but it would explain the secrecy; and a secret passage would make perfect

sense.

“If you like, I will go first,” says Lionel.

“I would like,” says Loki. Lionel may not be lying, but he wouldn’t put it past a monarch to leave a surprise without their retainer’s knowledge.

Lionel bows his head. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a dull olive orb. As he lifts it, it lights from within, casting the same green glow as the orbs outside the palace. And then Lionel steps into the dark passageway, Loki following.

Loki hears the tapestry fall back into place, and a sound like pebbles sliding together. When he looks behind him there is a seemingly solid wall.

After a few paces, the passageway changes to a stairway. The steps are low and narrow. Loki touches the walls. They are dry and cool beneath his slightly warm damp fingers. He can feel his pulse quickening. This is it. Soon he will know where his sons and Sigyn are, whether they are alive or dead.

Taking a deep breath, he tries to calm himself as best he can.

They have gone a few flights when the scent of stone and dust gives way to the smell of green living things, pine and sage maybe. It’s not unpleasant at all. Loki suddenly has an overpowering sense of déjà vu. He blinks. Prophecy is completely beyond him. He is over 1,000 years old. He may never have been in this stairway, but he has been in ones like it. Surely.

And yet...the fragrance. He takes a long breath. He is just anxious.

In front of him Lionel draws to a stop. Loki can’t see what he does with his hands but the wall falls away, and they step from behind another tapestry into a living area. The smell of pine and sage is stronger, and there is also the smell of meat and fresh bread. There is a chandelier above that looks like a mass of long silver leaves. There are no candles or orbs set in it: the whole thing glows, casting a glow like moonlight. Below it are two chairs, and a table laden with food. Nearby Loki can hear the sound of falling water.

“Her Majesty’s chambers,” says the steward. He gestures to a seat. “Please, sit and eat your fill.”

Loki's mouth is watering, but he doesn't sit down. He tilts his head to the sound of water. In his mind he pictures a living wall of lichens, a small spout emerging from it, and a stream of water falling into a semi-circular pool set flush in the floor. Turning, he walks quickly from the little room, Lionel at his heels, saying, "Stop! Wait!"

He steps into the next room over and draws up short. There are the wall and fountain just as he imagined them.

"Sir," Lionel says, "you are to wait in the other room."

Loki doesn't move. And then he sees it, magic, the same color as moonlight, spilling from behind his back.

"Leave us, Lionel," says a feminine voice as smooth and sure as water over rocks.

Loki and Lionel both turn. The elf queen approaches them. She wears a simple circlet on her brow. Her ears peek out from straight black hair. Her eyes are almond shaped, almost like a human from the continent of Asia, but they are nearly as light as Loki's own. Her features are fine, delicate and almost painfully symmetrical, like all of the elf race. She is as slender and willowy as a reed — not precisely his type, but undeniably beautiful.

Loki has seen her several times before. He's always looked at her from a distance, or from over Odin's shoulder as a retainer. She's never met his eyes before. She does now. Loki has the peculiar sensation of coming in from the cold to find a warm and welcome fire.

For some reason he almost says "Gala" aloud, but holds it back. Strange to be affected so by a silly human myth.

He tilts his head. This feeling of belonging, is it a trick of her magic?

"Yes, my Queen," Lionel says, drawing Loki from his reverie. Bowing quickly the retainer leaves the room.

"Loki, son of wildfire and the green and peaceful isle," says the elf queen.

He hasn't heard his heritage described that way before, but he doesn't argue. Bowing, Loki lets his disguise drop and prepares to kneel.

“Please,” says the elf queen holding out a pale hand. “Don’t.”

Loki straightens. There is something in her voice, fear or apprehension; he can’t tell.

“Why are you here?” she says coming forward, magic swirling in the air so much it warms his skin. She cannot possibly be afraid of him, her magic is so much stronger.

“I mean you no harm, your highness. I come only for an exchange of information.”

“What information do you wish to give me?”

Loki tilts his head. “A pathway, from your realm to Asgard.”

“I know many of those,” she says dropping her eyes and moving quietly as a shadow so they are no more than a foot apart. That closeness should strike him as odd — but it doesn’t, and that is truly odd.

“Ah, but this is a very strategic one, your highness. Right from the heart of your realm to just behind the throne of Odin himself.”

The elf queen’s eyes shoot up to his and then she looks aside and walks away. “I already know of such a pathway,” she says.

Loki feels the first prickle of worry. “But this, your highness, this one....” He licks his lips. “It is very near, but so small you would never find it unless — ”

“The one inside our wine cellar,” she says.

Loki’s eyes go wide. He feels as though the wind has been knocked out of him. He brings a hand to the chest plate of his armor and feels the press of his book tucked inside there. The queen’s eyes follow the movement, and for an instant he thinks he sees something cruel and predatory flash in them. But then the look is gone, and her features again are cool and distant.

“Someone already bartered that piece of information to me...long, long ago,” she says, her eyes dropping to the small pool in the floor.

She looks sharply at him, and then comes forward again. Tilting her head she says, “But I would hear your question anyways.”

It takes a moment for Loki to process her words. No barter? No exchange? When do gifts ever come freely?

“Tell me,” she says. And again she is very close, too close for decorum, and again it is a fact that hovers at the edge of his consciousness, something that should strike him as uncomfortable and off, but the feeling of her proximity is completely different. It’s like a warm fire.

He closes his eyes. He sees Valli and Nari as children, with Helen — who he also lost. He cannot think them lost, too — or Sigyn, gone like his Aggie. “My sons, my ex-wife, Sigyn, I want to know where they are, ” he says softly. She draws back, just a bit. Maybe he isn’t speaking softly, maybe it just sounds faint over the angry pounding of his own heart.

“I don’t know,” she says, her gaze firm on his. “I cannot see everything. I am sorry.”

She’s not lying...and yet...

His next breath is too hard and too loud. He wants to turn away, but doesn’t think he can. Valli and Nari’s faces and the blackness of space flash before him. His sons...his beautiful sons.

The elf queen takes his arm, and that act of comfort is scandalous, ridiculous, coming from a queen. Not that he hasn’t gotten women far above his station to do things far more scandalous — but not without trying.

“Come sit down,” she says pulling him towards the chairs in the other room.

“I should go,” he says. He doesn’t know where.

“Odin does not know you’re here,” she says.

That is pure truth.

He lets himself be led and sinks down into the chair. She doesn’t move away. Rubbing a hand on his shoulder she says, “Loki, Loki, Loki,” as though practicing the word. Her touch is oddly familiar.

Almost unconsciously he takes her hand in his and she comes around so that she stands just to the side of him, very close. She leans down so their

eyes are level; locks of her black hair fall down over her shoulders. “If I cannot give you the knowledge you need, at least let me give you comfort,” she says, her face close to his.

When Loki jested with the human girl earlier about the elf queen taking advantage of his silver tongue, it had been just that, a jest, and nothing more. The queen was not known to take lovers casually, if at all. Even Baldur had tried and failed.

And yet...Loki looks at the pale skin where her neck meets the junction of her shoulders. He has the feeling that if he ghosts his lips there he knows exactly what sound she’ll make. He looks at her lips and thinks he knows exactly how they will taste.

He pulls her closer and she doesn’t resist. When he kisses her it isn’t like a first kiss, laced with excitement and uncertainty. It’s like comfort and homecoming. He needs those things.

And she tastes exactly as he thought she would.

Afterwards, when he feels a brief bit of peace, it feels natural to fall asleep with his arms draped around the elf woman he hasn’t called anything less formal than “your Majesty.” He dreams of a younger Alfheim, with a brighter, yellower sun, of gazing out the window of the palace at a mortal peasant man come to visit. The human smiles at Loki and it’s warm, good humored and yet it fills him with dread.

His eyes snap open. He hears fast footfalls, and then the sting of sharp cold metal at his throat.

He looks up. The elf queen is there, holding his own blade against his neck with one hand, his book in the other.

This is not good.



THE DINING ROOM is as grand as the other halls of the palace. More tapestries,

another glowing orb in the ceiling, and a great table still piled high with food — even though the diners are mostly done.

Amy sits back in her seat, pleasantly full. Near her feet Fenrir whines. Amy glances around. All eyes in the hall are trained on Beatrice, who is recounting the story of her life. Taking advantage of their lack of attention, Amy slips a piece of cheese to Fenrir.

The queen came into the hall a few hours ago. From a raised dais at the end of the table she bid Amy and her grandmother greetings in English nearly as perfect as Loki's, before addressing her own people and then taking her leave.

Amy was asked a few questions during the meal by Belladal, but Beatrice very quickly became the star of the show. Now Beatrice is telling the story of her life, how she was born to a formerly wealthy clothing merchant in the Ukraine. She has described her parents, her family and her friends in greater detail than Amy has ever heard. Amy is as enraptured as the elves are to hear previously unheard stories of her family's history. The tale is interrupted frequently by the elf man in blue translating for the rest of the table.

Beatrice comes to the part of how her family and friends were persecuted after the communists took power, and the elves hiss before the translation even starts. Startled, Beatrice, a few seats down and across the table, meets Amy's eyes. Next to Amy, Belladal says, "We know of these communists. Killers of kings, queens, lords and ladies...but not only just! Kill common people, too."

"Yes," says Beatrice nodding gravely at Belladal. "They caused a great famine."

"This we know not!" says the elf man. The whole hall goes silent, as though they are hanging breathlessly on Beatrice's words. When she finishes describing the Holodomor, the famine induced by Stalin that killed nearly 2.7 million people, the elf in blue begins to translate again. Amy notices he doesn't just address the people at the table, he also addresses the servants in

the background.

For some reason it makes her stomach feel heavy.

At one point Belladal leans to Amy and whispers. “Your grandmother. So brave. Journey to lawless land no king. No queen. Much danger!”

Amy puts the crystal goblet in her hands down on the table. There is a sweet liquid within it — she’s pretty sure it’s alcoholic and wishes she could just drink some water. She is the designated driver after all. “We do all right,” she says to the elf woman.

Belladal’s eyes go wide. “If you not saved by Frost Giant...” She shakes her head. “No king. No queen. Is...is...discord....chaos.”

Amy scowls a little. “Well, no...” But Beatrice has begun to speak again and Belladal’s head turns away. At Amy’s feet Fenrir whimpers.

“I have to take her out,” Amy whispers to Belladal.

Belladal looks like she is about to get up, but the servant elf Amy had spoken to briefly is by Amy’s side at that instant. “Don’t worry,” says Amy. “I’ll go with her.”

Belladal nods and returns her gaze to Beatrice who has just begun her story of her voyage to America. Amy wishes she could stay for it, but part of her also wants to flee the hall as soon as possible.

The servant leads Amy and Fenrir out of the dining hall and Amy finds herself close to a place she remembers from earlier — the restroom. There is a group of elves in drab garb with an orb like the ones that line the ceilings and hover in the sky. But this one is brown and murky. As Amy watches, they take the orb into the restroom.

Drawing to a stop, Amy tilts her head. “What are they doing?”

The elf woman next to her bites her lip. “The orb magic water...used up. They empty. They refill new magic water.”

Amy’s eyes widen. “Are they flushing it down the toilet?” Despite the quaintness of the elf architecture, they do have flush toilets, thankfully.

The elf woman bites her lip again. “Yes. But don’t worry. Dark water

goes down to delta. We get drinking water and fish up river.”

Fenrir begins tugging at the leash, and the elf woman pulls Amy down the passageway. Amy follows obediently, but the image of the river churning brown and black towards the dark lands is heavy in her mind.

A few paces later, they are stepping out into the cool night air onto a path of worn stones. The green orbs hover in the air, and light blue fireflies dance around them.

“What is your name?” Amy asks.

“Dolinar,” says the elf woman.

“Dolinar,” says Amy. “Do elves live down river?”

For a moment there is just the sound of Fenrir’s leash in the grass, and Dolinar’s and Amy’s footfalls. And then Dolinar says quietly, “Yes. But only thieves, murderers, traitors...and those who will not obey the life price.”

The night air suddenly feels very chill. Clutching her arms to her chest, Amy says, “That’s wrong. Even if it’s criminals down river, poisoning them is still wrong.”

Dolinar looks quickly to the palace, and then back to Amy. Pointed ears trembling, she whispers, “Yes, I think so, too.”

They stare at one another a moment. It occurs to Amy that even dressed in plain servants’ garb, Dolinar looks more noble than Amy ever will. Dolinar’s hair is a deep walnut brown. Her eyes are hazel, and Amy is sure she sees light flickering in them. Her facial features are so delicate, and so perfect; her body is as small and poised as a ballet dancer.

Dolinar looks away from the palace and into the darkness. “My life mate works in stables. You say you are studying to be animal doctor. Want to see animals?”

Amy’s eyes widen, and she starts walking into the darkness and direction of Dolinar’s gaze. “Let’s go!”

A few minutes later they are approaching a building that is at least four stories tall. Through narrow windows Amy sees the glow of green orbs.

There is an enormous door at the front, but Dolinar leads her around to a small door in the back.

As soon as they enter the stables, Dolinar runs forward. Out of the shadows an elf man in drab pants and a simple shirt comes forward. His hair is long and blonde, his eyes are brown. He takes Dolinar in his arms and they begin speaking quickly in their own tongue.

It's touching, but Amy's eyes almost immediately go down the row of stalls. Her mouth opens. On one side of the stable are horses. On the other are hadrosaurs. The dinosaurs sit on their powerful hind limbs, their front limbs pulled up, and their beak-like snouts turned on their long necks and tucked against their bodies. They look like nothing so much as roosting birds.

Feet moving of their own accord, she approaches one of the sleeping dinosaur's enclosure. The creature untucks its neck, brings its large snout around and blinks yellow eyes. Between its eyes and its colorful, nearly iridescent scales, it looks like a giant parrot. A small gasp comes from Amy's lips.

"She gentle," comes a man's voice from behind her. He says something in elvish and then Dolinar says, "You may touch her, if you wish."

Amy doesn't have to be coaxed. She holds out a hand. The hadrosaur brings its snout forward and sniffs. Then walking forward on its large hind legs, it drops its snout and begins rubbing the side of its head against Amy's fingers. Up close, its scales are actually more like feathers, and they are soft as a chick's down. Amy bites back a laugh of pure wonderment. She doesn't doubt that the moment is real. She can smell the familiar smells of horses and straw, but there is also the smell of the hadrosaur, very akin to a bird. The animal is making soft huffing noises, and Amy catches the odor of its breath, warm and thick with the smell of half digested vegetation. It's wonderful. Magical.

Suddenly, everything that has happened — her horrible sickening run-in with a psychopath, her fear, the horrible sensation that her life was just a

dream, the elves Amy is beginning to suspect are charming fascists, Loki frightening her in the kitchen, and his terrible come-ons, it is all worth it. Even if she can't breathe a word of this moment to anyone except Beatrice; she will know it happened. The universe seems to be grinding along with such beautiful perfection, and Amy's part may be insignificant, but it is still wonderful.

She rubs the hadrosaur's head and finds a small opening. She smiles; it is the animal's ear. She scratches just behind it and the hadrosaur lets loose a deep, pleasant, lowing noise.

"She like you," says Dolinar.

Amy doesn't say anything. Just continues rubbing a few minutes more, feeling the exquisite, alien and yet familiar softness of the creature's scales. She can feel her pulse racing just from the sheer joy of it. This perfect moment, it is all Loki's fault, and that thought almost makes her laugh.

The hadrosaur abruptly pulls itself further upright, shakes its head, and then tucks its snout against its body again.

"Now go back to sleep," says man.

Smiling, Amy turns to them. "Thank you so much..." She blinks at them standing arm in arm. Her brain disconnects from the moment she's just experienced. Tilting her head at the lovely couple she says, "How come you speak English?"

Squeezing the man's hand, Dolinar steps forward. "We do not speak English. We use magic to translate. My life mate, Liddel, and I study magic in secret."

Face very serious, Liddel draws closer to Dolinar. "We would like to learn more magic. We are both hard workers and we were wondering..."

"We have to leave," Dolinar says quickly. Amy's eyes widen and she steps back.

Dolinar swallows. "We haven't paid the life price. "

Overwhelmed and confused, Amy says in a small voice, "Life price?"

“I am pregnant,” says Dolinar and Amy’s eyes flash between the two elves. “But no one in family has died so it is not allowed. Balance of elves and other creatures will be disrupted....”

Charming fascists indeed! “They aren’t going to kill your baby?” Amy gasps.

Dolinar and Liddel blink at her. “No,” says Liddel. “They will take him away.”

“Oh,” says Amy. That is better — but not by much.

“Fjölnir,” says Dolinar. “The Frost Giant you came with, we see his magic, he is very powerful...maybe more powerful than queen.”

“Would he take us as apprentices?” says Liddel. “Just me for now, but later...”

From outside there come loud shouts and the sound of horns. Liddel’s eyes widen. “It is the royal messengers. They may be angered if they know I’ve let you both into Queen’s stables. Hide!”

Dolinar takes Amy’s hand and pulls her and Fenrir towards a hadrosaur stall. She opens the latch with trembling hands as Liddel walks to the main door, shouting something. Amy, Fenrir and Dolinar swing into the stall next to an oblivious hadrosaur, and Dolinar shuts the stall door just as the main door of the stables swings open, and green orbs float in above.

There is much shouting and whinnying of horses. Amy scoops Fenrir up and wraps her hand around her dog’s muzzle before she can bark. Wiggling in her arms, Fenrir makes muffled yipping noises anyway.

Outside the stall door, someone says something that sounds like a question. Amy hears Liddel responding. The stall door rattles.

Turning towards Fenrir, eyes wide, Dolinar points a finger at the dog’s mouth just as her muzzle slips through Amy’s fingers. Fenrir opens her mouth, the stall door rattles again, and Amy’s heart misses a beat. Her dog’s jaws open and shut, Amy can see her tiny lungs heave...but then no sound comes out. Amy looks at Dolinar...the elf woman’s brow looks damp and she

brings a finger to her lips.

Fenrir blinks and starts rubbing her muzzle.

The door of the stall shakes, and then someone says something, and Amy hears footsteps going away. Heart pounding in her ears, she lets out a breath and settles into the shadow of the hadrosaur, still sleeping peacefully.

Amy's not sure how long it is before the elves leave the stable; it feels like an eternity. She hears the sound of livery being readied, and hooves marching out into the night. At last, the stall door swings open, and Liddel's form appears. Looking perplexed, he says, "The messenger and an armed escort is going to the World Gate. It's strange so late in the evening."

"World Gate?" says Amy. "World Gate to where?"

The elves turn to her and look at her as though she has asked a silly question. "To Asgard."

Amy's heart leaps to her throat. "I have to get my grandmother...I have to get my car..." She runs forward and takes Dolinar's hands. "I don't know if Loki needs an apprentice, but I'm sure he'll let you come with us."

"Loki?" say Dolinar and Liddel in unison.

Amy puts her hand to her mouth. The one thing she wasn't supposed to do and she's done it!

The elves look at each other and whisper back and forth in their own language. Liddel puts a hand on Amy's shoulder. "We thank you for your kindness. Perhaps it would be better for you if you come with us to the Dark Lands."

Amy looks between them. Their eyes are wide and sincere.

"No, no, he's really not that bad," Amy says. "He saved my life...and he's kind, a little pervy, ...but..."

The elves exchange glances.

"Please don't tell!" Amy says. "Just please don't tell."

Liddel's eyes narrow. "We will tell no one."

Narrowing her own eyes, Dolinar smiles slightly...and it's not a kind

smile. “Let the queen deal with the breaker of worlds.”

## CHAPTER 9



LOKI PULLS his neck back instinctively from the sharp bite of his blade. He just needs a moment's distraction. He glances around the room. Perhaps if he set the curtains on fire...

Hissing, the elf queen steps forward and he feels the point nip at his skin again. His eyes return to the shining piece of steel.

"You should not be awake," she says. That answers a question at the back of his mind. She'd enchanted him. He searches for something pithy to say, but before he can open his mouth, she shakes the book and shouts, "My lover's book. You have it! Why?"

The book is Lothur's journal. Hoenir gave it to Loki centuries ago. Shocked by the question, Loki just stares at her dumbly. She wears only a dressing gown tied loosely at the waist. Her eyes are narrow and too wet, her mouth open and slightly turned down. He tries to parse the emotions he is seeing: anger, sadness, disbelief.

"Can you read it!" she says, pricking the blade beneath his chin. He feels the warm ooze of a trickle of blood.

Loki scrambles backwards on his elbows, the sheet falling away from his bare chest. "Gala—," he starts to whisper.

"How do you know that name?" the elf queen shouts, sword shaking dangerously in her hands. "Only she knew that name!"

Loki blinks. How does he know it? Amy told him...but it's more than that. She lowers the blade a fraction. "Can you read the book?" she says her voice a low hiss.

Staring at the gleaming steel, he says, "Yes."

"Prove it!" she says, throwing the small, ancient volume towards him.

Loki's heart nearly stops as the book tumbles through the air and opens like a bird. Heedless of the blade, Loki throws up his hands and catches it as gently as he can. Glaring at her, he pulls it to his chest.

"Read," she says. Taking a step forward, she brings the blade to his neck again.

He blinks and looks down. The book has fallen open. It always opens to the same place; it's a passage Loki knows well. He makes a move to turn the page, but the elf queen says, "No, read that page. I know that page."

Loki looks up at her and then down at the book. He doesn't like reading this passage. There is something about it. It makes his heart fall and a lump form in his throat. He reads it anyway, maybe because of the sword in the queen's hand, or maybe because with it open in front of him, he can't turn away.

"And I have dreams of my love, who was not my love, but was. Her father said words low against me, so low that it caused her heart to flame."

Swallowing, Loki tries to banish the imagery that dances in his mind. The passage is too real. Not like a story, more like a memory.

"Keep going," says the elf queen.

With a deep breath, Loki reads. "And the flame of her heart spread to the utmost ends of her limbs. My love died in flames..."

There is a loud clang. The vision of flames in Loki's eyes vanishes. He looks up to see the elf queen has dropped the blade on the ground. She stands before him, her shoulders slouched, her face empty. "Only my lover, and Lothur, could read that book," she says.

Loki looks down at the pages. There was an entry at the very beginning

where Lothur said he'd enchanted the volume to be readable by no one but himself. But Loki could read it; he'd always assumed that Lothur was a touch mad.

Suddenly very curious, Loki says, "But my lady, you have the Gift of Tongues. You must be able to read it."

Shaking her head and not meeting his eyes, she says, "No. No, I cannot." Swallowing, she meets his gaze, her eyes red, her ears trembling slightly. Despite the rude awakening, Loki has an inexplicable desire to go to her and comfort her.

He resists on principle. Tilting his head, he says, "This book was a gift. I did not steal it from..." he lets his words drift off.

"Loka," she says. "Loka...she died over 2,500 years ago. I betrayed her to Odin."

That is long before Loki's time, but he feels a ripple of anger on Loka's behalf. Loki shuts the book sharply.

The queen meets his eyes. Her jaw goes hard. "I sent the royal messengers to Asgard moments before you awoke." Turning quickly she says, "Gather your armor and meet me at the pool. We have only a little time to find your sons, and for you to make your escape."

Loki looks around the bedchamber at his blade lying on the floor and his armor strewn about like a jigsaw puzzle. Cursing, he rolls out of the bed, pulls on his breeches, and then yanks a sheet off the mattress. Spreading the sheet out, he tosses his armor onto it, then gathers it up by the corners, throws it over his back, and grabs his sword.

As he paces into the other room, he has half a mind to run the elf queen through with his blade. But she's standing over the pool. It's casting white light on her face, and the murderous thought is subverted by curiosity.

He goes to where she stands and looks into the water. Instead of their reflections he sees the front of Hoenir's hut, its door flung open to the night. Hoenir and Sigyn are standing there and Loki's eyes widen.

“This is a few days ago,” says the queen.

There is a flash of light outside the hut, and there are Valli and Nari, falling to the ground and gasping for air. Loki squats to the floor in front of the pond and holds out his hand as though to touch them, his mouth falling open in hope and relief. In the pool, Hoenir and Sigyn run forward and pull Loki’s boys into the hut. “They’re alive,” he says running a hand through his hair. “They’re alive.” He feels lighter. Like laughing aloud, like picking up the queen and spinning her around, faithless witch and betrayer though she may be.

The elf queen begins to chant. The scene begins to move too quickly, like a human film played too fast. Dawn glows on the horizon beyond the hut and Heimdall appears with armed guards. Valkyries swoop and land to encircle the small dwelling. Loki scowls as Odin walks onto the scene and stands just within the circle of guards, about ten paces from Hoenir’s door. Loki can’t hear the words, but he sees Odin’s lips moving.

Heart beating too loud in his chest, Loki watches as Heimdall goes forward. He is accompanied by Skaddi, a Frost Giant like Loki and the self proclaimed “goddess of justice.”

The Valkyries begin to raise their spears, lightning flashes on the scene, and all eyes turn. Thor appears. Guards fall back to let him pass. He goes and speaks quietly to Odin and Heimdall. Heimdall scowls and Thor walks forward, turns so his back is to the hut, and holds up his hammer.

Loki’s mouth falls open. “He’s protecting them. Thor is protecting them!”

The guards don’t move, but Loki sees them scowl. Heimdall is saying something to Odin, and Loki can tell without hearing that the gatekeeper is shouting. Loki sees a few Valkyries pound their spears. He can see them shouting, too. Someone shoots a bolt of fire; it seems to go into the sky...

But then at the top of Hoenir’s roof, there is a burst of flame. A swarm of butterfly snakes take to the air, birds with lizard heads take wing. New flames lick at the foundations; Loki doesn’t know how they even got there.

Thor turns and tries to rush into the hut, but Heimdall and Odin hold him back.

Loki's eyes widen. "What is happening, what is happening!" Loki shouts. In the scene in the pool Thor holds up his arm, and Loki sees the sky darken. Thor's calling rain. Loki has never been so grateful he gave Thor the damned hammer.

The queen chants more quickly. The scene in the pool is smoky and obscure, but Loki sees the flames leap, even as the rain begins to fall. The flames surround the hut like a curtain. He can't make out doors, windows or chimney. Odin pounds Gungnir into the earth in front of the hut and leaves it there upright.

The scene is moving incredibly fast. It's early morning there in the pool...and the curtain of flames is falling. He sees the downpour is now a drizzle

Gungnir is gone...and Hoenir's hut is not there. Where the hut stood there is only charred ground.

Loki stares at the pool, not really seeing it. He feels as though a weight was briefly lifted from his body and then hurled down upon him. He puts his hands to his head, runs his fingers through his hair, scraping his nails against his scalp with such force it hurts.

As though from a great distance he hears the crackle of fire, and screaming — his mind supplying the details of Valli , Nari, Hoenir, Mimir's and Sigyn's brutal ends?

And then another sound comes. Loud and insistent — the sound of a car calling for its master. Loki blinks...Amy and Beatrice...he has an oath to keep to them.

He wants to stay, he wants to fight Odin and his legions — not to win, to die. Helen, Aggie, now Valli, Nari, Sigyn, and even Mimir and Hoenir. He squeezes his eyes shut. It's because of him, somehow it is all because of him. Loki knows there is no afterlife, no Valhalla for the valiant, no Hel for the

mEEK. And that is good, he wants the release of nothingness.

The car calls again — it sounds so close, and the way its call echoes through the palace it sounds almost as though it is inside. Taking a sharp breath he opens his eyes. He doesn't break oaths.

That thought is the thread of strength that makes him stand up. He looks around. To one side is the receiving room he entered by last night, to the other side is the elf queen's bedroom, now in flames. She stands in front of him, haloed by the fire, her face calm. "Once again you leave me for a mortal," she says.

Loki has no time for her games. Narrowing his eyes he says, "How long do I have?"

"I will give you five minutes to leave the palace grounds before I send the guards after you. After that you're on your own."

Loki tilts his head. In the receiving chambers he hears the crackle of more flames.

"I cannot afford to let Odin think I allowed you to escape," says the queen.

"Of course not," Loki hisses. For a moment the air between them shimmers. Loki wants to see her smooth beautiful body burst into flames. But another part...another part of him feels sorrow, pity and guilt that he cannot understand.

The queen's face is as unworried as a Greek statue, and that's a shame. Such a beautiful face would be more beautiful with emotion on it — even if the emotion were anger or hatred.

"You don't have time for this," the elf queen says. "Run."

Loki stares at her a heartbeat more. And then securing his makeshift pack over his shoulder, he backs away from her into the receiving room. The door to the secret passage is open, the covering tapestry nowhere in sight.

Loki runs.

## CHAPTER 10



MAYBE IT WON'T BE SO bad if the elves alert Asgard, and presumably Odin, that Loki is in Alfheim. Maybe Odin will just take Loki, send Beatrice and Amy home, and be on his way.

Or maybe he'll leave Amy and Beatrice in Alfheim forever.

Amy swallows. The truth is, no matter what mercy Odin might grant to her and Beatrice, Amy's worried about Loki. Twisted and perverted as he may be, if it weren't for him she wouldn't be alive — or have ever seen a hadrosaur.

Hands shaking, Amy drives up the road to the elf palace. The sky has turned overcast. There is no starlight, just the light of the green orbs that seem to be the elven version of street lights. A light drizzle is in the air. At the top of a staircase of long low stairs, four elf guards stand in front of the wide front door. As she gets closer, they cross their spears. It will take a long time for Beatrice to get down those stairs...and Amy still has to find her.

Biting her lip, Amy stares at the guards. And then she is struck by inspiration.

Pressing a button on her keychain, she lets the car alarm shriek. The guards visibly jump.

From the door the elf in black who had spoken to Loki emerges. "What going on?" he says.

Turning off the alarm and switching into 4 wheel drive, Amy sticks her head out the window. “My car, he wants to come in — we hurt his feelings leaving him out all night and now he’s worried about Fjölnir and Beatrice!” Hitting the gas, she edges to the stairs. Craning her head out the window, she adds, “Please, open the door! He’ll be good if you just let him in and we find them.”

The elf in black says something to the guards again. They eye the car warily but open the doors. The man in black runs inside.

Slipping back into the driver’s seat, Amy puts her foot on the gas and bumps up the steps.

She hits the horn as soon as she gets into the foyer and then jumps out of the car. Pressing the alarm button again, she says, “Don’t go near him! He might bite!” Then she runs around the car towards the dining hall and her mouth falls open.

The elf in black is leading four other elves who are carrying a large chair between them. On the chair slumped over asleep is Beatrice.

Looking visibly worried, the elf in black says, “She drink too much our mead. Beastly chariot not angry?”

Amy’s mouth forms a small ‘o’. “I think he’ll be fine if we just put her inside and he can see she’s alright.”

Shaking his head, the elf in black says, “We not mean insult. Not know chariot have feelings.”

Trying to keep a straight face, Amy says, “It’s okay, I’m sure he’ll understand...” She looks at her grandmother snoring softly. Maybe it’s for the best she won’t be awake. She has a feeling this will be a rough ride.



RUNNING down the steps of the secret passage, Loki has no idea how he’ll manage to round-up Beatrice and Amy in time to escape the grounds in only

a few minutes.

He bursts into the first private receiving chamber, still lit by fireflies. And then he hears it again. The car...it sounds so close. Could it be?

He runs through the door, down a passage, and around a corner, and his eyes go wide. The car is parked in the foyer of the palace. Some elves and Amy are securing Beatrice in the back seat.

“That’s good,” says Amy. “Get out, please. Don’t make the car mad. He doesn’t know you, thank you, that’s good...now we need to find Fjölnir...”

She turns around and her eyes fall on him and go wide. “Lo — Fjölnir!” The car gives a happy little chirp. “Car is so happy to see you!”

Loki blinks for a moment. She’s lying; he can feel it.

Raising her voice above the murmuring of the crowd that is rapidly forming, she says, “Car wants to go home, so we have to go. Now.” She hops into the driver’s side, and motions to Loki to get into the passenger’s side. He hurries to comply, throwing his sack of armor and sword on the floor of the back seat in front of Fenrir and a gently snoring Beatrice.

Before he’s even closed the door, Amy’s sticking her head out the window saying, “Thanks for everything, everyone!” The car starts to move and she says, “Oh, sorry! Car is anxious! Long, lonely night for him! Got to go!” She pulls all the way into the car, turns it around, and heads towards the door and the stairs. The car gives a few more happy beeps.

Loki stares at her, stunned. It was all lies. Brilliant lies, on her part and possibly Car’s. How did she know?

“They sent messengers to Asgard, Loki,” Amy says, as they bump down the front steps of the palace. “I’m not sure...but I thought maybe we should leave.”

“Good thought,” he says. He owes this girl more respect than he’s given her.

A look of confusion crosses her face. “Where is your armor? Why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

But in some ways...she is really so naive. Normally, he might make a joke, but he feels too empty. “Drive as fast as you can; we don’t have much time.”

Scowling at the wheel, she says, “Why? What happened? ”

“Just drive,” he says.

“Did you get your answers?” she asks.

“Just drive,” he says. “Please!”

There must be something in his voice, because she hits the gas. It’s still dark outside. There is the soft patter of rain on the car roof. Ahead, a long shadow is covering the gate of the palace. Loki’s heart skips a beat. At his feet is the army knapsack. Reaching into it he pulls out a grenade.

“The gate!” Amy cries. “It’s open but the vines are down. Can they hurt the car?”

Loki has no idea. Before he can say anything, the girl says, “Is that a grenade in your hand? Use it!”

The top window opens. Loki’s not sure how, but he doesn’t have to be told twice. “Stop Car!” he shouts.

The car screeches to a halt and he stands up in the rain. Blinking to clear his vision, he flings the grenade at the curtain of vines. Pulling back into the car, he pushes Amy down so they are both protected by the dash. There is a boom, the car shakes, but the window does not shatter. They both sit up to see a large hole in the curtain, but long tendrils are already snaking down to close it.

Hitting the gas without even being asked, Amy grumbles. “I don’t want to be stuck here with these pointy-eared fascists!”

He looks at her for an instant. She is wearing clothing finer than she probably has ever worn or will ever wear again. Her hair is upswept, with crystal flowers woven into it. She looks radiant and beautiful, and if she stayed here the elves could help her remain so for a time...in her own realm she’ll be doomed to fade and age so quickly. Yet she wants to leave. Part of

him wants to smile at her, but he can't. His face feels frozen into a slight scowl and a frown. He has a lump in his throat that has nothing to do with her.

He hears a rumble of hooves and heavy feet behind them. "That will be the guards," he says. He looks up; the top window is already closed. He touches his wet face and looks at the pavement shining beneath the green orbs.

Amy's eyes go to the rear-view mirror. "What? Why are they following us? They seemed fine letting us go...maybe we should stop?"

Loki feels the car start to slow. "No, do not stop! It's a ruse — the queen cannot let Odin think she let us go too easily."

The girl speeds up a little but her eyes dart to the mirror again. "They're closing in fast..." Turning her attention back to the road, she swallows. "I can't go much faster than them on the hairpin turns, especially since the road is wet."

"Go as fast as you can," Loki says, bracing himself as she makes a sharp turn.

"I am, I am!" Amy says, a frantic note in her voice. Car's wheels screech and Loki hears the shouts and hooves of the rapidly approaching cavalry.

He scowls. He needs to put on his armor, but their pursuers are catching up to them too fast. Reaching up, he taps the overhead window that now is closed. "Car, open up."

Amy looks at him, eyes wide. The window slides open, and Loki stands up.

"What are you doing?" Amy shouts, her voice just audible over the sound of the rain, the hoof beats of the elves' horses, and the lowing of the hadrosaurs.

Not responding, Loki turns to face their pursuers.

"Halt now!" one cries in the elf tongue. "By order of the All Father!"

They don't shoot at him, though some carry bows. Odin must want him

alive — he won't let that happen again.

Loki thinks of the brief flare of hope he had when he saw Valli and Nari in the pool disappearing into the hut, and then the cold realization just moments later when he saw the flames. Let the elves feel the hollow cold of his heart.

Car makes another sharp turn, and Loki is nearly thrown out. Righting himself, he focuses on the rain falling on his pursuers, and the water rivulets running down the cobblestone street. He sees the magic between the water and himself and he pulls on it, tugs at it, imagines the magic stilling the water, calming it, deep at the molecular level — so the water's spinning hydrogen atoms lock together and crystals form on the ground and in the sky.

Horses scream and the hadrosaurs bellow in terror as the rain turns to snow, and the road behind Car turns to ice.

“What's going on?” says Amy.

Loki falls panting back through the open window.

“Ice...you turned the road to ice...” Amy says, eyes in the mirror.

Turning his head, Loki looks back. Where there had been at least a dozen elves on horseback before, and two hadrosaurs, now there are no dinosaur mounts, and only four horsemen are left — but they are pulling out lances and looking very determined.

Rain is streaking in through the open roof.

Amy glances at him, eyes wide. “You probably broke the horses' legs.”

“Not enough of them,” Loki says, lip curling upward.

“You can't do that!” Amy says. “It's not the horses' faults!” She twists the wheel as they take another sharp turn.

He stares at her a moment in disbelief. And then his disbelief turns to rage, red and hot beneath his skin. “Fine,” he says. “I won't use ice this time.” He stands up again.

“What — ”

He can't hear the rest of what she says. He looks back at the horsemen in

the rain. “Stop now, Loki!” one calls. “You’ll never get through the main gate!”

Loki lets his rage loose in a scream. What he expects to happen, happens. Magic rips the water molecules apart into oxygen and hydrogen, and excites the hydrogen atoms to the point where they burst into flame. But it should have just been a little spark in the air before the horses’ eyes. Instead a wall of flame forms between Car and the riders, as thick and as high as the flames that overcame Hoenir’s hut.

Loki falls back into the car, his eyes wide. Amy is silent, but he sees her hands shaking.

He hardly feels as though he’s exerted any energy at all. He looks over his shoulder. The flames still burn — he can’t see beyond them. Something is wrong. He’s not that strong. “Gala...” he murmurs to himself. “It must have been the queen’s doing.”

“What?” says Amy.

“She wants to let me escape,” Loki says almost to himself. “But needs it to look like an accident...”

The flames behind them make the window in front of them reflective for a brief moment. Loki catches sight of his face, slightly blue in the strange light. For an instant he is looking at his daughter Helen’s face, or half her face. He shakes his head. Is he going mad with grief?

Car’s wheels screech, and Loki’s body bangs into the door as they make another sharp turn. And then they’re at the marketplace. Car’s horn lets out a loud alarm. Some elves part and run in front of them.

“Ummm...” says Amy. “If she wants us to escape, why’d she lock the front door?”

Looking at the closed doors of the heavy metal gate, Loki’s heart falls. He doesn’t know any trick to open it — he can move small things with his mind, but this is too large, too heavy, and too fireproof. He looks down at the bag at his feet. There is one more grenade, but it won’t be strong enough...his jaw

tightens. He reaches into the bag, and says, “Car, open your top window again!” Loki doesn’t remember when it even closed.

Hitting the brakes, Amy gives him a funny look. But the window opens. Standing up, Loki pulls the pin and hurls the last grenade. He pulls back into the car. Amy’s already ducking. Loki presses himself down as far as he can, his chest pressing against Amy’s back.

The blast goes off, and the car rattles. Loki and Amy both lift themselves up. The gate is closed.

“Oh,” says Amy, her shoulders sagging.

Loki closes his eyes. “I won’t be taken alive,” he says. “Not this time. I’ll fight to the death.”

There is a loud creak.

He opens his eyes and blinks. There is a shimmer of magic the color of moonlight, and then the gate creaks again and swings open. In the open way stands the elf queen, or more likely an astral projection of her, considering she floats above the ground.

In her own language she says, “Be gone from my realm, and set no more of my people aflame — or not only Odin will hunt you!”

Loki blinks. He didn’t create that inferno...did he?

“What did she say?” Amy says, hunching over the wheel.

In front of them, the projection disappears. “She wishes us well and bids us be on our way,” says Loki.

Amy puts her foot on the gas. “It sounded more like she was angry.”

“Mmmm...” says Loki settling back into his seat. “Go quickly as you can. The armies of Asgard will be upon us quickly.”

“Armies?” squeaks Amy, turning out onto the lane that will take them to the Border Road.

“Don’t worry,” Loki says. “I’m sure you’ll be able to convince Odin that you were deceived by the God of Lies and he’ll spare your lives.”

Car’s lights become even brighter and Amy speeds up. Her voice shaking,

she says, "I would rather you not die either."

Loki looks over at her, his mouth still frozen in a frown, his brows still knit together. He brings destruction to everything he touches, and everyone he loves. He wants to die.

Amy casts a worried glance in his direction.

He cannot die now. He has an oath to keep.

Without a word he turns in his seat and begins to rummage through the makeshift sack for his armor. Beatrice is still asleep, but Fenrir eyes him curiously.

He's got his shirt on and is awkwardly attaching his breast plate when Amy turns onto the border road. She steps on the gas and they surge forward at what feels like dizzying speed. They're still in a relatively populous region; farmlands line the road on their left. They don't have to worry about dark elves just yet.

He tilts his head. Over the elf queen's lands, the sky is just starting to lighten.

He's sure it must be taking all of Amy's concentration to remain on the road, but then she begins to speak. "You were blue for a few moments when the fire started. Is that your natural color? I thought Frost Giants only turned blue when they were cold."

He freezes, his hands on the buckle of an arm guard. "I don't turn blue." He isn't Helen.

"You looked blue," says Amy.

"That was a trick of the light," Loki says, his voice coming out nearly a hiss. He doesn't have time for this inane chatter.

"You looked good blue. Not like in the movies with pointy teeth and a giant horny head," she says her words running together as though she's just speaking to hear herself speak. "More like —"

"Be quiet," he snaps.

"I thought you weren't sensitive about your Frost Giant nature?"

“Frost Giants are not blue!” he says. “I should know. I’ve been one for more than 1,000 years!”

“Huh,” says Amy.

“The forest is approaching,” says Loki, turning his attention to the mail links that cover his right elbow. “If you hit anything or anyone just keep going.”

“Just because the queen thinks the elves over there are bad doesn’t mean they are!” says Amy, slowing down as they slip into the forest.

Looking up, Loki blinks at her, surprised how much of Alfheim politics she’s managed to divine in such a short time. Ordering her isn’t going to work. He sighs inwardly.

“No, they’re not,” he says quietly. “I’ve had dealings with Dark Elves before. But trust me, any Dark Elf that would choose to attack Car merely for transversing the border road isn’t one you should stop for. Under any circumstances.”

Amy swallows and her hands shake even more violently.

Loki turns back to his armor and curses. The plate that covers his upper left arm is completely missing. He grabs the piece for his forearm and attaches it best he can, without the anchor of the upper section.

It’s only a few minutes later when a shadow seems to fall on the land in the East, and the wind and rain outside them pick up.

“Ummm...” says Amy.

“Thor,” mutters Loki, narrowing his eyes. Is Thor Odin’s puppet once again? Or is he here for some reason of his own? To beg forgiveness maybe? Not that Loki could give it.

A streak of lightning turns the realm bright as day.

“What are those shadows in the sky?” Amy says.

“Valkyries,” Loki says, the word spitting out of his mouth. His mouth twists. “Not here to beg forgiveness after all.”

“Forgiveness?” says Amy.

“We have a few minutes,” says Loki twisting to reach into the backseat “Concentrate on the road,” he says. “I need to eat something.”



AMY IS TRYING to concentrate on the road. Rain and wind are whipping through the sky. It might be her imagination, but both seem to be getting stronger.

She shivers. Her back is still damp from where Loki leaned over her as the grenades went off. Her eyes dart over to him. He’s still wet, armor half on, stuffing peanut butter into his mouth with a spoon, a liter bottle of Coca Cola open in his lap. He hasn’t spoken to her since grabbing some food. How can he be eating? Her own stomach is heavy with fear, and her mind is swimming with everything that’s happened this evening: the elves, the hadrosaurs, and seeing Loki in a lovely robin’s egg shade of blue. Trick of the light or not, it had been strange, lovely, and as magical as the fire, the ice, or his astral projections.

She takes a shaky breath. Loki says he’s over 1,000 years old. She can’t even imagine that.

Whoever’s chasing them is likely just as old or older than him, possibly more powerful...

That’s too much to think about. Taking a deep breath, she glances in the rearview mirror. Beatrice is thankfully still asleep. Fenrir is awake, her nose darting from side to side.

Amy looks at the clock on the dash. Fifteen minutes ago Loki said, “It’s Thor.” It feels like an eternity, and like only a heartbeat. Tightening her grip on the wheel she speeds up.

Lightning rips across the road just 50 yards in front of the car. A humanoid shadow is haloed in its light. Amy screams, hits the brakes, and tries to dodge it.

“Keep going!” Loki yells. His hand shoots to the wheel and holds it straight. Whoever it was hits the car and sinks below the hood. The car bumps sickeningly.

“Hit the gas!” Loki says.

But Amy’s foot is on the brake. “No,” she says. “We hit someone! We have to stop.” Even if it is a criminal.

“He’s fine!” Loki says, “Go!”

“No, I can’t,” Amy says.

Something bangs against the back window of the car. Amy turns and screams again. There is a huge mouth filled with sharp teeth attached to the flat plane of the back window. Fingers with suction cups are at its side.

She hears the sound of a thunk as Loki drops his bottle of cola.

“Drive!” shouts Loki twisting and crawling into the back.

Amy floors it. She looks in the rearview mirror. Loki obscures most of the view, but Amy can see the thing is still there. It doesn’t seem to have eyes or nose...just that huge maw.

“Car, open the back window!” Loki says.

“What?” screams Amy.

“Just let Car do it!”

Amy hits the button at her left and the window begins to drop. Over the sound of the wind comes a horrible noise like lips smacking, and then there is a gurgling noise and an inhuman scream.

“Roll up the window!”

Amy doesn’t have to be told twice. She raises the window, and Loki pulls back into the front seat, his sword in his hand, something dark and black at the point.

Another bolt of lightning rips across the road.

“Next time I’ll just keep going,” Amy says. “I’ll just keep going.”

Looking at the ceiling, Loki says, “There isn’t going to be a next time. Thor and the Valkyries are almost upon us.”

Amy bites her lips. “What do I do?”

“I’m going to try and make us invisible,” Loki says, his voice very calm. “You’ll still be able to hear everything...but you’ll only be able to see things outside of Car, you won’t even be able to see anything inside, not even yourself. I’ll need you to keep driving though. Can you do that?”

Amy nods. “Yes...I think so.” Not because she thinks she can, just because she doesn’t like the idea of what may happen if she can’t.

The words are hardly out of her mouth when everything in front and behind her starts to fade from view.

Her foot hits the brakes. She hears the sound of tires on pavement, the thump of rain on the roof, the engine. But she can’t see the car, Beatrice, Loki, even herself...She takes a ragged breath.

Loki’s voice comes from her right. “It’s disorienting.”

“Yes!” Amy shouts, maybe just to hear her own voice.

Loki’s voice sounds tight. “You must keep driving.”

“I can’t see the dash, the steering wheel or the pedals!” Amy says.

“You don’t even look at those,” Loki says, his voice sharp.

That’s true. Amy licks her lips, feels the sensation of her tongue, cool and wet against her skin. “I can’t see myself...it’s almost like I’m not here.”

There is a moment of heavy silence. “How can I help?” Loki says, sounding like his voice is coming through gritted teeth.

“Would you touch me?” Amy asks before she’s even thought about it, and she almost wants to bang her head on the invisible steering wheel for making the suggestion.

In a voice that is surprisingly clinical Loki says, “You’re going to feel my hand on your thigh; it’s the best place for me to touch you without obstructing your ability to drive.”

Before she even has a chance to react, she feels his hand on her leg, large and warm, and as long as she doesn’t look down, seemingly solid. And it does help; she’s too grateful to worry about the implications of it. She puts

her foot down on the gas and holds the steering wheel at 3 and 9 o'clock.

“Very good,” Loki says, giving her leg a pat. It shouldn't be as encouraging as it is.

Amy nods and bites her lip. She's just getting to the point where she's feeling a little more comfortable when bright lights like lasers shoot down on the road and forest in front of them sending off sparks in every direction, lighting up weird hominid shadows as they do.

The shadows leap from the trees on the dark side of the forest. Amy screams again, puts her foot on the brake, and almost runs them off the road, but Loki's hand is suddenly on the wheel, holding it firm. “They're magical flares,” he says. “They won't hurt us. Try to dodge them if you can, but keep us on the road!”

Shaking, Amy puts her foot back on the gas.

“They don't want us dead,” Loki says as though the words are a revelation to himself. “They're just trying to flush us out.”

Amy blinks. “The sparks will hit the car, and they'll see them bounce...”

“Exactly,” says Loki, his hand on her leg again.

“I think I can do this.” says Amy, speeding up. As long as she doesn't have to worry about the blasts killing them, she feels much better. Also, they're scaring the crazy shadow things away. And that's good.

Amy zigzags through the flares that are falling down on the road.

At one point she thinks they're going to roll over, but a few minutes later, the road ahead of them is clear. She looks in the rearview mirror, all the flares are bursting on the road behind them.

Loki pats her lap. “Well done.”

Her heart is in her ears, and she's panting, but she laughs aloud. “We did it!”

The words are barely out of her mouth when she hears a loud clang. Sparks cascade over her head and down the sides of the car like a waterfall. “Uh-oh,” she says.

“Drive!” says Loki.

Amy floors the pedal, but up ahead and behind them shapes are falling from the sky. Another flare is fired directly towards them from in front; it explodes on the windshield, and suddenly the car and everything inside is visible again — but Amy can’t see the road at all. She puts her foot on the brakes, gently this time so they don’t skid.

She looks to her side. Loki is next to her. His face has a sheen to it, his mouth is open, and she notices he’s breathing heavily. He’s not looking at her. His eyes are focused on the road ahead of them.

Amy follows his gaze. About 100 yards ahead of them are women carrying spears, standing around an enormous man in front of a chariot without a horse. In the enormous man’s hands there is a hammer that is glowing with the pale blue white of lightning.

Loki takes a deep breath, and his voice comes out low, malevolent, but tinged with something desperate. “It is the mighty Thor.”

Uh-oh.

## CHAPTER 11



“WHAT DO I DO?” says the girl.

Loki stares at Thor in front of his golden chariot. Valkyries stand beside Thor and are blocking the road behind Car. More are alighting along the sides of the road.

“Drive forward,” he says. “Slowly. When I tap the roof, stop.” Knocking at the top window, he says, “Car, open up.”

“You know...” the girl begins to say.

“What?” he snaps, not bothering to look at her.

“It can wait,” she says, gripping Car’s door as the window above slides open.

Loki stands up. Heavy but sparse drops of rain fall on him. He can see trees waving madly in the distance, but around him the air is nearly still. They are in the eye of the storm.

Around Car, Valkyries raise their spears, but they do not fire. In front of him, Thor stands up straighter. His eyes meet Loki’s, then go over Car, before coming back to meet Loki’s gaze again.

Neither Loki nor Thor say anything. When Amy has brought Car within a few paces of Thor, Loki taps the roof. She obediently stops the vehicle.

“Well met,” says Thor in the Asgard tongue.

Loki does not respond.

Thor licks his lips and looks distinctly uncomfortable. “I bring grave tidings — ”

“If you mean the fire that consumed Hoenir’s hut, and all within, including Sigyn and my sons, I already know,” Loki snaps.

Appearing genuinely hurt, Thor takes a step forward. “Loki, I did try — ”

“To save them,” Loki says sharply. His body sags and he looks away. “Yes, I know that, too.” It occurs to him how devious it was for Odin to send Thor on this particular outing. Thor is possibly the only Asgardian Loki will hear out at this point. And Thor does have something to say; if he didn’t, Loki would be dead by now.

It’s uncomfortable standing half in Car, half out. Loki’s legs are at odd angles, so he slips onto the roof and sits there, legs dangling into the inside of Car below. The roof buckles a little at his weight, Amy gasps, and Fenrir yips, but Loki ignores them. “Spit it out, Thor. What do you want?”

Thor straightens. He takes a deep breath and appears almost to go a little green, as though he has just been asked to eat something extremely distasteful. “I have been sent...to beg you to return.”

Loki stares at him for several long heartbeats. Then he bursts out laughing. The sound seems brittle and hard even to him. Waving at the Valkyries, Loki says, “You came to beg me...at spear point?”

Thor doesn’t back down. Raising an eyebrow, he smiles slightly. “It would seem I needed their help to find you.”

Loki sighs. Once he might have warmed to that; now he feels only emptiness. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Thor.”

The slight smile on Thor’s face vanishes. “Nonetheless, everything I say is true. Loki, my father needs you to come home. ”

Loki’s lip curls into a sneer. “And he would have the gall to ask me after killing Hoenir, Mimir, Sigyn and my boys!”

Scowling, Thor takes a step forward. “It wasn’t like that! The fire — ”

“Wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t tried to execute my sons!”

“Let me finish!” Thor’s voice rips so loudly through the darkness of the stormy dawn that Car reverberates. Lifting his hammer, Thor shouts, “My father tried to stop the flames — but even Gungnir couldn’t halt them. Something is growing in the nine realms, something that is twisting magic and time and will pull the World Tree asunder.” Thor swings his hammer for emphasis and a stray bit of lightning sprays off into the trees. There is a loud crack, and a small scream from Amy. The Valkyries shift on their feet.

Stepping back with one foot, Thor’s face contorts into something like disbelief or revulsion. “My father believes only you can stop it.” Loki crosses his arms. Of course Thor would feel ashamed if there was some threat to the realms he couldn’t resolve with a few pounds of his hammer.

Not that Loki believes this little story. “Would saving the realms involve me remaining in a cave doused in snake venom for a few centuries?”

“It isn’t like that!” Thor says. “You will be absolved of all wrongdoing in this matter. This is the truth!”

Absolved? As though he was the one who needs absolution. His sons, Sigyn, Mimir and Hoenir are dead. Loki grits his teeth and feels his eyes get hot. Thinking about them all gone — his body feels hollow, as though he is an empty shell.

He takes a deep breath and pulls himself back into the moment. Absolution is a farce. As soon as Loki returns to Asgard, there will be some dire punishment, and this time there will be no Sigyn to tend to him. Loki rolls his eyes at Thor’s naivete. When will Thor realize Odin is as capable at lying as Loki, perhaps more so? Anything to “protect” the realms, or rather, his own power.

“Lovely,” says Loki, tapping his fingers on Car’s roof. “But I’m afraid I have to refuse.” Shrugging, he points down at Car and says, “I have some mortals I have sworn to return to their own realm. You know I always keep my oaths.”

Thor scowls. “Father said that you could slip between the realms...” He

walks around the car towards the driver's side — as he does so, the Valkyries raise their spears a bit higher. Loki scowls at them and then turns his attention to Thor. Odin's son is now peeking in the driver's side window. Thor smiles and waggles a finger at Amy as one might waggle a finger at a pretty bird in a cage. In the back seat Fenrir growls warningly.

Looking up, Thor raises his eyebrows and says brightly, "She is a pretty thing, Loki. And just your type." Raising one hand to his chest, Thor makes groping motions with his fingers in what is probably a universal symbol for large breasts. "I suppose the old woman in the back is her kin. Convince them to come back to Asgard with you. Keep the girl as your plaything for a decade. When she withers she can remain your servant, a much better life than she'd have in her own realm."

Somewhere a Valkyrie's spear must fire accidentally because Loki sees a flare of orange flame in the periphery of his vision. His sons are dead. As are his ex-wife and two best friends. Thor dares talk of playthings? Loki is too furious to speak.

"What did he just say?" says Amy in English, her voice sounding indignant.

Loki looks down at her. She is staring hard out the window at Thor who is wagging his finger at her again and smiling like an idiot. It is probably innate contrariness that makes Loki translate. "Oh, he's just suggested I bring you home to Asgard and keep you as a plaything and servant. Perhaps you'd like to answer?"

Eyes going wide, Amy's brows draw together and she springs up through the window in the roof between Loki's knees. Facing Thor she says, "You can tell the God of Blunder he can take that idea and shove it up his great big Viking butt!"

Loki blinks. Well, that was absolutely priceless. The corners of his lips pull up.

Thor's face goes completely red, his lips curve into something between a

frown and a grimace, and his brows draw into one line. The hand holding his hammer starts to tremble.

“Actually,” Loki says, keeping his gaze fixed on Thor, “Thor understands English well enough.”

“Oh,” says Amy, sounding not at all brave. Putting a hand gently on her head, Loki pushes her back into the car.

Thor is breathing deeply, but Loki nor Car nor the girl are dead. Odin must want Loki very badly.

In English, Thor says very slowly, “You can tell your whore that my orders are to bring you back to Asgard alive. Father will not care about her puny little mortal life.”

Head darting out of the car again, in a voice that is plaintive rather than angry, Amy says, “I am not a whore!”

Putting his hand on her head not so gently this time, Loki pushes her back inside. With a smirk he says, “She has my oath of protection. You’ll have to kill me first.”

With a bellow, Thor swings his hammer in empty air like a toddler having a tantrum. Something cracks in the distance, like lightning hitting tree branches. Loki smiles. He hears the Valkyries at the dark side of the forest give angry cries.

In Car, Amy starts pulling at his leg. “Loki!” she whispers.

“Not now!” he snaps down at her.

In the distance he hears more cracking in rapid succession. Thor looks away. Someone shouts, “Dark Elves!”

“Loki!” says Amy.

He scowls at her. But she gives a ferocious tug at his leg. Letting himself be tugged into Car, he finds his face just inches from hers. Her eyes are wide with fear — and so help him he’s about to make her more afraid with the words at the tip of his tongue. But before he can even breathe she says, “Do elves have automatic weapons? Because that sounds like automatic

weapons.”

Loki’s eyes go wide. He looks towards the dark forest. Something hits the side of Car and there is the sharp clang of metal on metal. In the dark forest there are loud angry popping noises getting closer. Valkyries from the left side of the road are streaming past Car to the dark side. Car makes a sharp beep.

Turning back to Amy, he sees her hands are already at the wheel.

“That does sound like automatic weapons fire,” he says. He hasn’t heard it since World War II.

Amy hits the gas. Loki puts a hand on her leg and says, “I’m making us invisible again!”

From the backseat Beatrice says quietly, “Oh, the elves have fireworks.” Loki looks back at her; her eyes are still closed. Everything around them begins to shimmer as his spell takes effect. He hears Thor yelling orders.

Loki looks at the shimmering Amy, now steering them around Thor’s chariot. “How do you know what automatic weapons sound like?” he asks.

“I live in Chicago,” she says, as though that is explanation.

Her shimmering form hunching over the wheel, Amy says, “Elves have guns?”

“No,” says Loki. More gunshots go off, and the car shoots forward. “Not that I know of.”

“Oh, what lovely fireworks,” says Beatrice.

An explosion goes off in the distance behind them and something whizzes past. Amy jumps beneath his hand. Loki follows the whizzing shape with his eyes and turns his head. “That was just another flare.”

He turns around. “Thor’s broken off from the rest and is pursuing us!”

Car shoots forward.



It's like a video game Amy tells herself. The flares aren't going to hurt them. No one dies if they get hit.

"Veer left," Loki says. Amy veers left and a bolt of blue shoots by the car. She's not sure how long she's been driving since the Valkyries were overtaken by dark elves. It seems like forever, but it's probably only a few minutes.

"We're almost at the gate," Loki says. "Slow down."

"How will you open it?" Amy says, putting a foot gently on the brake. "Will you have to get out of the car?"

"Of course I'll have to get out of the car," Loki snaps. "Stop here!"

Amy stops so quickly she bumps the steering wheel.

Loki's hand leaves her knee, and she is suspended in absolute nothingness.

"Car, open up the top hatch!" Loki says.

Amy doesn't try to argue with him. She just searches blindly for the button in the door's armrest. Another flare goes by. She hears what sounds like feet on the hood of the car, and then the only sound is the wind. She can feel rain coming in through the open sunroof and she shivers.

There is the sound of quick steps on the hood again, and then Loki's voice is very close to her ear. "Drive forward!"

Amy does. She sees the rainbow of the gateway again, and her body and the car come into view bathed in early morning light. Dark bricks surround her on either side and she smells garbage and urine and thinks that an alley has never smelled so sweet. She looks up. Loki is half on the hood, half on the roof. His head is above her, looking in the direction they came, a sword in his hand. Glancing in the rear view mirror she sees Beatrice sleeping, the seat behind her Grandmother just coming into view.

Amy smiles and breathes out a long breath of relief. The car is almost through when it suddenly jerks up and backwards, the back wheels seeming to leave the ground. Lines of light surround it on either side. Loki swears.

Amy looks back in the window and sees a huge hulking Thor-like shadow seeming to emerge out of nothing behind her. It looks like he's pulling the car backwards by the bumper.

Loki scrambles across the roof towards the back of the car. Amy doesn't think. Shouting "Loki, hold on!" she throws the car into four wheel drive, then reverse, and hits the gas. There is a loud thud. Amy can't see the back of the car; it must still be in Alfheim. But she feels it when the back tires hit the ground and bounce. Heart suddenly very loud, Amy puts the car into first gear and pulls forward but meets resistance.

She looks back. Light flashes in a wide vertical circle behind the car. There is a loud clang, and Loki jumps down off the car and stands in the middle of the circle shouting something in a weird slavic-sounding language. His sword is gone, but in one hand he holds what looks like a tiny book. She thinks she sees Thor again, but then the circle collapses on itself and there's just Loki swaying on his feet.

Turning, with wavering steps he comes around the car. Amy hears the scrape of metal on pavement, and then Loki climbs into the passenger side, sword in his hand.

Beatrice is rubbing her eyes. Fenrir is standing on top of her, looking out the backseat. There is no Thor, but the last six inches of the rear of the car is just gone.

Closing the door and hanging his head, Loki says softly, "Will Car be alright?"

Amy looks back at the missing rear end, and over at Loki. "You know...it's just a machine."

Loki turns his head to look at her. "How can you say that?"

Feeling like a heel, she turns to the steering wheel. Her hands are shaking so much she doesn't really want to go anywhere for a few minutes.

"Dude!" comes a loud voice from outside the car.

Raising her eyes, she sees three guys with spiky hair in hipster clothing

standing directly in front of them in the alley. Their mouths are open. The middle one's got a bottle of something in his hands. It falls to the ground and lands with a crash.

Somewhere a police siren wails.

Swallowing, Amy revs the engine a bit. The hipsters move to the side. She pulls out into the alley and heads home. Thankfully, they don't run into any police. She's sure driving with a hole in the back of your car is some sort of moving violation.

Loki says nothing the entire way. He just slouches over in the seat, his breathing ragged and uneven as though he's extremely tired or might weep.

It's still mostly dark out when she backs into the garage, and she doesn't see any neighbors about. Beatrice says, "Oh, my, are we home already?"

Before Amy's even parked, Loki jumps out of his seat and walks out of the garage.

"I'll be right back, Grandma!" Amy says, following him.

She catches him just a few feet outside of the garage. "Loki," she says putting a hand on his left arm that doesn't have any armor on it. He stops but doesn't look at her.

Jaw tight he says, "I think you should know, I have tangled the branch of the world tree we came through. Neither Odin or Heimdall will be able to follow it and find you — " He stops, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and disappears. For an instant Amy feels him beneath her hand, warm and solid, but then that's gone, too.

Fenrir barks in the garage. Amy just stands staring in the empty alley, feeling hollow and empty.

## CHAPTER 12



IT'S NEARLY 9:00 PM, three days after Loki disappeared. Amy is just coming home from a shift as vet tech at a clinic up on the North Side. She only gets about eight hours a week from the clinic, and she has managed to get another four as a hostess at a restaurant, but jobs are surprisingly hard to come by this summer.

As Amy climbs the stairs with Fenrir scampering at her feet, she sees Beatrice's door ajar, the light on. She peeks in. Beatrice is sitting on her bed. The dress from Alfheim is hanging on her closet door. It still glows.

Beatrice must hear her because she turns to Amy, a little girl smile on her face. "Would it be wrong to put on our dresses occasionally and throw tea parties?"

Amy blinks, feeling her eyes get wet. Beatrice's memories of Alfheim are only good. Despite Amy's decidedly more mixed experience, she understands what Beatrice means. "I'd be happy to join you for tea," Amy says.

Beatrice sighs and relaxes. "I'm not just going senile. It was real, it really happened!"

Amy stares at the dress.

Beatrice sighs. "Still no sign of Loki. He left his sword." She turns to Amy. "That must be a sign he will come back?"

Amy bites her lip. She is worried it might be a sign of something worse,

something self-destructive. “I hope so,” she says. Loki in some ways reminds her of the worst frat-boy she’s ever met, except with magic. But there is a part of her that believes he’s good, and noble even. She remembers the way he stood up to Thor when that big overgrown oaf suggested keeping her as a pet. And Loki did save her from Malson. And then the way he danced with Beatrice... She swallows. Hopefully he’s out there, and okay.

Amy looks at Beatrice’s beautiful dress and then down at her slightly stained blue scrubs. Suddenly realizing how much she smells like ill cats and dogs, she says, “I’m going to go take a shower.”

Beatrice nods.

When Amy comes out of the shower, Beatrice’s light is off. With Fenrir by her side, Amy curls up in her own bed and tries to read a book. She’s exhausted, but she’s still having trouble sleeping. After an hour or so, she turns off her light. She lies in the dark gazing at the ceiling for far too long, but she must eventually drift off because she lifts her head at one point and Fenrir says in a deep masculine voice, “Amy, get up.”

Amy stares at her little dog. Fenrir is lying down at her feet, her ears cocked, seemingly staring at a point at the end of her nose.

Amy blinks. It must be a dream — if Fenrir spoke it would be with a girl’s voice. At least I’m sleeping, she thinks. With that sleep-induced logic at the forefront of her mind, she lies back down and closes her eyes.

“Ahem!”

Amy opens her eyes. Where her little Fenrir was lying at the end of her bed, there is now a giant wolf sitting on its haunches.

Amy screams, scrambles backwards, and hits the backboard of her bed so hard her head bounces. She tries to jump out of her bed, catches her feet on the sheets, and promptly falls flat on the floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” says the wolf in a voice that is still masculine, but also familiar...and slightly slurred.

Amy turns her head. “Loki?” she asks cautiously.

The wolf raises a paw to its mouth and snickers. Putting the paw down, it says in a loud voice, "I am the spirit of Fenrir!" Letting loose a howl, it lies down on the bed, rolls over on its back, and closes its eyes. From tail to nose it completely fills the bed. Amy's mouth opens, and the real Fenrir runs over and starts barking at the wolf.

From the door comes a knock. "Amy?"

"It's alright, Grandma. I think it's just...Fenrir."

The wolf blinks its eyes open. "Actually, you were right the first time. Sort of. I think I'm more Loki's subconscious."

"Loki's subconscious?" says Amy.

"Loki's subconscious?" says Beatrice through the door.

Rolling on its stomach, the wolf says, "Yes, that tiny, tiny, little part of him that doesn't want to drown in his own vomit in your backyard."

Amy springs up and opens her bedroom door. "Grandma," she says. "I think Loki is in the backyard."

Beatrice looks past Amy and says, "Who were you talking to?"

"The wolf."

"Wolf?" says Beatrice.

Amy looks back. The bed is empty.

"Never mind," she says, turning and running down the hall. She hears Beatrice following more slowly behind her.

A few moments later Amy throws open the kitchen door. Sure enough there is Loki sprawled out on the lawn on his back, an arm thrown over his eyes, his attire flickering from armor to street clothes and back again. She sees something wet glistening on his chin and winces. Magical frat boy indeed.

Behind her she hears Beatrice tsk-tsk. Her grandmother walks right by Amy and out onto the lawn. As she goes over to Loki, a light in the neighbor's house goes on. A window opens and said neighbor, Harry, a sixty five-ish year old man who's lived there forever, says, "Beatrice, I saw that

bum pissing in your bushes! Want me to call the cops?”

Amy sags. Whatever hope she had for nobility in Loki is flushed down the drain. Or peed into the hedge.

“No, no, no! That’s alright, Harry!” Beatrice shouts. “We know him.”

“What’s that he’s wearing?” Harry shouts. Several other lights down the block go on.

Beatrice taps Loki with a foot, then looks up at Harry again. “Clothes, Harry! Clothes!”

Loki begins to cough.

“Amy!” Beatrice says. “Help me roll him over!”

Startled out of her reverie, Amy runs out and helps Beatrice roll Loki onto his side. He smells like a wino, and up close she can see he hasn’t shaven, probably since Alfheim.

“Ugh,” says Amy.

Beatrice turns her head and winces.

Fenrir, Amy’s Fenrir, moves closer and licks his face. Which is probably a testament to just how disgusting whatever is on his chin is.

“Eww...” says Amy.

Beatrice puts a hand over her nose and her mouth and kicks Loki in the ribs with surprising force.

Loki’s eyes flutter but don’t open.

“Get in the house, Loki!” Beatrice says.

“Grandma,” Amy says, “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

Beatrice kicks him again. To Amy’s surprise, Loki rolls over onto his stomach and pulls himself up onto his feet, but he tips dangerously.

“You get under that arm,” says Beatrice resolutely. “I’ll get under this one.”

Together they manage to get Loki across the lawn and up the stoop. They’ve just stepped into the kitchen and Amy’s head is bent over when Beatrice screams and drops the arm she’s holding.

Loki falls to the side and crashes on the floor. Amy looks up and there is wolf Fenrir sitting in front of the kitchen sink.

Grabbing her grandmother, Amy narrows her eyes. “Couldn’t you have just made yourself look like yourself!”

“That would be needlessly straightforward,” says the wolf.

“Wha — wha — wha -” says Beatrice.

“It’s alright, Grandma,” Amy says, patting her back. “It’s just Loki’s subconscious.”

Tilting its head, the wolf says, “Shouldn’t you move him to the couch?”

Amy looks down at Loki lying on his side on the floor in a semi-fetal position.

“Should we, Grandma?”

Eyeing the wolf carefully, Beatrice says shakily, “No, it’ll be easier to clean up if he throws up here.”

The wolf puts back its ears, bobs its head, thumps its tail and opens its eyes wide.

“No,” says Beatrice, the self-assuredness back in her voice.

Straightening, the wolf sighs. “It was worth a try.”

The real Loki mutters in his sleep.

Wincing, Amy says, “What happened?”

“He went on a three day bender,” says Beatrice, her voice very dry, a scowl settling on her features.

“Why?” says Amy, walking over to get a dish towel. The spittle or whatever it is on his chin is grossing her out.

“They killed his sons...and Hoenir, Mimir and Sigyn,” the wolf says.

Amy looks up from where she is about to wipe Loki’s face.

She looks over at Beatrice. The hard lines in her grandmother's brow have softened.

The wolf settles down on the floor with a whimper. “Gone now like Aggie and Helen.”

“Helen?” says Amy.

The wolf stares at Loki, his voice far off. “You know her as Hel.”

“And Aggie...” says Beatrice. “Angrboða?”

Turning its eyes to Beatrice, the wolf snarls. “Her name was Anganboða, bringer of joy! Do not call her by the name Baldur gave!”

Beatrice puts her hand to her mouth and steps back.

Snarling, the wolf says. “Baldur destroyed her! Called her a troll and a witch. Even Odin spoke ill against her.” The wolf’s voice takes on a sing-song quality. “Because no one would ever gainsay the words of Baldur the Brave.”

And then dropping its head down, the wolf that is maybe a figment of Loki’s imagination puts its paws over his nose. “She saw Baldur for what he was. What she saw in Loki...” The wolf whimpers.



*THE GREAT HALL of Odin’s palace is filled with golden firelight and the buzz of conversation. Loki stands just to the right of the thrones of Odin, Frigga and crown prince Baldur.*

*Loki’s lips were released from the dwarf wire just a month ago, and he isn’t quite healed. Small circles of white scar tissue dot his upper lip and chin. As proficient as he is with magic, the wire itself was magical; the scars are slow to heal and difficult to cover with an illusion.*

*Odin has commanded he be here. Asgard is receiving King Frosthryr from Jotunheim, land of the Frost Giants. Loki has never been to Jotunheim — not since Odin rescued him as an infant during a campaign, anyway. He doesn’t know Jotunn customs, and the scars on his lips don’t speak well of his treatment in Asgard. He has no idea what his presence is supposed to accomplish.*

*Now as they wait for their guests to enter, Loki scans the hall. He catches*

Thor's eyes. Thor smiles with too many teeth and raises his hammer. Loki looks away.

He sees Sigyn in a distant corner and looks away again. Hoenir is standing near her in the shadows. Mimir is with him. For the occasion Mimir has been mounted on the end of a long staff. Loki contains a wince. Mimir loves being on the staff point. It gives him a better view. It also is a quite gruesome sight to the uninitiated. Loki wonders how Hoenir convinced Odin to allow it.

Catching his gaze, Mimir smiles brightly at Loki and lifts his eyebrows. It's a Mimir rendition of a wave. Loki nods in his direction.

Horns announce the Jotunn's arrival, and the hall goes quiet. Great double doors opposite the thrones open up and the Jotunn delegation marches in. King Frosthyrr is just one of many kings of Jotunheim squabbling for control of that realm. The civil wars on Jotunheim have given Frost Giants a reputation for primitive savagery, but you would not know it from looking at King Frosthyrr or the lords and ladies accompanying him. Their armor and clothing are fine, their bearing regal. But whereas Odin's palace is bathed in warm colors — oranges, reds and golds — the Frost Giants wear whites, silvers and blues. The giantesses wear jewelry of cool crystal. Like Loki, to a one they are pale, their skin almost translucent.

At the head of the procession marches King Frosthyrr with his daughter, Princess Járnsaxa. Odin has instructed Baldur to pay special attention to the princess. Loki notices with some disappointment that she is actually quite lovely. Her pale cheeks are rosy, her eyes blue and sparkling beneath dark blonde locks. She is smiling perhaps more than a princess should, but overall...Loki sighs. Why does Baldur always get the pleasant tasks?

He looks over at the crown prince. To his surprise, Baldur's eyes are riveted at the far end of the procession. Loki blinks, and then he sees what has caught Baldur's attention. A giantess stands there, her attire somewhat more modest than her companions. She has the darkest hair Loki has ever

seen, falling behind her shoulders like a black curtain. Her features are delicate and fine except for wide generous lips. Tall, and voluptuous without being fat, her bearing is as regal as a queen's.

She is the most beautiful woman Loki has ever seen; and next to her, Princess Járnsaxa is only plain.

He shifts on his feet and finds her eyes on his. Her gaze quickly drops and wanders over the royal family beside him, and then it comes back to Loki. She smiles slightly as though they are sharing some secret joke, and then the man standing next to her whispers something in her ear and she frowns and looks away.

Loki stands transfixed for a moment, Odin's words to King Frosthyrr are an unintelligible murmur at the edge of his consciousness. He looks to the crown prince. Baldur's eyes are still riveted on the giantess.

If she has the attention of the golden prince, she is a lost cause. Loki looks away, but over the next few hours his eyes keep going back to her.

Much later in the evening, after the feasting is mostly done and the festivities are turning to dancing, Loki eyes are still wandering to the giantess. He's learned her name is Anganboða. She is unmarried; the man she was speaking to earlier is her brother. Now she stands between said brother and Baldur. Loki scowls.

Thor's loud voice bellows over his shoulder. "What's wrong, Scar Lip? Won't anyone dance with you?"

Loki glares at Thor. "I simply have not asked anyone."

Thor's eyes sparkle and he smiles wickedly. "And you think anyone would give you that honor?"

Loki feels his blood go hot. Without thinking he says, "I bet you six months of your princely stipend that the very first individual I ask will be unable to refuse me."

Thor's smile drops. "If I win I get your stipend for same."

"Done," says Loki, smirking despite the fact he has no idea how he's

going to pull this off. His eyes pass over the room. The only woman who might dance with him is Sigyn, but he recoils at that idea. And then he blinks, and recalling his wager, he turns and walks, nay nearly skips, over to Hoenir and Mimir. Bowing low before the staff that Mimir is mounted on, Loki says, "Mimir, would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

Before Mimir can even respond, Loki pulls the staff from Hoenir's hands and starts moving towards the floor. Behind him Loki can hear Hoenir snort. At the top of the staff Mimir says loudly, "Well, it's not like I can refuse, is it?"

Across the room Loki sees Thor's face go red. Loki smiles with all his teeth and steps with Mimir into the line of dancers, twirling the staff as he does so. From the crowd he hears laughter and cries of "fool," but imagining what he'll do with six months of a princeling's allowance more than makes up for it.

"I say, Loki," says Mimir. "This actually isn't half bad. I can see so much this way. Spin me again!"

Now that Loki's technically fulfilled the requirements of his wager he could quit, but seeing Thor's furious glare across the hall is just too priceless to let go. He dances with Mimir, spins him, dips him, catches the staff on his foot, and tips it back up into his hands.

"I say," says Mimir, "dip me again! I didn't realize the frescoes on the ceiling had changed. I miss being able to bend my neck..."

Loki grins, even though the hall is filling with raucous laughter at his expense. The music gets louder and faster. The torches start to flicker madly, the fires in their pits send sparks shooting up into the air, and then the laughter takes on a nervous edge and someone screams.

"Or maybe we should stop," says Mimir.

The music is slowing anyway. Loki tilts Mimir back for a final, proper dip and as he bows, Mimir's staff in hand, he hears curses and shouts, but above it all the sound of one set of hands clapping.

Loki looks up and there is Anganboða not two paces away, clapping happily. “Well done!” she says, smiling at him. He does not smile back. She is so beautiful and so close. He wants to go to her, to smile in return, but she has the eye of Baldur and he knows who will win in such a contest. The effort it takes to stifle his natural impulses makes his lips twist into a frown; his body flushes with heat and rage.

Screams rise in the hall. Anganboða turns, and Loki follows her gaze. Sparks of fire are jumping madly from candles and the fire pits. Loki’s mouth opens in surprise, and his rage cools a bit just as the sparks subside.

“Oh, dear,” says Mimir.

Baldur and Anganboða’s brother are suddenly at her side, steering her away.

Loki watches them go, his face a mask of indifference. And then beside him he hears Odin’s voice. “I grow weary of playing politics. I need a drink. Come with us, Loki.”

Loki turns and there is Hoenir and Odin. A drink sounds like a very good idea.

Away from the party, in Odin’s own rooms, one drink turns into a few. Loki manages to lose all the money he won from Thor in a wager over a chess game while he is only slightly drunk.

...and then he proceeds to win it all back — and a rather nice guest house thrown in for good measure, while he is incredibly, mind-bendingly drunk during a second chess match.

His head is lying on the board and he hears Mimir nagging with Odin somewhere far, far, far, off in the distance. “It’s your fault! You should never have played him while he was so drunk. You had to know with those odds he’d win! Now look, you’re all drunk...Hoenir, don’t animate the chess pieces! You know they’ll squabble and cause all sorts of trouble — and you haven’t given them mouths! You’ve doomed them to die!”

Loki hears Odin guffaw and Hoenir snort. Loki manages to raise his

head. The chess pieces are sliding at each other and not paying attention to the rules of the board at all. He drops his head again.

“Come on, Hoenir,” says Mimir. “Let’s take Loki home...you’re less drunk than he is...Well then, heal yourself...I don’t care if you don’t want to be sober!”

Loki feels a hand slap his back, and then suddenly his head stops spinning and the world comes into focus. The chess pieces are knocking one another off the board, Odin has his hand on Hoenir’s shoulder, and they’re both laughing hysterically. Mimir’s staff is propped against the wall. For his part, Mimir looks extremely put out.

Loki sits up and meets Odin’s unblinking eye. Odin points his finger at him and laughs, “Ha! You get to be the responsible one for once! Take Hoenir home or I’ll lift my eye patch and give you a fright!”

At that Hoenir snickers with such force he falls off his stool. The stool promptly hops backwards and begins to scamper around like a small dog.

“Loki, let’s go before Hoenir animates something dangerous,” Mimir mutters.

Suddenly noticing the wide array of weapons decorating the walls of Odin’s private chamber, Loki gets off his chair and slides one of Hoenir’s arms under his shoulder. With the other hand he grabs Mimir’s staff. They leave Odin talking with the chess pieces, idly patting Hoenir’s stool.

“Well, that was just like old times,” Mimir says as they make their way down a long hallway past Odin’s guard. Loki can’t be bothered to respond. Hoenir is heavy. Also, Loki is watching for signs that he will throw up.

Loki decides to cut through the guest wing of the palace. There is a servants’ corridor and exit that will let them out closer to Hoenir’s hut than the front or back entrance. He is passing through some long unremarkable corridor when he hears a female voice echoing down the hall. “For so long you have said my honor was my most important possession, and now you want me to give it away to some so-called-golden prince so that you may rise

*in power!”*

*It takes a moment for Loki to realize it is Anganboða’s voice. And another moment more to comprehend what she is saying. So-called-golden prince? She is not smitten? He must have heard wrong. He finds himself stopping, his hands tightening on Mimir’s staff. There is a sound like a slap and then a door slams. Loki watches as Anganboða’s brother strides off down the hall in the opposite direction, passing by another servant as he does.*

*That servant meets Loki’s eyes. In his hands, Mimir whispers, “There really is nothing you can do at this point that won’t make the lady’s situation worse.”*

*Loki frowns but continues slowly on his way.*

*By the time he reaches the small door that exits to the garden, he doesn’t think his mood can get worse. There is a lantern by the door that he gives to Mimir to hold in his teeth, and then they step out into the night and Loki realizes it’s raining. Soon Loki is wet and chilled and Hoenir is getting heavier and heavier, and less and less cooperative. It would be better if Loki could swing him over his shoulder, but he also has to tote Mimir along.*

*Loki thinks of Odin warm and drunk and happy in his rooms and scowls. He hates being the responsible one.*

*Head bent over, he continues on. The rain picks up, and they’re just turning into a walkway lined with long hedges when Mimir mumbles through the lantern handle in his mouth. “‘ook!”*

*Loki looks up; a hooded figure is pressed against the hedge. Whoever it is doesn’t seem to be aware of their approach until they are nearly upon them, and then the figure turns. The hood spills off and Loki and Mimir are facing a very red-eyed Anganboða.*

*“What are you doing here?” he says, the words harsher than he intends.*

*“Is it any of your business?” she says.*

*Loki stares at her and he knows. “You’re running away,” he says. At least temporarily. From Baldur. Maybe from her family.*

*She doesn't deny it.*

*He twists his hands on Mimir's staff. Choosing to run away in the rain, probably without a plan, or without really knowing where she was going...She's obviously a bit mad.*

*The right thing for Loki to do, if he values his position at court, is to convince her to go back to the palace, grit her teeth, and allow Baldur's "affections."*

*He holds out Mimir's staff to her and says, "You can come with us." Apparently Loki can only be responsible to a point.*

*She takes the staff, looks up at Mimir and says, "Would you like me to take the lantern?"*

*"Yesh!" says the head, dropping it from his mouth into her hands.*

*It was quite nice of her to think of Mimir that way. For some reason it irritates him. Swinging the nearly unconscious Hoenir over his shoulder, he begins to walk away. A few paces later he turns back. Anganboða hasn't moved.*

*"You need not worry about your honor. You have my oath it is safe with me," Loki says, the words spilling out before he even thinks about them.*

*She tilts her head and then says, "I trust you." And she does. Loki has a rather keen sense for disambiguation. She's definitely mad.*

*Heaving a breath, she says, "But it doesn't seem to matter what you do, it's what people say you do..."*

*"Ahem," says Mimir. "Consider me your chaperone."*

*Looking up at the head, Anganboða's lips part. Those very wide, generous lips. Loki can't help but stare.*

*Why did he just make an oath to protect her honor? Scowling, Loki says, "Come on, Hoenir's heavy," and starts walking again. This time she hurries to catch up.*

*"Did you have any plans?" Loki gasps out as they trudge along. "Since you have chosen to run rather than accept the suit of Baldur the Beautiful,*

*Wise and Brave.”*

*“Is he those things?” Anganbođa says.*

*Loki turns to her. Rain has plastered her raven locks to her face, and he realizes what he took for a cloak is actually just a blanket, probably stolen from her rooms in the palace. She is very desperate.*

*Turning her eyes to the muddy ground she says, “I look at him...and I see a golden prince, but when I turn away, from the corner of my eye I see something quite different. Something I don’t like, something dark. When I hear his words they sound sweet, but when I replay them in my mind they are cruel.” She laughs and there is something frantic in it. “Yet everyone says he is beautiful, wise and brave.”*

*Loki turns to her, mouth open. No one else has ever doubted Baldur. A knot in his stomach uncoils with a force so strong it hurts.*

*“I must be mad,” she says softly. “And yet...he bartered for my honor with my brother...am I worth so little that a man can do that and still be good?”*

*“No, my lady,” Loki says.*

*She turns to him and smiles softly, and he finds himself silently vowing that if Baldur ever lays a finger on her, ever hurts her, he will make him die a slow and painful death.*

*They turn round a hedge and step through the large trees that shield Hoenir’s hut from the rest of Asgard. “What a meager abode for Odin’s brother,” Anganbođa says out of nowhere.*

*Loki blinks and shoves Hoenir against the door. “Hoenir is not Odin’s brother. Whatever made you think that?”*

*Hoenir grunts, the door gives way, and Mimir is overcome with a minor coughing fit.*

*Following him in the door, Anganbođa says, “But the three of you...you’re brothers, surely...”*

*“We aren’t related,” says Loki.*

*Mimir's minor coughing fit turns to a major coughing fit. Loki looks at him sharply, wondering what's amiss. Mimir says nothing, just turns very red.*



“BROTHERS,” the wolf mutters nonsensically. “She was mad...but I still loved her. And Sigyn...” It whimpers again.

Amy looks down at Loki. Beside her, Beatrice kneels down, too. Surely losing your children, best friends and wife warranted a little sympathy? She touches the cloth gingerly to Loki’s chin, the reek suddenly not bothering her as much. Underneath his unshaven face she begins to see that nobility again.

“So sad,” says Beatrice with a sigh.

Loki’s eyes flutter open. “Where am I?” he asks, rolling onto his back.

Leaning over him, gently brushing his cheeks, Amy says, “You’re safe. You’re back with Beatrice and me.”

Loki’s eyes go over to Beatrice and then rove down Amy’s body. He mutters something. Even though it is in a strange foreign language, it sounds heavy with gratitude.

His eyes close again and Amy says to the wolf. “What did he just say?”

Blinking, the wolf says, “Oh, he said ‘By the World Tree you have nice tits.’” And then it pops out of existence.

Amy leans away, just a little bit horrified.

Beatrice shakes her head ruefully. “Well, he’s not the god of niceness.” Standing up she says, “I’m going to bed.”

## CHAPTER 13



THE NEXT MORNING when Amy comes into the kitchen Beatrice is already there, and so is Loki. Beatrice is buzzing around the stove; Loki is sitting at the table, hunched over a cup of coffee and a half eaten plate of eggs. His hair is wet like he's just come out of the shower, but he still hasn't shaved. He isn't in his armor. He's wearing one of her grandfather's old tee shirts and a pair of Grandpa's utility pants that fit Loki like capris.

He doesn't raise his eyes when she comes in, just stares at a point on the table next to the sugar jar.

"Hi," Amy says.

Loki doesn't move or speak. But Beatrice says, "Good morning, Dear." And then her grandmother takes a cup of tea and goes and sits down next to Loki at the table.

Amy pours herself a cup of coffee and joins them.

Loki doesn't do anything, just sits hunched over, as though inhabiting his own dark world. It's frightening, and sad.

Swallowing, Amy says, "You told us what happened."

Loki's eyes shoot up to hers. For a moment Amy thinks they are completely black, but she blinks, and they're that eerie light gray color again.

"You told us last night," Amy says. Or his subconscious did. It doesn't seem worthwhile to go into the whole wolf Fenrir thing. "I'm sorry about

your family, and your friends.”

Loki looks away.

Beatrice shakily puts down her teacup. “I hope you won’t do anything ...rash...”

Amy blinks. A three-day bender seems pretty rash to her.

Loki’s eyes slide to Beatrice and then he smirks. “Are you referring to Ragnarok, Beatrice?”

“It had crossed my mind.” Beatrice’s eyes are steady, but her hands are shaking on her teacup.

Amy’s heart stops. If she remembers Loki’s Wikipedia entry correctly, he’s the one who leads the dead in the battle against the Norse gods at Ragnarok, the end of the world.

Loki snorts, and then he begins to laugh quietly. Playing idly with his fork he says, “Oh, if only I could hop aboard the ship Naglfar and lead the armies of Hel against Asgard, I would, definitely. But there are no armies in the realm of Hel. Just my daughter’s corpse, and the corpses of her maids.” His smile drops and he looks away. “There is no Hel for the meek, no Valhalla for warriors slain in battle. Those are just dreams you humans use to console yourselves during your fleeting lives. There is just nothingness.”

“You don’t know that!” says Beatrice, fingering the cross hanging around her neck.

Loki looks up at her and glares. And then he stands from the table and walks out the door. Beatrice and Amy watch him walk into the garage. Amy looks around the kitchen. Nothing is on fire. For some reason that makes her sad.



SITTING with her laptop and checkbook on the kitchen table, Amy’s looking at her bank accounts trying not to feel depressed. It’s the evening after Loki’s

return. She had a temp job in the afternoon, and now she's obsessively reconciling her checkbook, calculating how much she has earned and how much she'll need to earn to have enough money to pay the school fees her scholarship doesn't cover, and to make a down payment on a new place to live in the fall.

Hearing a knock at the door, Amy looks up. Through the window she sees Loki wearing the same clothes he had on earlier.

Grateful for the distraction and relieved that he looks sober and shaven, Amy walks over and opens the door. Face almost expressionless, Loki says, "Miss Lewis, it seems I will be a guest of your world for awhile. I was wondering if..." He looks away. "If you might help me get acclimated to your world's current magic...technologies."

Amy's stares at him. That seems so healthy and proactive. "Wow. Good for you," she says, too shocked to move from the doorway.

Shrugging, he says in a flat voice, "If I'm going to see Odin kneel before me while I hold his testicles in my hands as all of Asgard burns, I have to start somewhere."

Amy's mouth drops.

Straightening, Loki says, "I will make it worth your while somehow, I give you my —"

Amy waves a hand. "No, no, no. It's okay...of course I'll help you if I can; you don't owe me anything." She'll just take that Odin's testicle thing and Asgard burning thing as a slight bit of hyperbole brought on by grief.

Loki tilts his head and his expression softens just a bit.

Her brow furrows. "Is there any place you'd like to start?"

Loki's eyes go over to her laptop on the kitchen table. "Computers and the internets. The last time I was here I had some access to ENIAC — but things have come so far since then."

Amy blinks at him. ENIAC? Shaking her head she steps aside and motions for him to come in. "Have a seat. I'll get us something to drink."

“Thank you,” says Loki, walking over and sitting in front of her computer. As she turns to the refrigerator, he’s staring at the blank screen of power save mode.

Taking out a pitcher of freshly made peach tea, she pours two glasses and turns around. Loki has one finger hovering above the keyboard and he’s staring at her bank account information.

“Whoa,” says Amy, going to the table and closing that tab.

Loki looks at her, brows slightly raised.

Wincing, Amy says, “You probably shouldn’t have seen that.”

Loki holds up two hands. “I just touched it and — ”

“No, no, no...It’s okay.” She grabs her checkbook and then brings the two glasses of tea over to the table. Handing him one, she takes a sip of her own. It’s not as cold as she expected. “Drats, I’ll have to get some ice,” she says.

Holding out a hand to her, Loki says, “Sit down and allow me.”

She hands him the glasses. He gives her a twisted half smile and frost climbs up the outside of both. “Here,” he says, handing one back.

Amy finds herself smiling...more than she should. Is she being flirty? She shouldn’t be flirty. He just lost his family and his best friends and that would be inappropriate. She schools her face to neutral. Is it her imagination or is her pulse a little quick? Just knowing about his family...he doesn’t seem so much like an obnoxious flirt anymore. He has children, he’s —

Loki clinks his glass with hers which snaps her back to the moment. She takes a sip. “It’s perfect,” she says, staring over her glass at him.

Loki raises an eyebrow. “Where should we start?”

Realizing she’s staring, she spins back to her computer. “Well, I guess, first...this is a mouse.” She toggles the wireless mouse she has next to her iMac. Remembering his confusion over Car, she says, “It’s just what it’s called...it’s not actually alive.”

Loki holds out a hand and she hands it to him. Eying the mouse he murmurs, “Hoenir would have fun with this.” Expression hardening, he says,

“How does it work?”

Amy has some experience teaching techie neophytes. She expects hours of back and forth, and obvious questions that make her want to tear her hair out. That doesn't happen.

Loki grasps the point and click concept immediately. They move quickly from mice to the internet, and he begins asking questions that are too technical. He accidentally calls up the browser's options and gets a menu she has never seen. He clicks on something, and when the page of gobbledygook comes up, he recognizes it immediately as the code for the page.

That's when she looks down and sees it. “Um...” she says. “Loki, your fingertips are blue...” It's that lovely, robin's egg shade she had seen before, and it almost seems to be alight from within.

He looks down and his brow furrows. He takes a breath and the color fades away, like a wave draining from sand. Turning to her, his expression sharp, he says, “It is just an illusion.”

Amy can't help it; she puts a hand on his shoulder. “It's okay.”

Turning back to the computer he says dryly, “I blame you for putting the damned idea in my head.”

Removing her hand and taking a deep uncomfortable breath, Amy says, “Okay, maybe we should go next to Google. It's an internet site that can tell you just about everything....”

Once Loki has access to Google, it quickly becomes apparent that Amy isn't so much helping as holding Loki back. She gets up and lets him explore ‘How the Internet Works’ and ‘Static Versus Dynamic Web Pages’ by himself.

Beatrice comes in, they all eat dinner together, and then Loki is at the computer again. When Amy goes to bed, Loki is still there, the screen flashing from one page to another. His eyes look very dark, and she swears his skin has a blue cast but decides not to say anything.

The next day when Beatrice goes to fetch Loki for breakfast, Amy clicks

on the browser's history — just out of curiosity. She's not sure what she expected to find, but she doesn't expect to find a whole bunch of entries on something called Schrödinger's cat, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, quantum computing, random number generators and something on financial derivatives. She backs slowly away.

At breakfast when she asks him what he was browsing the night before, he just smirks and says, "Magic."



WITH THE HELP OF GOOGLE, Loki fixes the ceiling fan in her grandmother's room — turns out the problem was actually in the fuse box. During his first week with them, among other acts of computer wizardry, Loki cleans up the hard drive on Beatrice's PC — something Amy would have thought impossible since her grandmother seems to open every attachment and click on every link she's ever gotten in an email. And he also manages to get a nasty virus off of nosy-neighbor Harry's computer — Harry's on Beatrice's email list. Sometime that first week he also hooks up the television, the DVD player and the stereo so that all share one remote, something Amy never managed to do. After that Amy finds herself regularly watching TV with Loki late into the night. He lies on the couch, feet propped up on one end. She sits on the EZ-boy chair — she starts sleeping better there than anywhere else.

Overall, Beatrice and Amy are both really impressed by the way Loki immerses himself in modern technology and modern life. But there are some incidents.



AMY COMES HOME JUST after lunchtime during Loki's second week with

them. She had a job as a hostess at a local restaurant that morning. Beatrice meets her in the backyard, water pot in hand. “He’s in the kitchen,” Beatrice says. “I think you need to talk to him. We just don’t do that!”

Puzzled, Amy heads into the kitchen. Loki is wearing her grandmother’s apron...which is a little odd considering it is pink and far too small...but that isn’t what really grabs her attention.

“Why is there a dead pig on our kitchen table?” She’s been around enough dead animals in vet school to recognize it without most of its skin and to not be disgusted — even if she is mostly vegetarian.

Loki looks up from where he is leaning over said pig with a very big cleaver. His brows furrow. “It has come to my attention that I am, in Beatrice’s words, ‘Eating you out of house and home.’ I am trying to do my ‘fair share’.”

“By butchering a pig...”

“It is a free-range pig, much higher quality than you would get in the the grocery store. Also, it is freshly slaughtered. It will be delicious...even you will want to eat this bacon.” He smacks the pig’s hindquarters and smiles.

Tilting his chin and rubbing the back of his cheek with a bloody hand, he says, “Though tonight I think we should eat the head. I make a delicious sweetbread.” He looks at her, holding up the cleaver in a way that is kind of psycho-esque. “What?”

“You cook?” she says. That is probably the least important question in her mind, but somehow it pops up first.

He rolls his eyes. “Odin was always sending me out to babysit Thor when he went adventuring. Thor was a prince; a bastard, but a prince... I got to cook.”

Amy looks at the dead animal stretched out and filling the whole kitchen table. “Where did you get the pig?”

He blinks at her and then leans down and starts sliding the knife under the pig’s skin. “From a butcher on Fulton. I read about it on the internet and went

this morning.”

“You don’t drive...did you take this thing on the bus?” She had taught him how to use the bus and left a pass out for him. The one time Amy tried to teach Loki how to drive, he turned the Subaru into a load bearing part of the garage wall. Amy doesn’t know how he can build her a personal website on ‘server space’ she didn’t know she had and hook it up to ‘RSS feeds’ on veterinary medicine but can’t manage to put a car in reverse. It probably relates somehow to him setting the toaster on fire, though.

He looks up at her. “You know they wouldn’t let me?” He shakes his head as though amazed. “I carried it back. I got a lot of stares. You’d think people never had seen a hog before.”

Amy can hear the neighborhood gossip mill grinding in her head. Trying not to think about it she says, “How did you pay for it?”

He blinks again.

Oh, no. “Did you steal this pig?”

“I have no money. Of course I stole the pig,” he says.

“We don’t do that!” says Amy.

He stares at her. Then frowning and crossing his arms, cleaver still in hand, he says, “Do you want me to return it?”

Amy looks at the partially butchered animal and rubs her eyes. “No, just tell me where you stole it from and give me your oath that you won’t do it again.” She tells herself she’ll send the butcher compensation. Somehow. Anonymously.

“Fine...you have my oath, while I reside at your house, I will not steal another pig — ”

“Anything,” says Amy.

He glowers at her.

She glowers right back even though she feels a pang of fear. “It could attract attention and the police.”

Narrowing his eyes, he uncrosses his arms and rolls his eyes. “Fine, you

have my oath I will not steal while I reside under your roof.”

Amy decides that is the best she is going to do. Later that night, despite her better judgment, she tries some pig cheek — it just smells so good. It is delicious.



IT IS near the end of the second week when the second incident occurs. Amy is just coming home late from her hostessing job. There is a light in the living room. She follows it and finds Loki kneeling in front of the TV cabinet fiddling with the remote.

Without thinking, she puts her hostessing apron with the \$66.73 she got in tips from takeaway orders on the coffee table next to her laptop. It was a long day, she made hardly any money, and she has no idea how she’s going to pay all her expenses at this rate. Settling into the EZ boy, she just sighs.

Without looking at her, Loki flops down on the couch. “I’ve hooked the television up to your computer. We can watch YouTube, Netflix, Hulu...”

“Whatever,” Amy says.

Without looking at her, Loki points the remote at the TV and some strange menu with cute icons comes up. He selects some talk on YouTube about Higgs Boson particles. Physics really isn’t Amy’s thing, but it is interesting — until it isn’t. Amy finds herself drifting off into sleep, Loki talking in the background...Something about, “Humans can’t see magic, but you’ve found all these ways to look at it indirectly. I really can see why Hoenir is so fond of you...”

She jerks awake when the program ends. The strange menu comes up and Loki flips to Netflix and Star Trek TOS reruns.

Spock’s making eyes at some incredibly elegant woman, and Amy’s just drifting off to sleep again when Loki says, “She’s scrawny.”

“Mmmm...” says Amy.

And then out of the blue Loki says, “You know, Amy, you really are just my type, but I don’t even feel like having sex right now.”

Amy bolts upright. Loki isn’t even looking at her. He’s just lying on the couch, head turned to the television screen. Her heart rate goes from racing back to normal. For a moment she’d felt like her sanctuary was going to collapse on her.

Staring at the flickering light without even seeing it, Amy feels exhausted again. “Sex is overrated,” she says. Sex is a tease. Your body convinces you you want it, and then during it you hardly feel like you’re even there, your mind wanders, the sensations become muted. Once it’s over you’re left feeling incomplete, and empty, wondering why you’d bothered in the first place. And then your partner describes it as awesome. She huffs at a recent memory and stares at her fingernails on the arm of the chair.

“Ordinarily I’d take that as a challenge,” Loki says, not moving.

Amy’s cheeks flush. “Glad I can be here during your time of personal growth.”

“This isn’t growth,” says Loki, his voice flat.

He isn’t looking at her; he hasn’t even moved. And then she remembers him laughing about getting his lips sewn shut, and flirting with her in Alfheim. Where did the Loki that could laugh about his own torture go? She’s been enjoying his company these last few weeks; he’s been mellow. There have been no horrible pick-up lines; she feels so safe she falls asleep with him in her living room. But the reason he’s been so mellow, the reason she feels so comfortable — it’s because he’s depressed, isn’t it?

She swallows. And why shouldn’t he be? He’s lost everything.

The images on the screen stop. “I’m bored with this show,” says Loki. He flips back to the cute icon-y menu.

Suddenly anxious to draw him out, Amy says, “Did you hook my computer up to the DVD player somehow?” Talking about technology is about the only thing that seems to perk his interest lately.

Loki actually laughs. “Oh, your DVD player isn’t involved in the slightest. I’m utilizing a device called an Apple TV. It’s a little box that connects your TV to your computer and the internet. The hard part was getting a username and then a password to initialize it.” He shakes his head and sighs. “Actually, it wasn’t that hard. You know, if you humans used more pass phrases instead of passwords the internet would be so much more secure. And think of it — ‘the pink hadrosaur jumps over thirteen purple griffins in the icebox,’ you’d never forget it, and it would be nearly impossible to hack.”

He actually sounds happy, and that’s good, but he talks so fast it takes Amy a moment to decipher all of it. And then she flushes. “Did you steal an Apple TV?”

He waves a hand at her and puffs. “No, I *borrowed* an Apple TV. I have every intention of returning it.”

“You can’t do that!”

Loki looks at a point on the wall. “No, I really can. I make myself invisible, walk into the Apple Store and — ”

“That’s stealing!”

He glares at her. “I do not break my oaths!”

What follows is an argument that she thinks she technically wins, but he refuses to acknowledge her victory. In the end she extracts an oath that he will return the Apple TV the next day and that he won’t borrow again without a merchant’s express consent...as long as he resides on their property.

That night she goes to sleep in her own bed, leaving him taking the Apple TV box thingy out of the TV cabinet.

Later, she comes down the stairs to let Fenrir out. Loki is stretched out asleep on the couch. A box she supposes is the Apple TV is on the coffee table beside him.

His face is drawn, his fingers are blue and twitching, and he’s mumbling something in another language, sounding strained. Her change apron is still

on the coffee table, too. She decides not to move it. It's so close to his face, it will jingle and Loki obviously needs his sleep, pained as it may be.

She has his oath not to steal in her house; and she's seen that the man takes his oaths very seriously.

It isn't until she's settled back in bed and closing her eyes that she realizes the true significance of her argument with Loki earlier in the evening.

Her eyes bolt open.

...forget borrowing things without asking. What's really scary is that he's been here two weeks and he's already hacking into computers.



*STUMBLING out of the rain into Hoenir's hut, Anganboða, Mimir, Loki and the nearly unconscious Hoenir find themselves in a sitting room. Panting, Loki drops Hoenir on the small sofa. Hoenir mumbles something in his sleep, and Loki crumples to the floor.*

*"That's going to hurt in the morning," says Mimir with a tsk, tsk.*

*"His head or my back?" Loki grumbles.*

*"Both," says Mimir. His eyes slide over to Anganboða. "Would you please lean me against that wall?" He waggles his eyebrows in the direction of a wall just to the side of an unlit fireplace.*

*As Anganboða complies, Loki stares at the logs in the fireplace, concentrates just a moment and the logs leap into flame.*

*Anganboða gives a small gasp and she backs away from Mimir and the roaring fire. Loki just stares at her silently, his mind an uncomfortable jumble.*

*"Now, Miss," says Mimir, "Loki did ask a very good question out there. Do you have a plan?"*

*Anganboða lets the blanket covering her shoulders fall away. Beneath it is a thick satchel. "I was thinking, I have heard some wealthy families will*

hire a young lady to educate their daughters and young children.” Opening the satchel, she pulls out a large and well worn tome. “I have no experience, but I am well read.”

Curiosity getting the better of him, Loki says, “That doesn’t look like a book for children.”

Anganbođa sighs. “It isn’t, but it is one of my favorites. I couldn’t leave it.” She hands it to Loki. He opens the dust jacket and smiles. “Ah, it is Hellbendi’s, *Magic: Mathematical, Scientific and Philosophical Inquiries Beyond Practical Applications.*” Shaking his head he says almost to himself, “This is a very, very, good book.”

Although the Aesir can sense magic and bend it to their will, few have tried to understand it like Hellbendi, a sorcerer from ancient times. Loki has found that understanding the science of magic has greatly improved his practical abilities.

“You’ve read it?” says Anganbođa. She sounds impressed, not bored or mildly disgusted.

He should reply with confidence; however, all that happens is that his jaw drops open.

Fortunately, Mimir comes to Loki’s aid. In his most courtly tones he says, “Loki has read that and more. When he isn’t causing mischief for his or Odin’s amusement, he is often ransacking Hoenir’s library.”

“Library?” says Anganbođa, her face visibly brightening. She looks at Loki expectantly.

Pulling himself together, he says, “Yes, Hoenir’s rivals Odin’s.” Going to retrieve Mimir, he steps towards a wall lined with several doors. “Come, we’ll show you,” he says.

“Are you sure you know which door? Even I can’t keep them straight,” Mimir whispers.

Loki isn’t sure, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he smiles as confidently as he can at Anganbođa, who smiles back wildly. Lifting his eyebrows at her, he

*opens the first door just slightly. The sound of claws on metal and a furious screeching fills his ears. Loki peeks in the opening. It is a room he has never seen before, lined with giant cages, inside of which are velociraptors as tall as him. Their heads swivel as one towards the doorway. For a moment they just stare, and then they jump against the bars of their cages, shaking and screeching with all their might.*

*Loki closes the door quickly.*

*“What were those?” says Anganboða, eyes wide.*

*“Errrrr....” says Mimir.*

*“Nothing but harmless hadrosaurs, gentle herbivorous dragons,” says Loki.*

*“They didn’t look gentle,” says Anganboða.*

*“Let’s try the next door,” says Loki, quickly moving on. Fortunately, that door does lead to the library.*

*Perhaps an hour later, they are still there. Mimir is leaning against a wall, sound asleep. Loki and Anganboða are sitting at a table, two stacks of books in front of Anganboða. One stack for her to read, the other a stack of children’s books Loki is insisting that she borrow from Hoenir.*

*Leaning on his elbows, Loki says, “You are so well read, and yet you do not use magic yourself. I don’t understand.”*

*Anganboða looks down. “I would love to use magic. But I can’t. I see magic but am unable to bend it to my will.”*

*She frowns a little. Upset that his line of questioning has made her unhappy, Loki reaches forward and pulls an illusion of a flower from her nose.*

*Anganboða laughs, and Loki smirks and lifts an eyebrow. He waves his hand and the imaginary flower turns into butterflies — he’s more a fan of spiders, but they seldom go over well. The butterflies flap their wings, fly up towards the ceiling and disappear.*

*Still smiling, Anganboða looks to the books. “Do you really think Hoenir*

won't mind if I borrow these?"

Loki waves a hand. "Of course he won't mind." He leans back in his chair and puts a hand to his chin. "What's more of a worry is how Baldur reacts to your not coming to see him this evening. Falling out of favor of the crown prince is a sure way to find yourself unemployable."

Unless of course, you are Loki. Odin insists Loki remain in Asgard, no matter how Baldur complains.

Tapping his chin, Loki says, "You were supposed to meet him somewhere in the palace, were you not?"

Anganboða's face falls and she nods.

"Don't worry," says Loki. "We will tell the court I transformed myself into Baldur and nearly led you astray, but the fine Mimir saw what I was up to, put an end to my antics, and protected your honor. Eternally grateful, you helped him find his way back to Hoenir's hut." Loki straightens and smiles mischievously. "Your honor is preserved, and Baldur can't possibly be mad at you because everyone knows what a horrible prankster I am." He narrows his eyes. But somehow he has to find a way to keep Baldur away from her in the future.

"I don't like that plan," Anganboða says.

Loki raises an eyebrow. "Why ever not?"

"What of your honor, and how it will be damaged by such a lie?" Anganboða says.

Loki smirks. "Everyone knows I have no honor."

Anganboða's eyes narrow. "Yes, if it wasn't for the eagle eyes of Mimir over there, I'd be ruined by now."

Mimir chooses that moment to release a giant snore.

Loki flushes. His jaw tenses. Pretending that Mimir is protecting her is one of the little mental games he plays to keep his oath to her. "It is not for lack of desire, my Lady." His words sound too cutting, and too cruel, even to him.

*Anganbođa's gaze moves away. She looks at the books in front of her. "After I am employed, will I see you again?"*

*Her voice is soft...almost hopeful. Or perhaps he is imagining it. "That can be arranged," he says cautiously.*

*She smiles, and he feels his lips threaten to pull up.*

*"But first," he says, "we must make sure you can be employed. You must lie to the court."*

*Shaking her head, she puts a hand on his. "I won't tell them that story. It is unfair to you."*

*It's ridiculous how arousing her soft fingers are against his knuckles. He sighs and brings her hand to his lips. "My Lady," he says. "At court you must lie. It is how you survive."*



*"LOKI, LOKI, LOKI!"*

*Loki's eyes open to darkness. It takes him a moment to realize he is on Midgard curled up on Beatrice's couch. He puts his hand to his temples, closes his eyes and sees Anganbođa's face.*

*"Aggie...." He sighs. Was there ever a time he was so hopelessly romantic? "I could not protect you..." Or even the much more formidable Sigyn.*

*"Loki, Loki, Loki!"*

*Loki feels a chill pass through him. Red mist creeps along the edges of his vision. "What do you want?" he whispers.*

*"I need your help," the mist says, as usual in Russian.*

*Loki scowls. "And why would I do that?" The mist swirls around him and the hairs on the back of his neck rise.*

*"I know what I am," the child's voice says.*

*Loki says nothing, just narrows his eyes.*

“Cera,” the child’s voice whispers.

Loki raises an eyebrow at the word. Cera means power.

“And I can be your Cera,” the red mist says. It is so dense around Loki that he has to blink his eyes to see. His whole body hums and his skin starts to turn blue. Scowling, he fights back the illusion concocted by his obviously slipping sanity and grief.

He blinks again. The thing, Cera, is right. Loki’s pulse starts to race. He’s been delving into mortal magics these past few weeks looking for some way to exact revenge. Humans are so close to being able to give him what he needs — yet still decades, maybe centuries away. But Cera...if whatever Cera is, is as powerful as Loki thinks, vengeance may be very close.

“What do you want?” Loki whispers.

“Be my Josef!” Cera wails. “Save me from the God people!”

Loki throws his legs over the edge of the couch. “Where are you?”

He feels an anxiety in the pit of his stomach and knows it isn’t his own. The thing is projecting emotions now. He scowls.

“I don’t know where I am,” Cera wails. “But I know where I’ve been...”



IT IS way too early in the morning after Loki and Amy’s Apple TV discussion, but Amy is dashing down the stairs. The vet clinic called. They are short handed for the day; they asked her if she can be there in half an hour for a ten hour shift. She tears into the kitchen in her scrubs and finds Loki staring out the window, a frown on his face. She runs to retrieve her change apron from the next room. When she gets back in the kitchen, apron in hand, she says, “What’s wrong?” She doesn’t really have time for the answer, but she remembers him murmuring in his sleep the night before, his fingers twitching, and it makes her physically ache for him.

“I need money,” he says, shooting her a look like a challenge. “And I am

forbidden to steal while I am under your roof, so — ”

“You could ask to borrow some,” says Amy.

Loki’s frown vanishes. “Ask?”

“Of course,” says Amy. She heaves a breath. “Look, you lost your family, your friends...your world. Of course you’ll need some help getting back on your feet.” She takes two tens out of the change apron, slips them in the pocket of her scrubs and drops the apron on the table. The change rattles in the pockets. Loki follows it with his eyes.

“Take as much as you need; everything if you need it,” Amy says.

“I don’t think I could....” says Loki. His eyes have gone wide, and he has the expression of a surprised puppy on his face.

His earnestness surprises Amy, and makes warmth bubble in her stomach. “Look, you know where it all is. Take it. Everything. It’s okay. Really.”

Loki comes forward and drops to one knee in front of her. “Amy Lewis, I am in your debt. You have my oath that I will pay you back with interest.”

“Ummm...” she says. “Well, if you think that is necessary,” she says, looking at her change purse. What is it, forty six bucks and some change maybe?

Kissing her hand, he says, “I do think it is necessary.”

Amy swallows as warmth rushes through her limbs at his touch. “Okay...” Loki looks up at her, his face shining with something close to happiness. “I wondered why I heard you in the forest, I wondered how your voice came to be in my head, and how you intersected with my higher purpose. Now I know. My gratitude is eternal, and you have my oath, I will pay it back with interest!”

He kisses her hand again, and Amy’s mouth drops open. “Ummmm....” is all that comes out. She feels her face go red, and then Loki looks up at her like he might actually kiss her — really kiss her. That is appealing and scary. “I have to go,” she squeaks and runs out the kitchen door.

She nearly crashes into Beatrice on the back walk. Clutching a watering

can to her chest, Beatrice says, “Did you talk to Loki this morning?”

Amy blinks. “Yes.”

Beatrice’s eyes narrow. “I heard him talking in Russian.” Beatrice learned Russian as a child in the Ukraine — under less than ideal circumstances.

Amy’s bites her lip. She has to run, but she doesn’t like to rush away from her grandmother. Not when she’s talking about her life before.

Shaking her head, Beatrice says, “Something about Cera and Tunguska.”

“What?” says Amy.

“Cera is power, dear,” says Beatrice. She purses her lips. “I think Tunguska is a place.” And then Beatrice starts walking towards the front yard. “Well, I better go. My impatiens are thirsty.”

Amy watches her go, her stomach tying in a knot. But then she shakes her head and makes a beeline for the bus stop, waving to the little Mexican man on a bicycle ice cream cart that always seems to be around their house as she goes.



LATER THAT EVENING when she comes home, her change apron is lying on the table. She peeks in. Loki has left her with \$20. A note is on top, written in an oddly near perfect hand.

*Miss Lewis,*

*I must leave for a while and do not know when I shall return; but rest assured, I never forget my oaths. We never discussed terms of my loan, I hope 33% per annum will be sufficient.*

*Again my gratitude is eternal,*

*Loki*

Amy’s heart falls at the “leave for a while” bit. She rubs her hand over the note and sighs.

After a few minutes she picks up the change apron and shakes her head.

All that gratitude for what could have only been about \$26 bucks?



ABOUT A WEEK AND A HALF LATER, Amy is walking up the sidewalk to her grandmother's house. It's dusk, and the windows are all dark. The day was hot and muggy, and the evening isn't much better, but she sees Beatrice out watering her flowers in the relatively cool air. Her grandmother nods without smiling, and goes around the back of the house, watering can in hand. Her grandmother's expression, the darkness of the house, she doesn't have to ask; Loki is still gone. She bites her lip, and the magic is gone with him. Bowing her head, she trudges up the steps.

Going in the door, she picks up the mail that's been thrust through the mail slot. She rifles through the envelopes, purposefully not looking at the couch where Loki slept.

Her eyebrows rise. There is a letter from her school. Opening it, she finds that the check she sent in to pay for her miscellaneous school fees has bounced. Shaking her head, she goes to her laptop to check her bank account. She's never bounced a check in her life; there must be a mistake.

A few minutes later, Amy's sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the computer screen, face in her hands. There is only \$1 left in her checking. She feels cold, even though the room is warm. Realization hits hard and fast. Loki stole from her, after giving her his precious oath. And he hasn't come back, and she won't be able to go back to school.

She swallows and scoots back from the table feeling sick.

How will she get the money? Should she borrow it from Beatrice? Is it too late to apply for financial aid?

She looks up and her gaze goes to the kitchen window. She's vaguely aware of Beatrice standing up and lowering the the watering can in her hands. Amy closes her eyes, remembering Loki's words, "I will pay you back with

interest.” Maybe it's all been a mistake? He'll come back, it will all be okay... But it won't be, because she needs the money *now*.

Outside, Beatrice must see Amy, and her face must look stricken, because Beatrice comes running. And then Beatrice just sort of isn't there.

Amy bolts from her seat, the sickening feeling in her stomach instantly getting worse. She runs through the door and finds Beatrice on the ground at the bottom of the stoop, her leg at an odd angle. Her head is tilted back and her eyes are closed. Blood is on the sidewalk.

“Grandma!” Amy screams. Sinking to her knees, she pulls out her phone, and dials 911. As the phone rings, she takes her grandmothers hand in her own. She looks down at the delicate veins visible through her grandmother's aged skin. Beatrice does not stir. Amy swallows, her eyes hot. Now everything is gone.

A few hours later she is at the hospital, sitting in the waiting room in a daze. On the periphery of her vision she sees several men approaching.

“Miss Lewis?” Amy turns her head, and her brow furrows. There is the older man with the too-square jaw in the too conservative gray suit who she saw in her neighborhood eating ice cream. He's still in a gray suit. Next to him are two other men. The first looks Mexican, and vaguely familiar. She blinks. It's the ice cream vendor, but now he's in a suit, too.

The last man is young. He's wearing a suit too, but he looks a little more rumpled. Looking down at a little device of some kind, he says, “She's clean.”

Holding up a badge, the older guy says, “Miss Lewis, I'm agent Merryl and these are agents Hernandez and Ericson. We're from the FBI. We need to bring you in for questioning.”

“Am I in trouble?” Amy stammers.

The old guy just tilts his head.

~FIN~

*Monsters: I Bring the Fire Part II* is available at your [favorite retailer](#).

Learn more on the author's [website](#), or [click here](#) to sign up for her mailing list.

# HIDDEN BLADE



SOUL EATER #1

By Pippa DaCosta

***"They call me devil, liar, thief. In whispers, they call me Soul Eater. They're right. I'm all those things—and more."***

Kicked out of the underworld and cursed to walk this earth for all eternity, Ace Dante finds solace in helping others avoid the wrath of the gods.

But when warrior-bitch, Queen of Cats, and Ace's ex-wife, Bastet, hires him to stop whoever is slaughtering her blessed women, Ace is caught between two of the most powerful deities to have ever existed: Isis and Osiris.

The once-revered gods aren't dead.

They're back.

And Ace is in their way.

Welcome to a New York where the ancient gods roam.

## CHAPTER 1



*GODS.* *They're a pain in my ass,* I thought as my cell phone chirped in my pocket, alerting the four college kids inside the apartment that I was crouched on their balcony, watching them summon gods knew what from the underworld. It had to be a god calling me—too many millennia had given them the worst sense of timing.

The kids spotted me through the glass and bolted, falling over their array of ritual paraphernalia. If they scattered out of the apartment, it'd make scaring the shit out of them a whole lot harder.

I kicked the balcony door in, whipped my sawed-off shotgun free of its holster, and fired at their exit, peppering the door with lead. The kids yanked up short and whirled.

“Oh shit—oh shit—oh shit, we didn't know, man!” Hands up, they wailed in one long tirade. “We weren't doin' anythin'. Don't shoot us.”

On and on their whining went, and on and on my cell tinkled, vibrating against my leg. Ignoring it all, I came to a stop at the edge of the elaborate summoning circle. A candle had toppled over, spilling wax across a papyrus scroll. The little flame licked at the scroll's upturned edge but didn't catch. Switching the shotgun to my left hand, I crouched, righted the candle, and flicked the papyrus around. I scanned the hieroglyphs scrawled from edge to edge. The penmanship was superb, more art than writing. Swirls and pen

strokes danced beautifully, almost as though they were alive. Whoever had written this knew how to craft the ancient words in powerful and mostly forgotten ways. A sorcerer. A sinking sense of dread darkened my already somber mood.

“It’s him,” one of the kids hissed. “I told you... I told you he was following us. You didn’t fuckin’ listen, Jase.”

“Shut up. Just shut up!” Jase snarled back, and then to me, he sniveled, “We were just messin’ around.”

Puffing out a sigh, I pinched the papyrus by its edges. The spellwork it contained was authentic. Kids these days. They had no fear and no clue. The spell nipped at my fingertips, trying to escape its bonds. I dangled it over the naked candle flame. A ripple of fire raced up the paper; fire liked volatile spells, especially those sanctioned by the underworld.

“He’s gonna kill us,” Jase whispered.

I snapped my gaze up. I could do worse than kill them. It had been a while since I’d indulged, but I could make an exception for spoiled, rich kids with too much time on their hands, especially since that one—Jase—and I already had a chat some weeks ago when I’d found him buying canopic jars.

He gulped loudly and made a brave attempt at staring back at me before dropping his eyes. Few could look me in the eye for long.

Finally, my cell stopped its incessant ringing and the quiet settled. Too quiet. New York didn’t do quiet. I should have been hearing the endless whine of sirens or the bark of car horns. *I’m too late.*

I straightened. “What happened to kids screwing around with Ouija boards? This here”—I flicked a hand at the well-crafted summoning circle—“this will get you killed.”

“It’s just some ancient Egyptian stuff.”

My lips twitched dangerously close to a smile. Holstering the shotgun inside my coat, I reached behind my shoulder and curled my fingers around Alysclair’s grip. The sword slid free from its leather scabbard with a

satisfying gasp. There was something to be said for a two-handed sword, particularly the kind etched with spellwork exactly like that found on the scroll I'd just burned. Alysdaire sang with magic. These kids wouldn't hear or feel it, but it wasn't meant for them. Strictly speaking, it wasn't meant for this world either—a little like me.

“Shit, man! You can't fuckin' do this!” They all started up again, bleating like penned sheep, all but one. The quiet one hadn't said a word since I'd kicked in the door and was doing a fantastic job of trying real hard to keep me from noticing him.

“C'mon, you're the Nameless One, right? The coat, the sword?” Jase spluttered, hope gushing through his words. “You're s'posed to be good.”

I wasn't sure what surprised me more: the fact he'd heard of the Nameless One, or that these dumbass kids thought I was good.

“The Nameless One is an urban legend.”

Pointing the sword tip at the floor, I scanned the apartment. The door was ten paces away; the balcony was closer. Two possible exits and I was in the middle, positioned exactly where I wanted to be.

“Besides,” I drawled, “if he was real, you really wouldn't want him saving you.”

Any hope of saving these kids had fled long before I arrived. The spellwork, the papyrus—heavy magic came at a high price. My job now was to contain the fallout.

My cell buzzed. “Poison” by Alice Cooper started playing from my pocket.

Quiet Guy kicked the glass coffee table, sending jagged pieces of glass raining over me. I flung up an arm too late to stop the shards from biting into my cheek. It only took a second, but the distraction lasted long enough for the summoned demon residing in Quiet Guy to snatch up a blade of glass and plunge it into his pal's neck. Things got messy real fast after that.

A hail of screams erupted. Blood sprayed in a wide arc as the kid

dropped. The demon inside Quiet Guy let out a triumphant howl, and the two remaining kids did the only sensible thing: they bolted out the door.

I lunged at the demon, Alysclair aglow, but being free, probably for the first time in its long life, the demon wasn't about to let the sight of Alysclair frighten it. Scuttling back—its movements broken and twitchy inside its human host—the demon clawed its way up the wall and onto the ceiling. Its human mouth split impossibly wide, and a long, whip-like black tongue lashed out.

It expected me to fall back. Those tongues were barbed. Any sane person would have run out the door with the kids, but I snatched the tongue out of the air, flicked it around my wrist, and yanked. I wasn't *any* sane person. Technically, I wasn't a person.

The demon heaved back, jerking me forward.

Wrestling with a demon's tongue wasn't how I'd expected this evening to go.

“Give up now—” I started, but the tongue knotted back on itself, reeling me closer. “And I'll let you live.”

My boots slipped. Tighter and tighter the tongue coiled up my forearm, bicep, and shoulder, until the demon had me dangling, my boot toes scuffing the floor.

The demon chuckled, the sound of it like metal grinding against metal—an abhorrent, not-of-this-world sound that set my teeth on edge.

“Lost your bite... Namelesssss One...” it hissed around its tongue, outside my mind as well as burrowing the words deep inside my thoughts.

“I know a girl like you.” I tightened my dangling grip on Alysclair. “All tongue.”

The demon had begun distorting its victim's body. The face was swollen and flushed purple, as though Quiet Guy had been run through a trash compactor. The eyes, so fragile, had been one of the first things to go. They had turned to mush and were dribbling from their sockets. Crimson flames

danced inside the dark, hollow sockets, seemingly deeper than a human skull could account for, as if reaching right into the soul. The eyes really were the windows to the soul, and Quiet Guy's was no longer home. Soon, there would be little left of the kid. Once that happened, the demon would become virtually unstoppable and the no-bullshit New Yorkers would have more to worry about than the alligators in the sewers, like the type of problem that ate small children and used their bones to pave the way for more of its ilk.

"Don't get me wrong," I pushed the words through my teeth, "there's a lot the right girl can do with her tongue, but my friend's is as sharp as a dagger and cuts like one too."

"Join me... Soul Eater...you were powerful once...could be again..."

I pretended to think about it while locking eyes with those glowing red coals. The deeper I looked, the deeper the creature's needs and desires clawed into my mind. There was no light in this one, only poisonous, devouring darkness.

"I don't do demon."

I heaved the sword around and thrust it upright, sinking it deep into the demon's gut. The demon screamed the way only otherworldly creatures could, as though the sword had cleaved its soul in two. I drove Alysclair right up to its damn hilt. A familiar spell pushed from my lips, which would have been the perfect end to this little dance had the demon's tongue not unraveled and dropped me like a stone. I fell, dragging Alysclair down with me, and landed in a crouch.

The demon scuttled along the ceiling, down the wall, and out the door, leaving a trail of bubbling blood behind it.

I spat a curse and dashed after it, my ringtone still belting out Alice Cooper and how his girl's lips were venomous poison.

## CHAPTER 2



BODY NUMBER two lay sprawled in the stairwell, neck broken. I stepped over the corpse and jogged up the stairs, following the splatters of blood toward the roof. The demon would eventually kill the third kid too; they always killed their summoners—the people who potentially had power over them.

Shoving through a door, the stairwell spat me out into a biting winter wind. Snow swirled and patted against my face, softening the sounds of New York’s usual din of traffic.

Alysdair in hand, hieroglyphs glowing pale green along her blade, I stepped into a few inches of snow cover and bounced my gaze around the rooftop’s clutter. Storage boxes, an elevator motor enclosure, some other jagged shapes silhouetted against the glistening skyline, but no obvious demons. Beyond the roof, a high-rise loomed, its windows aglow. With the gunshot and the bodies, someone would call the cops and soon. I had to get this done fast, before the demon sprouted wings.

“I’ve reconsidered,” I called out, following the trail of blood. My boots crunched in the snow, so there was no use in trying to move quietly. “You and me, I can make that work.”

The grinding laughter returned, but the wind gathered it up and tossed it around the rooftop. “You are weak...”

“Says the demon with a hole in its gut,” I muttered. “You’re going to die

here, you must know that.”

The demon could shift its shape and escape. Given enough time, it could hole up somewhere and lick its wounds. I couldn't let that happen. A demon loose in a city like New York would be a public relations nightmare. Naturally, it would be my fault. Most screwups were, if you asked the gods.

“You are not free to make a deal, Nameless One.”

“How's that?” I inched up against the elevator enclosure and eyed the trail of blood leading out of sight around the corner.

“Your soul is owned by another.” The words tumbled through the air, but their source was close. “I tasted *him* on you.”

I winced. That truth cut too close to the bone for comfort. If word got out I was Ozzy's bitch, nobody would hire me. Shit, nobody would come within ten feet of me. If the demon didn't have to die before, it did now.

Enough talk. Talking with demons—and listening to them—was a surefire way of getting your mind devoured. This one had spent long enough probing my thoughts to pick up on my fears. They were good at that—planting seeds that would later grow into toxic doubts until you fancied yourself a long walk off a short balcony. I hadn't dealt with a demon of this caliber in a while; clearly, I was rusty.

“Slippery things, souls.” I lifted Alysclair and wrapped both hands around her handle, letting the sword pull on my magical reserves. “They're surprisingly easy to lose and damned difficult to get back.”

I lunged around the corner and got a face full of contorted demon chest. Alysclair plunged through cleanly, slicing deeper than the metal alone would have allowed for, and sank into that fetid thing inside—its soul. A flicker snagged at my resolve—a twitch from my past, of how good it would be to drink its soul down. It *had* been a long time, but this was Alysclair's moment to shine, not mine. A soul that black, I didn't need the weight.

The demon let out its ear-piercing screech. Its claws raked at my sword arm to cut off the source of its agony, but its red-eyed glow was fading as

Alysdair fed. The sword sang in my grip until the deed was done, and the demon collapsed into a pile of loose skin and putrid flesh.

The after buzz tapped at the part of my mind that went to deeper, darker things every time Alysdair got her kick and I didn't—the *what-ifs* and *just-a-little-bits*. With a growl, I staggered back, grateful the snow was swirling faster now and covering up the grisly evidence.

“Poison” blared again from my pocket.

“For Sekhmet's sake!” I wiped Alysdair clean on my duster coat and drove her home inside her sheathe, snug between my shoulder blades. Then I snatched the cell from my pocket. “Shu, by the gods, this had better be good or I will come back there and shove your little statue of Ra up your—”

“Ace.”

Gods be damned, I'd worked with Shukra long enough to recognize that arctic tone in her voice. “That's my name, peaches. Don't wear it out.”

Sirens wailed nearby—too nearby. I strode to the edge of the roof and didn't need to look far to see the blue and white lights bathing the walls of the opposite building. It was too late to clean up the mess.

“There's a goddess in your office. I suggest you don't make her wait.”

The line went dead.

A goddess in my office? That didn't narrow it down. There were more goddesses topside than you could shake a crook and flail at. Time to make a quick exit and leave the cops with more questions than they had any hope of answering. I tucked my cell away. I broke into a jog, the rooftop's edge approaching fast. I picked up speed, wondered too late if the gap between the buildings might be wider than I'd guesstimated, and leaped into the dark.



IGNORING gods didn't make them go away. I'd tried. But that didn't mean I couldn't eek out some pleasure by making the bitch wait. I *was* on my way to

my office, but I just happened to drop by Toni's bar and order a few shots first. Antonio was more than eager to oblige, and I figured I owed it to Toni to prop the bar up like I did most nights after a job, especially when the job flirted with the kind of illicit desires that had gotten me thrown out of the underworld—or *Duat*, to give the place its proper name.

Toni drifted over, saluting me with the bottle of whatever he'd been serving me—something syrupy and potent. I placed my hand over the glass and shook my head. The idea was to arrive late, not drunk, although the thought of seeing the look on Shu's face did appeal to me. She wasn't immune to angry gods quite like I was. A minor god had once gotten the wrong idea about Shu and me and figured he could get to me by hurting her. I didn't answer the ransom, and as soon as Shu got free, she ripped his insides out via his throat. Happy days.

"Ace, right?" a sweet voice asked, wrenching me out of my thoughts. "Hi, I'm Rosie. I work right across the street."

I looked at her and then at Antonio, who shrugged and left to tend to the rest of his flock, and finally at the door like I might be able to see the place she'd mentioned through it. "The accountants?"

"Yeah." She beamed, tucked her short blond hair behind her ear and leaned against the bar. "I...er... I've seen you around a few times, and..."

She was talking, and I probably should have been listening, but my mind was still going over that tick, that little hook that had dug itself in right when the demon had died, that little voice that said the demon's soul should have been mine. That voice was almost as old as I was. I thought I'd kicked it to the curb long ago.

Rosie's smooth hand touched my arm, startling me back into the bar. She smiled like she was waiting for me to say something. I had no idea what. She was looking for company, but if she knew what I was she'd run, screaming.

I tossed a few dollars on the bar and slipped off my stool. "I gotta get to work."

Sinking my hands into my jacket pockets, my fingers brushed a familiar gold band. I slipped the ring over my ring finger, pushed through the door, and ducked my head against the flurries of snow.

I'd made the goddess wait long enough.

## CHAPTER 3



OPENING the door to the rented office space Shukra and I shared, I almost kicked a streak of black fur as it darted around my ankles and disappeared down the stairwell.

“Shu! Keep the damn door closed!” I slammed the door to drive my point home. “I hate cats.”

A headache was trying to hammer its way out of my skull through my eyeballs, my cheek was throbbing—probably from the tiny bits of glass I couldn’t pick out—and I was still sore over the new claw marks in my coat. The cherry on top of my fantastic night would be the goddess waiting behind my closed office door.

“Ace,” Shu said as she strode down the hall, hips swaying hypnotically like a cobra in a pantsuit.

I’d once condemned her to Hell. Her soul was the blackest I’d ever seen. She should have been devoured, and yet here she was, a blight on my life, striding toward me like she owned the goddamn place. *Half* owned it. My hatred for her burned as fiercely as it had on the day I’d weighed the light in her soul and found it lacking, and it was only matched by the vicious hatred she felt for me. We had that in common, at least.

“You’re not gonna like it,” she said, pulling up outside my office door. Her lips cut blood-red lines through her golden complexion. She still carried

the darker skin tone of the east, even after all this time. She wore her oil-black hair up in a ponytail so tight it pulled her cheekbones up with it. I hadn't been lying about the woman with a tongue like a knife—or exaggerating. She had the kind of sultry good looks that lured men and women close so she could tear their hearts out and eat them while her victims died watching. Disgust and hatred had saved me that fate.

“When have I ever liked anything you’ve said?” I told her and reached for the office door.

“This one—”

“I’ve got this.” I opened the door and my guts fell through the floor. My bravado, the thumping pain in my head, and the sickening sense that the world wasn't done screwing with me all came to a screeching halt. Never had a second dragged on for so long an eternity.

Goddess Bastet—Queen of Cats, Warrior Bitch, and my ex-wife—was sitting in my chair. She'd propped her boots, buckled up to the knee, on my desk and was plucking at her elaborately painted nails with my decorative letter opener. In her hands, that letter opener was a deadly weapon.

“Get out of my chair,” I growled.

“Technically, the chair is half mine.” She spoke slowly, leisurely, taking her time because she had immeasurable amounts of it.

“Take the chair and get out.” I even stepped aside and held the door open for her like a gentleman.

Shu stood down the hallway, glaring daggers. “She’s a client.”

My headache was back and thumping down my neck. I should have stayed at Antonio's.

“Conflict of interest,” I blurted, scrambling for any excuse to be done with this day, my ex-wife, and Shu's eternally pissed-off expression.

“You were always interested in conflict before.” This came from the smooth lips of my ex-wife. She could sit there as calm and relaxed as she liked, but like any cat, she could go from tame to rabid if I glanced at her the

wrong way.

Closing my eyes, I pinched the bridge of my nose and counted to three—that was as far as I got before my chair creaked, drawing my eye back to Bast as she rose gracefully to her feet. She was tall and lean and had a powerful gait, like the top cat cruising her territory. That’s what had first caught my eye; after a few hundred years, I’d been looking for a challenge and found it in her.

She wore some kind of belted waistcoat with an array of buckles and long fingerless gloves that ended at the elbow. Short black hair clung close to her cheeks, giving her a wild, foreboding flair, as though she’d sooner stab you as say hello. And yet her mouth was smooth, her lips soft, and her words like silk, and her touch...

I told myself I was looking for weapons when I roamed my gaze up her thighs and over her hips. I knew every inch of her and how she used it all.

“Shu,” I cleared my throat, “give us a minute.”

Shu was already halfway down the hall when she called back, “Anything gets broken, it comes out of your paycheck.”

I closed the door and pressed my back against it. Bast had taken up a spot leaning against my desk. She’d set the letter opener down beside her, still within reach. I didn’t actually think she’d go to all the trouble of hiring me only to stab me, but jilted women did crazy things. Jilted goddesses were damn right psychotic.

She blinked bottle-green, cat-like eyes and clasped her hands loosely in front of her.

“Do I talk first,” I asked, “or should we wait for the tension to kill me?”

“Someone is killing my blessed. I want you to find out who.”

“Someone is killing cats?”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed. “Were you even paying attention when we were married?”

All gods had obsessions, little quirks to get them through millennia of

endless boredom. Her *thing* was cats. I'd once woken in her bed surrounded by hundreds of felines—or maybe it had been thirty. Thirty cats sure felt like a hundred when they were watching you sleep. She *was* a cat—a big-ass jungle cat with claws like *janbiya* daggers who liked to pretend she was a person, or maybe it was the other way around. The lines had blurred. A lot had blurred in twenty years. I couldn't be expected to remember everything a goddess chose to bless.

What the hell else could be blessed by Bastet? Warriors, swords, ninjas? “I have no idea.”

“Pregnant women.”

“Right. That. Of course. Pregnant women.”

Her mouth curled at one side, tucking into her cheek. “You haven't changed.”

I *had*, just not recently. “Shu will look into it.”

“No.”

“Bast.”

She lifted her head at my tone and fixed those penetrating green eyes on mine. I hesitated, my argument stalling. If I spent too long looking into her eyes, I'd see into her soul. I'd been down that road before. I no more wanted to see the truth than she wanted me to see it. Breaking the visual connection before the magic could take hold, I sauntered around my desk and dropped into my chair.

“My schedule is packed. I really don't have the time.”

“I saw. You must be keeping Antonio busy.”

She had been rooting through my desk. I made a mental note to yell at Shu later, not that she could have stopped a goddess from helping herself to my office, but I could still lay into my business partner. It would make me feel better.

“Bast, you and me...we've been there.” I rummaged around my top drawer, trying to look busy. She might get the point and leave. “Let's not get

tangled up again. Shu is better suited to—”

“Shukra is a condemned soul tied to you because Osiris has a twisted sense of humor.” Bast planted her hands on my desktop and leaned in, driving her glare down on me. “I will not entrust the lives of my blessed to a foul being who should have been devoured centuries ago.”

I couldn’t argue with her words, or with the venom in them, but working with Bast on something like this? I already knew where it was headed. We’d end up fighting, which was never a pretty sight, the guilt would pile on, and there might even be some sex in there somewhere—angry sex, the toxic kind.

“You’re wearing our wedding band?”

I looked at my hand, surprised to find the incriminating evidence right there on my finger. “I...er...”

Damn, she was scrutinizing me again with those cat eyes.

“You left me, remember?” Bast said.

I remembered precisely how her knee had found my balls.

“You want the ring back?” I gave the ring a twist, but it wasn’t budging.

“No, I want your help.” She straightened and seemed to grow three inches. When she spoke, her voice carried a compulsion—a decent one too and heavy enough to scratch at my mind. “Women in Queens are dying. Women blessed by me, in my territory. My chosen. This is personal, and I don’t trust anyone else to do what needs to be done.”

Trust. We’d trusted each other once. Funny how that worked. Gods didn’t trust easily, and especially not other gods.

Her compulsion slid right off. She probably wasn’t aware she’d cast it, seeing as trying to compel me to do anything was a waste of magic. The fact she had made that mistake told me how much this meant to her. She wouldn’t have returned unless this was important. Her last words to me had been along the lines of, *“If I see you again in a thousand years, it’ll be too soon.”*

Twenty years was a blink to her. Maybe if I took the job and we stayed out of each other’s way, I could get this done. Business was slow. The gods

and their minions were unusually quiet. I needed the cash, needed this job, just not the baggage that came with it.

“You have to help, Ace.” The softness in her voice did me in, and I was about to agree, when she added, “For our daughter.”

“What?”

“I didn’t tell you because—”

“Wait.”

She waited. I opened my mouth, stalled, and closed my mouth.

“What?” I could hear my heart pounding right alongside the throbbing in my head. Daughter? “Back up a second.”

“She’s nineteen—and pregnant.”

A crazy little laugh slipped free. No. No way. Not in a thousand years would I believe this shit. “Really? You’re running with that cliché? I was going to say yes, but now...now...tell the sucker he has a kid and he’ll do anything?” I grinned, the laughter working its way to the surface again. “No thanks.”

“I’m not lying.”

I clamped my jaw so hard my teeth ached. A daughter. It was a lie. It had to be.

“You know what? I’ll let the lies slide. If what you’re saying is true and women in Queens are dying, I’ll look into it. Email me all the information you have.” I was done with her and this conversation. I just wanted her out of my office so I could raid the vodka in my bottom drawer. “But don’t lie to me, Bast. Okay? Not you. *Don’t.*”

I weighted the last word with my own compulsion, enough so she’d feel it and know I wasn’t screwing around.

She pulled a photo from her pocket and slammed it down on my desk like it was a smoking gun. “She has your eyes.”

Then she stormed out, slamming the door behind her with all the dramatic flare that goddesses possessed.

Twisting off the cap of the vodka bottle, I didn't bother with a glass and gulped down a few generous mouthfuls. And then I wished I hadn't as it burned my throat and threatened to come back up again.

The picture was sitting near the far edge of my desk, within reach, if I wanted to believe. I glared at it, my heart trying to hammer itself into something colder and harder. After twenty years, she'd decided to come back into my life, sit in my chair, and tell me I had a daughter. There should have been a law against women like her. Goddesses didn't abide by laws, only those of their own making, and even then they were more like guidelines.

I launched out of my seat, reached across the desk, snatched up the picture, and dumped it in the trash. There, that was dealt with. No picture. No guilt.

Bast and me, we'd had fun, until the lies started—my lies. Until I'd made the mistake of reading her soul.

My door rattled and flung open.

"I'm not in the mood," I groaned.

Shukra leaned against the doorframe and examined her nails. She'd stay that way until I acknowledged her. Hours, if necessary, just to win.

"Fine. What?"

"You're popular today. Ozzy called."

"He called?" First Bast, now Osiris? "On a phone?"

"No, via a séance." She rolled her eyes. "He wants to see you."

The vodka in my gut churned. "Now?"

She hesitated, a wicked smile crawling onto her lips. "Tomorrow morning. Ten a.m. sharp, Acehole."

And with that, she left, but her tinkling laughter sailed all the way up the hallway.

I side-eyed the vodka bottle. "Just you an' me."

I scooped it up and lifted it to my lips.

## CHAPTER 4



“YOU LOOK LIKE MY DOG.”

I squinted one eye at Nick “Cujo” Jones. He didn’t have a dog.

“After it died,” he added with a snort and then wheeled his wheelchair down his hall.

I followed, my head stuffed with cotton and my gut as fragile as a sacrificial virgin.

“I didn’t think you folks got hangovers?” Cujo said from farther down the hall, inside his kitchen.

I wasn’t hungover—hangovers were for lightweights. What I was feeling was more like halfway dead. Any further and I’d be back in the underworld.

“Takes some doing.” My voice sounded as dry and broken as my insides.

Cujo’s ground-floor apartment smelled of incense and marijuana. The incense was for deterring unwanted spirits, and the marijuana, that was for medicinal purposes—probably. I walked by dusty, decades-old framed photos of younger Cujo all buttoned up in his NYPD uniform, his cap tucked under his arm, and his smile fresh and bright. He’d been on the job for a few years before he had the misfortune of wandering into the crossfire between two bickering gods. He’d lived, but he would never walk again. After seeing enough of the impossible, he’d decided to start digging into the supernatural while he recovered, and a year later, he came to me, cash in his pocket and

hungry for revenge. I'd declined, telling him he was better off forgetting it, but he hadn't forgotten. He'd tried to hire me countless times since, and somewhere along the line, I'd started asking him for favors. Fifteen years on, he had yet to cash in his favors, but he would.

"Must have been a rough job?" Cujo asked in that gruff, no-bullshit tone of his. He'd filled out since his recruit photos. His dark hair was peppered with gray, and the years had weathered his face, drawing deep lines around his eyes and mouth. Age ate at some people, whittling them away, but not Cujo. The years had honed him into a hard-ass.

"Demons and dead bodies I can deal with. It's the ex-wife who did me in."

"Ah." He whirled his chair next to the kitchen table and leaned back. "What you got for me?"

I handed over the picture Bast had left with me, the one I'd dumped in the trash and then fished out again before passing out at my desk. "Nineteen. Pregnant. Lives in Queens."

Cujo took the picture, ran his critical gaze over it, and scratched at his whiskered chin. When he looked up, he clearly had a question on his lips.

"Don't say it," I suggested.

He shrugged. "Uh-huh. It's probably the light."

"No, really. Don't."

He tilted the photo side-on. "Maybe it's the camera angle or a lens flare caught in her eyes, made them glow a little?"

To keep my mind busy and my thoughts off the girl's uncanny likeness, I searched Cujo's cupboard, found a glass, and filled it from the faucet. All the while, Cujo's gaze rode my back like a devil on my shoulder.

"I need to know if she is nineteen and if she's showing any signs of—"

"Magic, hoodoo, spooky shit?" Cujo had a knack for reducing the terrifying into a joke. He took it all, the truth about the gods and their many beasts, in his stride.

“Just do some digging. See what you can find out about her.”

“Right-oh,” he said with too much enthusiasm.

I gulped down the water, waited to see if it would reappear anytime soon, and then turned to face Cujo’s crafted expression of innocence. “Keep this quiet. If anyone discovers—”

“That you couldn’t keep it in your pants?”

“Bastard.” A grin broke out across my lips.

Cujo arched an eyebrow. “Are there any more little Aces running around out there you want me to look for while I’m at it?”

“Gods, I hope not. One is enough.”

“Nobody ever teach you about protection in the underworld?”

I spluttered a laugh. Where I came from, traditional laws of nature did not apply. “It’s more complicated than that.”

He leaned back in his chair, wrestling his smile under control. “It’s been a while, but I seem to remember the whole process was pretty straightforward.”

“My ex-wife is a cat in her spare time. Insert Tab A into Slot B doesn’t cut it when you’re screwing gods.”

He let loose his chuckle. “I should have known. Nothing is ever simple around you.” He looked again at the picture. “Pretty. Must be her mother’s influence.”

“Ha, ha.”

“What god did she annoy to get lumped with you as her dad?”

“Possible dad,” I corrected and cringed. “What, you don’t think I’m parent material?”

“Oh, sure.” He crossed his arms over his chest, but that glint in his eye told me he wasn’t done. “It’s not like I’m constantly keeping your ugly mug off police records. Then there’s the weird shit that follows you. Put it this way: I wouldn’t want Chantal within five square miles of you.”

There was no chance of that. Chantal, Cujo’s teenage daughter, looked at me like she’d seen my soul, knew exactly what I was made of, and was

distinctly unimpressed. Most people had attuned survival instincts that kept them out of my path. But Chantal wasn't most people, and confrontation was her middle name. The first time we'd met, she'd asked me if I used my looks to manipulate and warned me that if I tried any of that shit with her, she'd set Cujo on me. I couldn't blame her. As far as she knew, I was in my late twenties, early thirties and an inexplicable "family friend." The type of "friend" her father wouldn't talk about. She didn't trust my vagueness. Never had. Never would. At least her instincts were accurate there. Outside of the Egyptian pantheon, Chantal was right up there on my "avoid at all costs" list.

Cujo had a point. I wasn't father material. "I'm hoping the girl has nothing to do with me."

He shot me a look, something like, "Keep telling yourself that," and said, "I'll run the girl through the NYPD systems and let you know what I find. That's what got you wasted, huh?"

"That"—my insides twisted—"and Osiris's summons."

Cujo's smile died a slow death and his cheeks lost some of their ruddy color. It took a lot to pale Cujo. "Shit." He shook his head. "Man, it's been a few years since the last time?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "I wish I could do more for yah."

"I appreciate the thought."

There was nothing Cujo, or anyone, could do. When the god of the underworld whipped up a curse, he didn't leave loopholes or wiggle room. I'd spent a few hundred years searching for one. Now I just lived with it, like I had to live with Shukra's putrid soul bound to mine.

"There's some whiskey under the sink," Cujo offered. "If you want some Dutch courage."

"Thanks, but my insides won't survive. Might take you up on a drink once I'm done with him though."

Facing Osiris drunk would only make a bad situation worse. I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut and would probably end up with another curse strangling my already battered soul.

Cujo's smile turned sympathetic. "At least he can't kill you, right?"

Somehow, I smiled, and not for the first time, I secretly wished Osiris had.

## CHAPTER 5



I PARKED my Ducati next to Ozzy's black Tesla, kicked the bike over on its stand, and fantasized about bringing Alysclair along for the ride. I didn't know if the sword could devour a god's soul, but I'd give it another shot. I'd tried before and failed spectacularly. It wasn't Osiris who'd taken umbrage at my assassination attempt. He'd found my efforts highly entertaining. Isis, on the other hand...

I shivered, swung my leg over the bike, palmed my keys, and gouged a deep line along the side of the Tesla, clipping every panel, and then I flicked my collar up and approached the mansion's entrance. After being around for as long as I had, I realized life was about taking the little pleasures as and when I could find them, because tomorrow, someone could rip them all away.

Gravel and snow crunched under my boots and the harsh New York wind bit at my bruised face as I stopped at the door. I pressed the bell and heard the chime echo inside. Any hope that Ozzy might have forgotten about his summons quickly died when his hired muscle opened the door. The guards frisked me, like always. I couldn't imagine anyone would be stupid enough to smuggle in a weapon (apart from me, that one time).

"Ozzy out back?" I asked Bob, the guard. Bob wasn't his real name, just the one I'd given him. Bob never smiled. I wouldn't have much to smile about if I were in Osiris's service either.

“You’ll find the mayor waiting for you same place as always,” Bob replied.

Believe it or not, there wasn’t a whole load of difference between New York and what most people called Hell. Swap the people out for demons, the politicians for gods, throw in the cutthroat family drama, amp up the mood lighting, and turn the Hudson into a river of souls, and welcome to home sweet home. Osiris was mayor here and a god back home. If he had it his way, he’d be a god here too. He probably believed he already was.

Osiris’s house was a museum, all dressed up for show. I’d never seen anyone out front, in the residence, and doubted Osiris and his wife did more than walk through the pretense of being average New Yorkers.

I sauntered through the cathedral-like foyer, down a red-carpeted hall, and into the study. I’d once admired the ancient books and array of Egyptian artifacts locked inside the glass cabinets, but now I barely spared them a glance. This wasn’t a social call. If I made the god wait any longer, I’d start to feel the hold he had over me; that was probably part of the reason my hangover was hanging around like the mistress at a wake.

The theatrics of opening the secret bookcase door had long ago lost its novelty and only served to remind me of the egotistical showman I was about to drop to my knees for.

The sight greeting me at the foot of the hidden staircase was, unfortunately, a typical one: women and men in various states of undress. Robed servers tended to their every need while they gorged themselves on the banquet of food, wine, and sex. The warm, wet air smelled like jasmine, cinnamon, indulgence, and sweat.

Overdressed in my coat, I garnered a few long, lingering glances as I picked my way through the revelers, keeping my eyes front and center. I didn’t want to know who they were—probably local officials and celebrities. Many of them likely had no choice but to be here. Osiris could be undeniably persuasive.

I took a wrong turn, easily done when every doorway was draped in gossamer curtains, and stumbled in on lurid sights I hadn't seen before and didn't wish to see again. By the time I found the right section, my heart was thudding fast and heavy and my breaths were coming on a little too hard.

Heat rolled out of the back chamber, the likes of which I hadn't known since the weighing chambers. I wiped my hands on my pants, gulped down what would probably be my last free breaths, and pushed through the drapes. It took a long, drawn out three seconds to read the mood in the room, three seconds in which my stride stuttered and instantly told two of the worlds' most powerful deities exactly what I didn't want them to know: that I'd prefer to be anywhere else but here with them.

Isis was lounging in an elaborate golden chair, jewels glittering in her raven-black hair. The fabric of her skintight dress was as thin and colorful as butterfly wings—for all the parts of her it covered up. Her golden skin shone, damp from exertion, as did her eyes, which were fixed across the room on her husband (and brother) seated at the end of a large bed. A woman was currently on her knees, worshipping his cock with her mouth.

The pair knew I was there, despite neither of them having acknowledged me. I gritted my teeth and waited, eyes fixed on the traditional relief of Osiris tucked inside an alcove along the back wall. I couldn't do much about the noise, except be grateful I hadn't eaten.

“Nameless One...” Osiris drawled. “Come here.”

My heart turned to stone. The compulsion wrapped around my flesh and bones and buried inside the parts of me deeply rooted in this realm. Forward I went, one foot in front of the other, until I stood beside the god, unable to turn my gaze away from the woman's bobbing head and rhythmic hand. I could close my eyes—and did, briefly—but that only made it worse.

If he asked me to suck him, I'd bite it off.

I waited, willing the time forward so I could get back to my little office and my paranormal clients with their mundane enquires that paid the bills and

kept my mind from straying. I even considered being nice to Shu—anything to get me out of this waking nightmare.

“This is taking too long,” Isis said, the ice in her voice cutting.

“It’s called sharing, Light of my Life. You had your—” Osiris’s breath caught, and he held it. The girl’s wet lips worked faster. The god leaned back, bracing his arms on the bed behind him, and breathed, “Right there.”

I shut my eyes and tried to recall the last time I’d ordered stationary. The office had to be due for another batch of pens. I’d get one of those handmade, leather-bound planners too, with all the fancy address cards and pockets.

Osiris grunted, deep and low, and then let out a strangled groan that rolled on and on until I wished I had brought Alysclair along so I could fall on the sword and put an end to my misery.

“No, no…” Osiris crooned. “You don’t swallow the nectar. Spit, dear.”

She did. I heard everything—smelled it too. Bile burned the back of my throat.

It had been a year, maybe two, since Osiris had summoned me. In that time, I’d deliberately forgotten how much I despised him. There was a time I’d screamed at him, raged, thrown my fists, and gotten myself strung up for my efforts. Now I endured.

I opened my eyes to see Isis sashaying toward us. Nature didn’t make women like her. Infinite power rippled through the air she carved through. She wore her beauty like armor and walked like time and decay couldn’t touch her. Slim and lithe, she didn’t look as though she had the strength to topple empires, but she could and she had—many times.

She planted something smooth, thin, and cool in my hand. I blinked down, recognized it as a dagger, and wondered if I could plunge it between Osiris’s ribs before either of them could stop me.

“Don’t move.” The compulsion ran steel rods through my spine, locking me down.

The god stood, naked but for a plain cotton robe. He had a supremely

proud face, a strong jaw, and fierce, long-lashed dark eyes. Without a word, he inspired the best in men—honor and loyalty—and a ferocious adoration from women, the type that could turn a mother against her child.

I had a blade in my hand and stood a few inches from his sun-baked chest, and he knew I wanted nothing more than to ram the blade into his heart and twist it in deep.

He appraised my scruffy coat and damp hair. His eyes moved to my face, where he probably hoped to find ammunition to use against me, but I'd learned long ago to keep my intentions far from my expression. He saw only boredom, compliance, and obedience. A snarl pulled at my lip. I swallowed, holding the rage deep inside.

He yanked the girl to her feet. Her pink tongue darted out, licking at a dribble of semen.

“Kill her,” Osiris said.

Panic wrapped around my heart. I fought to pull back my body, to somehow get a grip on its flesh, but all I could do was watch from inside my own skin as I lifted the dagger. *No, no!*

Osiris's warm hand curled around my neck. “Stop.”

Relief lifted the terror. Through it all, I'd struggled to keep my face an expressionless mask.

He jerked me forward, so close that his finely kohl-lined eyes were all I could see. “I'm just screwing with you.”

Gold rimmed his wide, black pupils and bled through the darker hazel color in his irises. He held me under his command, trapping me in my body, and burrowed his gaze deep into mine, knowing the longer he and I locked stares, the likelier it was I'd see into his soul. I closed my eyes, cutting off the magic before it could take root. His soul was not something I had any wish to witness.

Osiris shoved me back, rocking me onto my back foot, and took the dagger from my hand. “Sit, have a drink, relax.”

I would do all those things because I didn't have a choice. Stumbling to the table, I fell into a chair and poured myself wine from a crystal jug. I despised how my hand shook, sloshing wine over the tabletop. I would get through this, just like I had every other time.

"How's business?" the god asked, draping himself into the chair next to mine, sprawling like a lion in the sun. He set the dagger down between us. So close, so tempting.

"Could be better." I tasted the wine, found it sweet and sickly, but swallowed it anyway. It slipped all the way down and churned in my empty gut. "Could be worse."

Isis and the girl—whoever she was—were getting intimate in my peripheral vision. This was par for the course when it came to Osiris. As well as holding the title of God of the Underworld, he also happened to be the God of Fertility, and he was liberal with his blessings.

He poured himself some wine and cradled the glass stem between his long fingers while leaning back in his chair and looking me over. A smile teased the edges of his mouth. He was probably thinking of all the ways he could pull my strings.

"I don't hear much about you. Just the occasional whisper here and there..."

"We—Shu and I—we prefer it that way. Our clients appreciate discretion." And most of them didn't want news of their mistakes getting back to Osiris.

"Ah, Shukra... How is she?"

*Still tied to my soul, you twisted fuck.*

"Fine." I swallowed more wine, my throat constricting. I couldn't stop drinking, not until he released the compulsion. If I vomited it back up, he'd only make me drink more. I willed the wine to stay down. "Why did you summon me?"

Osiris drew in a deep breath through his nose. He crossed his legs and

sent his gaze around the room. “News from the underworld.”

Which could only mean one thing. “Amy?”

“Your mother wishes to take her slumber.” He flicked his long fingers as though tossing the comment away, like it was meaningless. He’d just told me that my mother was ready to slumber, which basically translated to: she’d tired of life and wanted to die.

I hovered my glass near my lips, the shock enough to stall Osiris’s compulsion. Ammit was a constant, like the sky or the earth. It had never crossed my mind that she’d step down. “When?”

“Well, these things take time, but time is a currency we gods have a surplus of.” He bounced his bare foot. “She wishes to see you.”

Which was easier said than done, since I was cursed to walk this earth by the very god I was currently drinking with. I finally took the sip of wine, hiding my expression behind the glass. Something wasn’t right. Osiris wouldn’t go back on his curse and agree to let me visit the underworld to pay my respects. That was a kindness the god didn’t have in him. Equally as suspicious, if it was that important, he could compel me to go home. Why give me the choice at all?

“She was a good mother to you,” he said.

There wasn’t a question there, so I didn’t reply. Ammit wasn’t my mother by blood, but she had taken me in and treated me like her own. They say that about the river beasts—vicious, but doting on their own kind. She was the ferocious Devourer of Souls, the final destination, and no god wanted to risk their paradise in the afterlife by crossing her—something I’d learned the hard way.

“I’ve always wondered why she took you in,” Osiris said with a whimsical tone that had the fine hairs on the back of my neck rising. “A nameless nothing, like you. She likes to keep her secrets, your mother.”

*No more or less than any other god,* I thought.

Osiris was looking at me, waiting for a reaction. He knew I couldn’t do

anything without his permission, and so we played this ancient game. His control. My obedience. “You must miss the old world as much as I do?”

I uselessly fought the compulsion, reluctant to give him anything he could use against me, but the answer came. “I do.”

“I imagine it’s the power you miss most ...”

Not a question. I kept my jaw locked.

“Is it? Tell me the truth.”

“Yes.” *Bastard*. This game, the strings he pulled and how he watched it all—every twitch, every glance, and every time I ground my teeth—was wearing me down. He poked and prodded me like an animal he’d caught in a trap, one he could torture for all eternity.

My gaze had strayed to the dagger and stayed fixed there, revealing my thoughts as plain as day. Of course, he’d noticed too and smiled when I forced myself to look him in the eye.

“If you wish to return, I’ll sanction your passage.”

*Why?* Why would he help me return home? What was in it for him? This wasn’t right. I had to think this through and find his angle before I agreed to anything.

“You do wish to return?” he asked casually.

“Yes, and I’ll consider it.”

“What is there to consider?” His laughter, short, sharp, and dark, left me with no doubt that he was deliberately jerking my chain.

“I need to consider why you’re giving me the choice,” I growled, teeth gritted. My fingers itched to close around his neck and choke the life out of him. Such mundane actions couldn’t kill gods and certainly not gods as powerful as Osiris. Still, it would feel good.

We locked gazes—a challenge—until I looked away, too afraid to see the truth inside those eyes.

He threw back his wine glass and downed its contents. “Isis, darling,” he beckoned.

I watched the goddess in the corner of my eye. She drew the young woman from the bed and led her over. The girl had the wide-eyed, half-high look of someone godstruck. Get too close to a higher deity, like Isis, for too long, and their allure became intoxicating. After spending time with the pair, her mind was probably lost in a pleasurable numbness. I doubted she even remembered her name.

“Are you finished, my sweetness?” Osiris smiled up at his wife.

Isis leaned down, rode her hand up his neck, and kissed him deeply.

“Yes,” she whispered against her husband’s lips.

They looked into each other’s eyes and power thrummed in the air between them—the power of an eternity spent together and of the two most feared deities the worlds had ever seen.

“Good,” Osiris said, and with his gaze firmly fixed on Isis, he added, “Nameless One, kill the girl.”

## CHAPTER 6



THE WATER in the sink had turned pink. I dug under my nails to get every minuscule piece of dried blood out, but no matter how hard I scrubbed, there was always more. Steam bellowed, fogging up the mirror. At least I couldn't see my face, my eyes, my soul.

A few raps on the door rattled my scattered thoughts.

My gut heaved. I'd already emptied its contents behind Osiris's garage, but my stomach didn't seem to care. It carried on heaving, trying to eject the guilt.

I pulled the plug, twisted on the faucet, swirled water, rinsed off the pink splatters, and splashed my face. My fingers trembled, like the rest of me.

"Ace, open up or I'll kick it in."

I couldn't deal with Shu, not in the state I was in. I should have gone home, but the office was closer, and I hadn't expected her to notice my arrival. She usually went out of her way to avoid me.

"Whatever personal crisis you're having," she shouted through the closed door, "I don't give a shit. I'm gonna count to three. One, two—"

I wrenched the door open. "What?!"

She recoiled, just a fraction, and then her eyes darkened and her brow cut a jagged scowl. "You fucked up."

I laughed because it was all I had left. "You'll have to narrow it down."

Barging past her, I retreated to my office and dropped into my chair. I'd planned to check my emails, but I couldn't remember why. I had no problem recalling how blood looked in a crystal glass though. How it clung to the sides, thick and dark, almost black.

Shu wisely loitered in my doorway. If she came any closer, I'd likely hurl my letter opener at her.

"That job," she said. "The kids who summoned something nasty in midtown? Someone had a hobby telescope pointed at the rooftop."

A little static shock of magic fizzled through my fingers. The girl's soul had been light and made of brilliance—innocent but for a few dark smudges. Had I weighed her, I'd have found her worthy. She would have rested for all eternity in the afterlife, where she belonged. But I hadn't weighed her. She'd never gotten that chance.

"Ace!" Shu barked. "Did you hear me?"

She'd tasted sweet. I could feel the light in her still, feel it dancing at my fingertips, plucking on pleasure. My body buzzed with life, magic, power. It had been so long...so long... I'd held out. I'd resisted.

"You're wanted for questioning in connection with the murders of those three kids."

"Three?" I asked. There had been four.

"A fourth—Jason Montgomery—is missing," she said, as if reading my thoughts.

My mind sharpened, focus narrowing. "Does the PD have my name?"

"No, just a description. It's blown up on the internet: the guy with the coat and sword. They're talking about you like you're some kind of vigilante bent on protecting the city from the rising dead."

They wouldn't say that if they knew I'd spent the morning washing off the blood of an innocent girl.

"You need to lay low. No more jobs. No more sword. Ditch the coat and wear a hat or something."

She *was* worried. Not for me, but for her own hide.

“I’ll find the kid,” I said. “He can tell the cops his pal went nuts and killed them all and then did himself in on the roof. He’s terrified. He’ll tell the cops what I tell him to tell them.”

One of Shu’s dark eyebrows crawled higher. “And the vigilante?”

“Urban legend. It was snowing. Whatever footage that’s circulating, it’ll be virtually indecipherable.”

She considered it, but that scowl of hers wasn’t getting any softer. “Let the cops find the kid.”

I could let it go. It wasn’t like I didn’t already have enough on my mind, but I hated loose ends—like snakes, they tended to come back around and bite me in the ass—and Jason Montgomery was one hell of a loose end. At the very least, I needed to have a chat with him.

“Fine.” Shu sighed, seeing the determination on my face and likely sensing now was not the time to argue. “Don’t get caught. It’s bad enough I have to spend every day working with you. I’d rather not be stuck in a prison cell with your righteous ass for the next fifty years.”

“Feeling’s mutual.”

*Find the kid.* I turned my mind to that and forcibly denied that morning’s events, pushing them way back where all the darkness of my past hid.

My cell chimed. I read Cujo’s name and waved Shu away. “Hey, Cujo—”

“Funny thing. There’s a video online of a guy in a long coat with a badass broadsword. You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“Sounds like a freak.” I grinned, grateful I could call Cujo a friend—one of few. “What kind of idiot carries a sword around New York?”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly. Anyway, that’s not why I’m calling. I looked into that bundle of joy of yours. Nineteen years old. She goes by the name *Chuck*.”

“What kind of name is that?”

Cujo paused. “Do you want me to answer that? Apple doesn’t fall far

from the tree.”

“I earned my nickname, same as you.”

“I got my name because a crackhead bit me and I lost it. Tell me again how you got the name *Ace*?”

“Cheating at cards,” I lied. He knew it was a lie too, which was why he kept asking. *Ace* didn’t always have good connotations. Go back far enough, a few centuries, and it was another word for bad luck, or a curse. “Tell me about Chuck.”

“No parents. She was abandoned at a firehouse as a six-month-old. In and out of foster homes since she was nine. A stint on the streets. She has herself a rap sheet for drug possession and theft, which was how I was able to trace her so fast.”

As he talked, that niggling, little voice of truth chipped away at my denials. Cujo was right, the apple never fell far, and Chuck’s background sounded all too familiar. “Cut to the chase, Cujo.”

“Difficult to know if she’s showing any unusual talents, but her name appears in the files of a few unresolved homicide cases. The victims were street douches. No witnesses. No charges. She was brought in but clammed up every time. Can’t say homicide would have wasted much manpower there, but your girl could have been caught up in something that went sideways, and if she does have *talents*, that might be how some nasty folks got themselves dead. From what I hear, little godlings often make mistakes that end with people dying.”

Ancient gods made mistakes too. I squeezed my eyes closed and pinched the bridge of my nose. A lot of things were my fault, but not this, not her. The girl’s upbringing was all on Bast. I hadn’t known about her. I didn’t get the chance to help.

“Ace?”

“Uh-huh, still here.”

“Short of a DNA test, I can’t tell you much more.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“There’s a shelter in Queens. I’ll email you the address. The shelter offers support for pregnant women in crisis.”

“Okay, thanks, Cujo. Hey, the missing kid, Jason Montgomery. Let me know if you get any leads.”

“Funny,” he mock-whispered. “The sword guy, they say he can walk through Hell unburned.”

I laughed. “It’s not the fire that burns, my friend. It’s the gods you gotta watch out for. Thanks for this, and I owe you one.”

“I’m keeping tabs. You owe me at least fifty. But sure, why not? Gotta get my kicks somewhere. Stay safe, Ace.”

## CHAPTER 7



THE SNOW in the street had turned to slush and refrozen in piles along the sidewalks outside the *Goddess of the Rising Sun Women's Shelter*. The name alone was a neon sign to anyone paying attention. Bast had many names, all the gods did, and this shelter was one of hers.

More people were filing through the doors than I'd expected. Inside, the staff served hot food and offered somewhere warm and dry for the cold and hungry to rest. I made my way through the line, quickly coming to the conclusion that blending in with roughly forty pregnant women wouldn't be easy.

"Can I help you?" A matronly woman stepped into my path. She was thin as a rake, gnarled like a tree, and had fierce eyes. She looked frail, but she'd bring out the claws if I threatened her or hers in any way.

"I'm looking for someone. A girl. Her name's—"

"Are you with the police?" She looked me over, suspicion in her words.

"No, I—"

"Then I can't tell you anything. As you can imagine, we get a lot of men through these doors looking for their wives, daughters, friends. Our women are often here to get away from such men."

"I just—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but you'll have to leave."

“It’s okay, Roseanne.” Bast settled a hand on the woman’s narrow shoulder. “I know him.” She nodded at me. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t get into any trouble.”

According to Cujo’s recent information, I was already in trouble.

Bast led me to a quiet corner at the back of the hall, and before I could ask any of the questions bubbling in my head, she produced a list from her biker jacket pocket and handed it over. “There are many more women at risk. I’ve narrowed down the names to those who are pregnant and currently living in Manhattan.”

I scanned the names. “I’m not here for them.”

“Our daughter has my protection.”

“That hasn’t worked out too well for those who’ve already died.”

She set her jaw and narrowed her finely lined dark eyes. “I can’t be everywhere at once. The women on that list need *your* help.”

Turning my back to Bast, I scanned the hall but couldn’t see any girl I’d recognize as Chuck. I just wanted to see her. If I saw her, I’d know if she was my blood. Wasn’t that how it worked with children? You just knew, as if there was a connection starting from the DNA out. “Where is she?”

“You believe me now?”

“I’m withholding judgment.”

Her hand settled on my shoulder, and her fingers applied enough pressure to tempt me to face her. The last time she’d touched me—two decades ago—it had been with a slap across my face and a knee to my balls. I *had* deserved it, which was probably why it still hurt.

Her big, dark eyes looked apologetic. Bast never looked sorry. She was made of steel and reverence and had once been worshipped as the Great Protector. She didn’t give an inch in anything, but these deaths had gotten to her. They undermined her strength like nothing else could. And looking into her eyes, I knew why. She’d once lost a legion of her most feared and revered warriors—four thousand women all under her protection. Trained by her,

loved by her, and all slaughtered because of her allegiance during the last great sundering, when the old world had fallen and the gods lost their combined power.

“I didn’t tell you,” Bast said with a sigh, “because she’s better off without us.”

She was right, and it should have been that simple, but an irrational anger whipped through me, sweeping all reason aside. “It wasn’t your choice to make alone.”

The venom behind my words surprised me, and by Bast’s widening eyes, her too. She hadn’t expected me to care and neither had I.

“You were never supposed to know,” she explained, saying it softly as though that might lessen the impact. “That’s how it should have stayed.”

I stepped in closer and lowered my voice. “Do you know the life she’s had? She’s been alone, on the streets, unwanted.”

Bast bowed her head, sending her gaze through the floor. Her shoulders dropped, and I watched the fight fade from the eyes of the strongest woman I’d ever known.

“But it’s a life.” She leaned a shoulder against the wall, dislodging flakes of paint. “Nobody knows, Ace. If Osiris knew... What kind of life would she have had as a pawn among our kind?”

It didn’t take much effort to recall how Osiris had flexed his godly muscles with me. If he discovered I had a daughter, he’d have a whole new array of horrific ways to torture me, the girl, and Bast.

“She had a choice,” Bast said, her voice regaining some of its steel. “Every day she has choices, and they’re hers to make.” She looked over the murmuring crowd. “Choice was the only gift I could give her.”

Her words snagged at my heart, where a terrible weight clung. There was a soul-deep longing in my ex-wife’s eyes. She’d given up her daughter, not because she didn’t want her, but to keep her safe.

I followed Bast’s far-eyed gaze through the crowd and over the heads of

strangers until I found the girl at the end of the far table. She was hunched over her bowl of soup as though expecting someone to snatch it away from her. She had Bast's straight black hair, but Chuck's was messy, like she had cut it herself. Defined cheekbones gave her a fierce beauty, with lips that seemed too perfect to snarl. Her eyes though—even from across the hall I could see how her eyes entranced. Long, dark lashes around soul-seer eyes speckled with gold. She held the weight of the world in her eyes. To think she might have my power, the ability to see the worth of someone's soul and the terrible knowledge that came with it. Nineteen years old. Nineteen years was nothing. A blink. But her soul would already be old.

"She looks like her mom." My voice came out flat and disinterested and didn't reflect the turmoil raging inside.

"Not the eyes."

*She's beautiful*, I thought, but was her soul like her mother's or mine?

Bast had done the right thing. Chuck could never know about us or the rest of *everything*. My ex-wife had kept the truth from me, as we would now keep it from Chuck. She'd hate us for it. She'd rage that it wasn't our choice to make, that she deserved to know, and she'd be right. My first lesson in parenting: you can't win.

I looked down at the list of pregnant women Bast wanted me to protect. One name had a line scored through it.

"Her body was found last night," Bast explained.

"All right." I folded up the note and tucked it into my pocket. "But you and me need to talk. Not here. We—"

A hail of shouts erupted from across the hall. Bast launched into the crowd, her black-clad figure disappearing among the crush of fleeing people. I pushed forward, stepped up onto the nearest table, and saw Chuck dash out the door, followed by what looked like a large, pointed-eared Doberman. Hopefully that's what all these witnesses would think—a dog attack. I knew otherwise. The jackals were search-and-destroy demons from my old

neighborhood.

Behind the demon, a large liquid streak of black—vaguely resembling a big cat—followed. Bastet.

I jumped from tabletop to tabletop and skidded outside in time to see three figures carving their way down the sidewalk. Chuck veered left, out of sight around a corner. The demon and Bast followed, seconds behind. Demons in broad daylight and I didn't have my sword. Just great.

I caught up with Bast—in her black-panther form—at the bottom of an extended fire escape ladder. Too bad big cats couldn't climb ladders. She circled, massive black paws padding in the filthy snow, and snuffled her nose against the slush, picking up the scent trail.

“I'm going up,” I told her. “Stay out of sight.”

She gave her glossy, black coat an all-over shake and planted her rump on the sidewalk, in full view of anyone who happened to turn down the street. There was no mistaking a black panther for a house cat.

“You sit there like that and animal control will be all over you.”

She yawned, showing me perfect rows of man-eating teeth inside her skull-crushing jaw, and then rumbled some sort of “bring it” growl.

“Fine, get yourself noticed. I'll come see you when you're in the city zoo.” I started up the ladder, followed by her low, bubbling growl.

Chuck was either smart or lucky. Climbing the fire escape had deterred the jackal, but it wouldn't stop it. They were excellent trackers. The beast was likely already finding another way into the building.

I climbed up a few flights and spotted drapes flapping from an open window.

“Chuck?” I hissed, sticking my head inside. Something large and black loomed to my right. I shot out a hand and caught the pan before it could crack my skull open.

Chuck's eyes flashed, and then she was off, dashing around a couch and heading for the door.

“Hey, wait. The dem—the dog—”

The door flung open and a hundred pounds of jackal demon slammed into Chuck, sending her sprawling. I lunged forward in time to see Chuck kick the jackal backward, across the wooden floor, and scabble to her feet. That had taken some strength, the inhuman kind.

Inserting myself between jackal and girl, I brandished the pan and growled, “Think twice.”

The jackal sank its claws into the timber floor and sprang. I swung and belted the pan across its muzzle with enough force to kill a man. It tumbled and whimpered but was on its feet in seconds, hollow eyes aflame and aimed at me.

Alysdair would have come in handy right about then. I could, of course, unleash the renewed magic bubbling in my veins, but that would require a lot of explaining. As things stood, a few lies about an escaped exotic wolf from the city zoo would explain most of the events so far. If I spouted spells, Chuck would ask questions I wasn’t ready to answer.

The jackal’s lips rippled over vicious teeth. It lowered its head and planted one forepaw forward and then the other.

I focused my gaze. “You clearly don’t know who you’re messing with.”

Its pointed ears flattened against its head.

Chuck ran for the door and the jackal hunched to launch after her.

I saw my chance, kicked the door closed, and flung out my left hand. “*Hurzd!*” *Hold!*

The demon’s approached stalled. It whipped its head up and recognition sparked in its rippling eyes. Down went its haunches and its head, until its belly touched the floor. Shame softened its so-sorry eyes, as if I’d come home to find my couch and slippers all chewed up.

“It’s too late for that.”

I tossed the pan aside, curled the fingers of my outstretched hand closed, and whispered old words. They tumbled from my lips—no pauses, no respite

—and as they built, power trembled through my body, rekindling old urges. Without Alysclair, I was out of options. This was the only way.

The jackal started whimpering again. It had been years since I'd spoken the spell. Today I'd wielded the magic twice, and the day wasn't over yet.

*'Tra k-dae amcru-kak sra ksork, kosec amcru-kak esk kassrakamsk, omd kae kuir amcru-kak aeuirk.'* *The sky encloses the stars, magic encloses its settlements, and my soul encloses yours.*

The ancient words sounded harsh and guttural, the language forgotten by all but the oldest of us.

My eyes locked with the jackal's and pinned it, leaving it quivering in its own piss. The words lost their form but not their meaning. I dug deeper into the beast's eyes, the spell spiraling between us, and deeper into the writhing darkness that made up its soul. Its spirit fought, black talons slicing, and distantly it screamed its death wail, but the soul was mine.

"By the grace of Amun-Ra." The words trembled. Magic surged. "By the power invested in me, by the sire Osiris, by the light, the dark, I have weighed your soul. You are encumbered. The Devourer accepts your eternal spirit as recompense."

The words hooked in, and there was no escape. I wrenched the fetid black soul free of its earthly grip. The darkness barreled into me, over me, spilling through my physical body, and flowed deeper until the hunger in me rose and enclosed it all, embracing the dark.

The jackal collapsed.

I dropped and rocked on my knees, head buzzing, my thoughts strewn about, impossible to reorder. The demon's final soul scream echoed into nothingness.

*"Daquir." Devour.*

The word of power had barely pushed off my lips before the jackal's earthly body burst into a puff of ash and embers. Gone for eternity. Not of this life or the next. The ultimate punishment.

Bast—in human form—kicked the door in, saw me on my knees, and sniffed at the air. She'd smell the ash and know exactly what had happened here.

“You all right?” she asked.

“Will be,” I ground out, still swimming through the fog in my head. “Go find her. If there's one jackal, there'll be others.”

She hesitated, and a smile touched my lips. I didn't know she cared.

“Go.”

“You didn't have to do this,” she said.

“I did.” I reached for the back of the couch and hauled myself onto unsteady legs. “Go, Bast. Call me when she's safe.”

I watched her go and let out a sigh that sounded too much like a lover's gasp. Alone, with the remnants of the spell and the fragments of a broken soul dancing through me, I lifted my gaze and smiled.

## CHAPTER 8



I'D ADDED Bast's cell to my contacts and attributed the most fitting song to her ringtone I could find. So when The Cure's "The Love Cats" trilled from my cell, I knew exactly who was calling. She told me she'd found Chuck and was taking her out for a bite to eat, hoping to get more information out of her.

I met the pair of them at one of those fancy bars that couldn't decide if it was a restaurant or a watering hole. Nineteen-forties chandeliers hung from high ceilings, black and white prints adorned the walls, and servers darted between tables with sliders on slates. I figured it was Bast's favorite haunt and ordered the only thing on the menu I could afford—a black coffee—and dumped a ton of sugar in it.

Chuck looked at me through narrowed, darting eyes, suspicion radiating off her. I'd seen that look in wild cats, the ones that scratched the hand trying to help them. She was too pale, and up close, I wondered if her sharp features had more to do with malnourishment than godly genes.

"You're the guy from the apartment," she said by way of hello.

"You're welcome."

"Chuck, this is Ace. He's a friend," Bast replied, giving me a furtive look that probably meant something, but I had no idea what.

"You going to eat that?" Chuck asked Bast, nodding at the goddess's scraps.

I'd arrived late, and the two of them had almost finished their meals. Without a word, Bast switched plates with Chuck, who quickly began vacuuming up the remains.

"What was that thing?" Chuck asked me around a mouthful of burger bun.

I flicked a questioning gaze at Bast.

"Wild dog," she replied on my behalf. "It escaped from the zoo."

Chuck snorted. "Uh-huh, and I'm the pope's daughter."

She gulped half her lemonade in one go and looked right at me again, her gaze trawling over my face but avoiding my eyes. *Clever girl.*

Done with her visual interrogation, she slumped back in her seat and raked her ringed fingers through her short hair.

"Did you kill it?" she asked me.

Killed it, devoured it—same thing. "It's gone."

Chuck nodded appreciatively. "I've been running from those things for weeks, so why don't you two cut the Good Samaritan act and tell me what's really going on?"

"Bast?" I asked, handing the baton over before she could do the same to me.

Chuck twisted in her seat to look Bast over. The goddess had toned down her allure and hidden her cat-like eyes behind a small human illusion, but that didn't detract from her unusually striking appearance or her casual, but lethal elegance.

"I'm going to ask you some questions," Bast replied. "They may seem strange."

"Strange? Like a wild dog chasing me down the street? And that wasn't the only thing after me. I saw a cat. A big one. I swear it. I only caught a glimpse when I climbed the ladder, but it was real."

Silence descended over our table. I played with my spoon.

"I'm not nuts," Chuck added. "I know what I saw."

“You’re pregnant—” Bast began.

“So? Everyone at that shelter is.” She crossed her arms and glared at the goddess, daring an ageless Egyptian deity to judge her.

I hid my smile by tasting my sweet coffee.

“Who’s the father?” Bast asked calmly.

Chuck shrugged. Her gaze flicked back to me and then down at her empty plate. She wouldn’t answer anything, and I couldn’t blame her. She didn’t know us. She’d survived on the streets by her wits alone, and that meant not trusting anyone. I knew what that felt like. It was difficult to let people in after guarding yourself against them for what felt like forever. That was one of the reasons I’d only had the one friend in the last few decades.

“We’re here to help,” I said.

“Great. Got any cash? That’ll help.”

“What are you going to spend it on?” I asked.

“Louis Vuitton handbags and getting my nails done like Goth lady here. What do you think I’m going to spend it on?”

“Drugs?”

She clamped her mouth shut and folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t do that no more. I’m clean.”

“I know what addiction is,” I said, avoiding Bast’s pertinent look. “Tough to beat on your own.”

“Well, I don’t got nobody, so just give me the money and you can go back to your cozy little life knowing you did your good deed for the day.”

“The dogs will come again,” Bast butted in, sounding like a portent of doom. Goddesses and their drama.

Chuck bounced her teenage glare between us. “You won’t tell me what’s really going on here, so what’s left to talk about?”

Bast shared another beseeching look with me but our wordless conversations clearly weren’t helping.

“Chuck,” Bast said, her voice tipping toward authoritative. “There may be

other women like you. Women in trouble.”

“More escaped dingoes, huh?”

I almost corrected her, but now both women were looking at me with varying degrees of contempt. Bast needed my help explaining, which, so far, I’d failed at, and Chuck knew it was all BS.

“I’m not telling you anything until you tell me the truth. You two talk it out. I’m going to the rest room.” Chuck shuffled from the booth and strode to the back of the bar with the long-legged, powerful stride of a caged tiger. Chuck had more of her mother in her than looks alone. That was an uncomfortable thought. She clearly didn’t know about shape-shifting, but she would learn fast if she developed that curious gift from her mother.

I grinned. “She’s got sass.”

Bast rolled her eyes at me. “It’s all posturing. She’s scared.” She tapped her painted nails on the tabletop. “I need to find out where she’s been, who she’s been talking to, and who her friends are. There must be something.”

“Good luck with that.”

“You could help.”

“She won’t talk to us.”

“We could tell her—”

“No,” I cut her off. “You were right. The less contact we have with her, the more chance she has at having normal a life. If you mention gods, she’ll think you’re nuts, but she won’t forget it. Then she’ll start digging and connect the dots, and the picture she’ll draw will come back to bite her. Happens every time. People can’t help but poke at the unknown, and then it pokes back and gets them killed.” *Or crippled for life*, I finished mentally, thinking of Cujo and the many others whose paths I’d crossed over the years.

“And if she has the magic?” Bast whispered. “What then? We’re just going to let her flounder like an unclaimed godling?”

I winced and glared at my black coffee. Looking at Chuck was too much like looking in a mirror, but she could still escape her fate.

“She’ll make a mistake,” Bast said. “Osiris will notice. He’ll kill her.”

“If she’s lucky,” I mumbled.

Bast’s dark brows shot up and I regretted the words. Sure enough, Bast read the weight in them. She knew about my curse, but not all of it. Not the details. *Seth ek em sra dasoerk. The devil is in the details.*

Bast rested an arm on the table, leaning in and making damn sure I had to look at her. “You didn’t have to devour that demon.”

“Yes, I did.”

“When was the last time *you* devoured? Not the sword, *you*?”

“This morning, actually.” And I was still coming down from that one.

She recoiled the way I had known she would and lifted her lip in a disgusted snarl. “If Osiris learns—”

“Osiris—” I stopped myself, aware I’d raised my voice along with my heart rate. “Bast, back off. I’m dealing with it.”

“‘Dealing with it’?” She snorted a judgmental laugh. “I was right. You haven’t changed at all.”

I wanted to lay into her, to tell her how Osiris knew I was devouring souls because he was the one who’d broken my abstinence, but what good would it do? She wouldn’t believe me, and even if she did, there was nothing she could do. But she’d try and get herself tangled up in my mess. It would be easier for everyone if we all continued to believe what we wanted to. *Liar. Thief.*

“Let’s address the Sphinx in the room, shall we?” I said.

She side-eyed me.

“The jackals. Few gods have dominion over them.”

“Ammit traditionally controls them,” she confirmed.

“Can you think of any reason why she’d want to attack your blessed?”

“None. I’ve never crossed Ammit.” She shivered. “No sane god would.”

A sane god? Somehow I kept from laughing. “If it isn’t her, she’ll know more. Osiris told me my mother wants to take her slumber. He said he’d

sanction my return to the underworld.”

Bast considered my words in silence. The sounds of people talking and laughing continued on around us, wrapping us in normalcy. I often forgot I wasn't part of their world, not even after all the years I'd walked among them. I would never belong, even though I'd done my damndest to fit in once I'd stopped pining for home.

“You're going back?” Bast asked.

“I have to.” I'd have been lying if I said the thought of going home didn't fill me with dread, as well as a deep, illicit thrill.

“How long has it been?” The compassion on her face and the regret in her eyes almost broke me down and had me telling her everything.

I remembered the white feather settling, the scales tipping, my heart falling, and the sounds of my own spell, spoken by Osiris, wrapping around me, through me, and binding my soul. The accusing eyes, the howls and screams from those I'd condemned—I remembered it all like it was yesterday. “Five hundred years, give or take a few.”

Bast reached across the table and closed her warm, smooth hand around mine. Gooseflesh lifted the fine hairs on my arms and up my neck. I'd have liked to pull her in, close my arms around her, and hide. It had always worked before.

“You'll be okay.”

My lips twitched in a mockery of a smile that didn't last. I pulled my hand from hers. “I always am.”

I told Bast to look out for Chuck, which I didn't need to say but seemed like a decent enough goodbye, and left her alone at the table. Her gaze rode my back until I left the bar, but guilt clung to me, weighing me down with every step.

## CHAPTER 9



HEAT BEAT at me when I stepped from the mansion into the greenhouse—a vast indoor tropical garden easily the size of the main house. Exotic butterflies flitted around, fans gently circulated the air, and occasionally the *drip-drip* of water tapped on large leaves.

I yanked off my coat and undid a few shirt buttons. The heat wasn't my only problem; I'd devoured two souls in less than twenty-four hours. One dark and heavy, the other light and clean. Loosely translated, the immense magical high was twisting into a crippling comedown. And here I was about to have a voluntary talk with Osiris. I'd have preferred to wait a few days until the aftereffects had stabilized, but a few days could have meant the slaughter of more of Bast's women. I had enough darkness in my putrid soul without adding that.

"Nameless One..." Isis's slippery voice curled through the jungle foliage and brought me to an abrupt stop on the winding path.

"By Isis, all that has been, that is, or shall be; no mortal man hath ever unveiled." The proper greeting fell off my tongue as flat and empty as the countless times I'd said it before and would again.

She emerged from behind the large leaves of a tropical fern, trailing her fingers along its edges and lifting her traditionally kohl-accented eyes to mine in a way that had a small skitter of nerves shortening my breath.

“There are no mortal men here. Would you like to unveil me?”

There’s no right way to answer a goddess—ever. Whatever I said next would be the wrong thing. If I said yes, she’d have me flailed for lusting after her divine body. If I declined, she’d be offended and would probably make me spend the next six months telling her how I did, in fact, lust after every inch of her. And that was if she was feeling generous.

Fucking gods.

“I’m here for Osiris.”

“Mm...” She pulled the leaf with her and then let it fall away as she approached. “I didn’t know you preferred the male form?”

Well, that was one way of escaping her word trap. But as she came forward, her slip of a gown parted up her thigh, revealing a trail of studded gems, and by Sekhmet, I made the mistake of imagining how I might follow that trail with my fingers and mouth. I clamped my teeth together and steered my thoughts away from dangerous territory, only to have them land on her lips and how she might taste beneath my tongue.

Those soft lips lifted at a corner.

“No, it is not men you prefer,” she said, stopping too close to me. Her fingertips touched my thigh and then her nails raked higher. “No need for words, Nameless One.” She found what she was looking for and pressed in, eliciting a sharp inhale from me. “I have my answer right here.”

“Stop.” I hadn’t meant to add the compulsion—it was pointless, of course—and all it did was widen the pupils of her eyes, as though she got off on my pathetic effort to control an eternal being like her.

“We could fuck right here, against this tree. I’d bend for you.” With her alarmingly hot hand still resting on my arousal, she used her free hand to pluck at my shirt buttons. “You despise my husband. Wouldn’t this be a fine way to hurt him?”

Oh, it would. She was painting a very fine image, one that I struggled to sweep from my thoughts, which had currently funneled right to where her

hand was resting. Screwing Isis appealed to the part of me that had never truly left the underworld, the being I'd been before, a creature of power and want, worthy of fear and worship. That part of me had no trouble imagining how the Goddess of Light would taste, or how she'd feel bent over with my hands on her hips as I pounded into her. But it wouldn't last. She'd tell Osiris a patchwork of lies, and as perilous and exhilarating as screwing the goddess Isis would be, it wouldn't be worth the centuries of fallout her husband would rain down on me.

"I know what you're thinking," she whispered. Her breath fluttered across my lips. "But what else could he possibly do to you that he hasn't already done?"

I caught her hand, the one cupping my cock. "*Stop.*"

This time I pushed more weight behind the word. I'd devoured two souls in a few hours. Surplus magic was something I had in swathes.

Her beautiful eyes widened in alarm. I released her hand and watched her briefly war with the compulsion. It lasted a grand total of two seconds before it broke.

With a gasp, she stepped back. "How dare you!"

"You seem to have forgotten where I came from, Your Highness. I'm glad I could help you with that unfortunate mistake."

Color flushed her cheeks and fury flashed as hard and fast as lightning in her eyes. I didn't think for one second I'd escaped her wrath, but to see her taste some of her own poison brightened my day immeasurably.

If my soul wasn't already cursed, my actions would have earned one. I smiled and meant it. "Please inform your husband I'm here."

She left, striding down the path and out of sight. I waited until I was sure she was gone before slumping against the tree and gulping down several shuddering breaths. One god down, one to go.

Needing to set my mind on something other than my neglected cock, I roamed the garden, walking the winding paths beneath heavy palm fronds

and around deep-throated exotic flowers.

Outside, snow patted lightly at the glass. With its heat and damp, earthy richness, I understood why the couple might like the gardens. The greenhouse smelled like the old world after the rains, when the Nile would flood, bringing much needed sustenance to the riverbanks. The people would revel in the sudden flourish of color and life, in celebrations of rebirth and festivals of plenty, giving thanks to the all-powerful gods for their generosity. Those had been joyous days and nights, but all that had changed when the gods grew bored and turned inward, allowing the worst of them to rise. Seth. The rains had stopped. The floods had failed. Crops had wilted under the relentless sun. And while the gods warred and bickered, Seth had cast his shadow over the land, the people had faded into dust, and the desert sand had devoured what had once been the greatest civilization on Earth.

I would often walk the riverbanks, running my hands through the miles and miles of wheat. I'd watched the children with baskets around their necks, singing as they scattered seeds. Occasionally, I'd join them and their families, never revealing who I was and keeping my power wrapped close. Though I had never belonged among them, I didn't care, not then. I'd spend evenings admiring the sailboats, listening to the slosh of oars, and watching, admiring, and living a normal life through the wonder of normal people.

But those memories were distant, like dreams, stories, myths. Today, those long-dead people and their fevered worship meant nothing. The gods were gone, relegated to religious texts and the occasional website selling fake protection spells. Now the gods, once so feared and revered, were confined to academia or the awe-filled eyes of tourists filing through barren tombs and crumbled temples.

The man who I had been *before*, he was dust and dreams. Perhaps he always had been.

I pulled up suddenly as Osiris jogged down the greenhouse steps, dressed in a tux and holding a cell phone to his ear. The image clashed so acutely

with my memories that I forgot about the curse and my blind hatred of him and saw him how he had once been: the greatest of gods, worshiped and admired by his people as well as his pantheon. Armies had marched in his name. He was the god of all things. Life and death had played out inside his hands—decay and rebirth.

“I know... I’ll be there. I don’t care when the cameras are rolling. I will be there when I am ready. They’ll wait.”

Where had it all gone so wrong?

He hung up the call and frowned at my presence. “What by Sekhmet did you say to my wife?”

“Only that which she asked of me,” I answered, avoiding the truth as best as I could, given his ability to extract answers out of me.

That didn’t appease him. I hadn’t really expected it to. “She’s in a foul mood and I have a gala I’m due to attend with her at my side. You have no idea what it’s like.”

I could imagine being married to Isis was a lot like sleeping in a bed of snakes: exhilarating, until it wasn’t.

“I’d like to visit my mother,” I said, veering the conversation away from Isis.

His smile was all perfect teeth. “Ah, yes, of course. I thought you might.” He half turned but hesitated, and then slowly, purposefully, he slid his gaze back to me. “There are some conditions.”

My heart sank.

“You should join us at the gala. We can talk more there.”

I forced what I hoped looked like a smile on my lips and not a sneer. “I’m not dressed for fine dining.”

“I’ll soon change that.” He turned, clicked his fingers, and said, “Come.”

I plodded after him, trailing behind the god like a slave on an invisible chain that I’d keenly felt for five interminably long centuries.



IF THE UNDERWORLD was my home, a charity gala was my idea of hell. Smiling faces, fake laughs, chinking glasses, and every word a weapon wielded for social ambition. I did my best to smile back and muster through painful small talk while the space between my shoulder blades itched for Alysclair's weight. I recognized a few faces from the orgy beneath Osiris's house. Thankfully those faces didn't recognize me all scrubbed up in a tux.

"Poison" blared from my cell phone, and probably for the first time in my life, I was grateful for Shu. Excusing myself from yet another conversation regarding politics, I stepped behind the table of canapés and hid away in a corner.

"Shu, kill me now," I growled.

"Where are you?"

"In hell."

She paused. "You're not, are you?"

I sighed, tucked a hand in my pocket, and slumped against the wall. "They don't have cell reception in the Hall of Judgment."

She grumbled a curse. "Did you get anywhere with the Montgomery kid?"

"Cujo will let me know if he gets any leads."

"Okay..."

"Why?"

"I think we might have a bigger problem than a scared kid."

The way the last few days had been going, I couldn't have been less surprised. "Are you going to keep it to yourself or share with the class?"

"Did you get a look at the spell they were casting?"

"Yeah, as accurate and deadly as they come."

"Did you keep it?" She didn't bother to hide the intrigue in her voice. Once a sorceress, always a sorceress.

“No, I didn’t keep it. I burned it so you couldn’t get your claws on it.” It hadn’t even crossed my mind to burn it to keep it from Shu, but I liked the idea, and her resulting hiss. I chuckled. “It was too potent. The kids didn’t need to know the language. The fact it was there, inside their circle, was enough to bring the demon through.”

“Demons.”

“What?”

“I saw an interview with the Montgomery mother. Her son looked sick before he vanished. The press is trying to blame it on drugs. You know what they’re like. They love a good socialite drug drama.”

A second demon? It was possible. The demon—or demons—had possessed their hosts before I arrived. I could have missed one, especially if it had buried itself so deep its host hadn’t been aware of it. “Damn it.”

“It’s been over twenty-four hours. It would have turned him by now. Get your ass on this with a bit more urgency.”

“I can’t. I’m having canapés with Osiris.” I deliberately omitted the part where women were dying and I needed to get to the underworld to find out why, just to get a rise out of Shu.

“For fuck’s sake.”

It worked.

A compulsion speared into me, yanking my head up, and there was Osiris, eyes fixed on me from across the room.

“Wherever the demon is, it’s laying low,” I said. “I gotta go. I’ll get on it when I get back from Amy’s. You deal with it.”

“What? Amy’s. Why—”

“I gotta go.”

“You bastard. You better come back.”

“I will.”

“It’s my ass on the line too—”

I hung up the cell, already moving at a brisk pace through the throng of

people toward the smiling mayor. I *would* be back. I had to come back. Bast, the dying women, Chuck, and now the loose demon—they were loose ends, all of them. I couldn't leave them hanging.

“Ace, sit,” Osiris ordered.

I pulled out the chair beside him and sat like a good puppet.

“Who was on the call?” he asked.

“Shukra.”

One of Osiris's dark eyebrows jerked higher. “You two getting along?”

“Does a viper get along with a scorpion?”

“Which are you?”

I frowned, wishing I'd kept quiet. “Scorpion, obviously. Can we get to the conditions you mentioned?”

His laugh grated like nails on a chalk board. “So eager to get away. Why don't you enjoy the company and the wine?”

I'd have preferred to spend the evening with a demon, and considering what had happened the last time I'd shared a glass of red with Osiris, I really didn't want to relive those memories or the experience.

“The conditions?” I asked, doing my best to look innocent to anyone who happened to be glancing at the mayor. He drew the eyes of many. Me sitting next to him was already damaging what reputation I had in my small world of clients.

“Yes...” He breathed in deeply through his nose and leaned a little closer while his gaze roamed the sea of happy, sparkly rich people. “I'm convinced my wife is having an affair.”

My memory flashed to the image of his wife's hand on my cock. *Guilty, guilty, guilty*, my heart thudded. I shifted in my seat and cleared my throat. “Oh?”

An older gentleman arrived and rained compliments down on the mayor. How delightful it was to have such a proactive young mayor running the city. He'd had his doubts, in the beginning, but Ozzy had turned the city around.

I squirmed as Osiris smiled, accepted the compliments with grace, and shook the gentleman's hand.

While they talked, I wondered what Osiris considered an affair. They'd both been screwing the unfortunate girl when I'd seen them together yesterday. Where did the god draw the line? More to the point, what the hell would he ask of me? I couldn't investigate Isis. She'd tie me up in knots. I knew my limitations. Getting between Isis and Osiris was tantamount to suicide.

The gushing praise faded and the gentleman went away, ruddy cheeked and happy. Osiris chuckled and tasted his wine. "So easily pleased."

"Isis," I said, determined not to spend the night dancing to Osiris's tune.

His smile faded. He spied his wife weaving through the crowd like a snake through the grass. Her green evening gown flowed over her body like emerald liquid. She'd pinned her hair up, twisted it into knots, and planted jewels inside the design. Whichever way she turned, people stopped her, their eyes alight with adoration. She was stunning and made a man forget his thoughts, his vows, his honor. She could have anyone.

She turned her head, sensing Osiris's gaze on her, and shared a private smile with her husband. She ignored me, thankfully.

"*She's fucking Thoth,*" Osiris said, his voice cutting deep into my thoughts. He hadn't spoken aloud, and even now he smiled back at his wife.

I spluttered. "The lawyer?"

"How many Thothes do you know?" Osiris drawled.

Thoth was perfectly suited to a life of litigation and numbers. I'd never seen him wearing anything other than a charcoal gray suit, and I'd only seen him crack a smile once. He was as rigid and unyielding as stone. The thought of him and Isis together? That just didn't seem likely. Maybe he was an animal in the bedroom. We all had our hidden talents.

"She's been...distant," Osiris confided, watching the crowd swallow Isis. "We've had our challenges."

I could imagine. Seven thousand years as husband and wife would take its toll. Then there was the fact that they were also brother and sister. Relationships didn't get more complicated than that.

"Isis is"—he swallowed—"insatiable, and I too may have been distracted as of late." Osiris shifted in his chair and poured the dregs from a bottle of champagne into his glass. "She's been meeting with him in secret."

He lifted the glass and continued watching the crowd, avoiding looking directly at me.

"Do you have proof of the affair?"

"That's what I need you for."

*Great, someone shoot me now.* Marital grievances were bad enough without adding all-powerful deities to the drama. To make matters worse, Thoth was Amun-Ra's son. As gods went, Thoth could rip me a new one in a blink. I'd stayed below the radar of most godly goings-on, but getting between Osiris, Isis, and Thoth? There wasn't any way I was coming out of that fire unburned.

"What sort of proof?" I asked, thoughts churning.

"All of it. If Thoth is touching my wife, I want every detail, every word, so I can make him eat his treachery."

Treachery wouldn't be the only thing Osiris would force Thoth to eat. If he could confine Thoth to the underworld, Osiris would have significant power over him. A clash between titans like that would ripple through the entire pantheon, and such an upheaval hadn't happened since the end of the old world. A civilization had fallen then. There was no telling what might fall this time—and I'd be right in the middle of it.

I needed a drink. I waved a server over and took a glass of wine. Osiris hadn't compelled me to work for him. He could, so why wasn't he?

"There's more, isn't there?" I asked.

Osiris blinked and looked at me as though he were surprised. "Of course. Once you have proof, you will kill Thoth."

I choked on my wine, spilling much of it over my fingers and onto my lap. *He's insane.*

I laughed, flicked the wine from my fingers, and dabbed at my pants with a napkin. He had to be joking. I couldn't kill Thoth. If I were capable of killing gods, I'd have killed Osiris long ago.

Osiris wasn't smiling and an icy shiver trickled down my back. He'd told me to kill Thoth. His words should have compelled me, but I didn't feel any different. I didn't feel the urge to pick up Alysclair and go god hunting.

Had his compulsion failed? "You'd have a better chance at killing Thoth than me. I'm just a mercenary without a name."

"I cannot strike a direct blow at Thoth. Such an act would start a political collapse. I have no wish to destabilize everything I've worked so hard to construct. This realm and our place in it, it is all about to change. I cannot risk millennia of planning because my wife is screwing another."

I absorbed that information and carefully packed it away for later consideration. "I can't kill a god, Osiris."

*Godkiller* was not a title I'd survive.

Osiris pursed his lips. His long fingers teased the rim of his glass. "I cannot compel you to do this. Thoth's power rivals mine and no compulsion would stand the weight of a task such as this one. But I will lift a condition of your curse. You'll be free to return home whenever you wish. Your mother can rest well in the afterlife knowing she has seen you. I am aware of some pertinent confessions she'd like to share with you before her slumber."

Kill Thoth and this realm would no longer be a prison.

Clearly Osiris believed I was capable, even if I didn't. That information alone was worth keeping close to my chest. In order to get back to the underworld, help Bast, her women, and Chuck, and see my mother again before she passed on, I had to agree to kill a god. If I succeeded, and that was a monumental *if*, I'd reduce the curse strangling my soul, but I'd also have the knowledge that Osiris had ordered me to kill a god—knowledge I could

use against Osiris. Knowledge powerful enough to keep my daughter safe should any god come looking?

This was a dangerous proposition, one I wasn't entirely sure I could survive.

"I agree," I said and then gulped down the last of my wine in one shot. "Lift the realm lock now."

Osiris's dark eyes flashed with warning, and something else, something like mischief. I already regretted my decision, but I couldn't see any other way out of this. He'd never allow me to say no.

"It will be done."

Osiris stood. Several people glanced our way over their wine glasses. They couldn't help themselves. The entire room was probably halfway in love with him. Given a few more hours, he could have them all enthralled and probably lining up to join him below his house.

"Come," he said, paying his rapt audience no mind.

Isis's intense glare was the last thing I saw in the crowd before I followed her husband out of the room.

## CHAPTER 10



OSIRIS UTTERED THE SPELLWORD, *hurzd*, blocking the men’s restroom door from any unwanted intruders, and wasted no time starting the curse reversal. He rinsed his hands, and while his fingers dripped water, he placed both palms on my cheeks. “Close your eyes.”

I did, with relief.

“*Bruud uk kema, kur sros vrecr aeui roqa baam birdam,*” His eternal power flexed in the room, swelling outward, and then snapped back with a pressurized pop. “*Koae muv reka.*”

I didn’t feel any different when it was done. As was the way with magic, you generally didn’t notice it until it was too late. “How do I know it’ll work?”

Osiris simply smiled, dug into his tuxedo’s pocket, and handed over two battered bronze coins. “Give the ferryman my regards.”

He turned to leave.

I closed my hand around the warm coins. “When I do this...”

He paused at the door, his back to me. We both knew I wasn’t talking about the trip back home, but the deal I’d struck. *Godkiller.*

“I’ll have your protection from the pantheon?”

His shoulders straightened into a solid line. “You already do.”

The door clicked closed behind him, leaving me standing alone beneath

the buzzing fluorescent lights. My reflection frowned back at me, concern and doubt etched into my face. “Yeah, I know. What else was I supposed to do?”

*No time like the present.* Filling one of the sinks to the brim, I shrugged off my borrowed jacket, rolled up the shirtsleeves, and plunged both hands into the water.

*“Ovam kur ka, kur I ok uk sra oer, sra aorsr, sra resrs, omd sra dord. Ovam omd varcuka ka srruisr.”* Open for me, for I am of the air, the earth, the light, and the dark. Open and welcome me through.

The lights flickered, and that was the only sign I’d get. Opening a door to the underworld wasn’t all that dramatic. No flaming doorways or blinding light. Old magic knew how to hide.

My amber-glittered eyes glowed a little too brightly in the mirror. I reached out my fingers and dabbed at the glass. Ripples shivered across the surface.

Five hundred years was a long time to walk this earth. A long time in which much could have changed back home. I hadn’t left on the best of terms.

I gripped the sink’s edge and peered into my reflection. I had changed. I hadn’t had much choice in that, but I was ready to go home. Wasn’t I?

Draining the water, I climbed onto the counter and pushed through the mirror.

For the longest moment, the crossing between realms felt like being submerged in warm water. The weight pushed in, not just against my skin and clothes, but into my mind. For a few seconds, it felt like I was drowning. There was no right way up, no sky, no ground, no sound, and no taste—until I opened my eyes and took my first breath. And there it was, the plaza. I hesitated, grounding myself.

Massive pillars held aloft a vast portico over the entrance to the Hall of Judgment, and all around pointed temples stretched into the distant, never-

ending glare. The air smelled sweet, like honey, and the breeze was soft, warm, familiar, and welcoming.

*Duat. Home sweet home.* It had been too long.

Power buzzed beneath my skin, coming alive in my realm, and lent me a radiance I didn't deserve. I'd spent so long in the dark that this world and its brilliance scorched.

Figures drifted in my peripheral vision, the Hall spirits. They'd remain little more than dust motes in sunlight until they wanted to show themselves. I felt their curiosity pushing at me. If they sensed weakness, they wouldn't be nearly as benevolent. I strode on, sweeping through their numbers in my mortal clothing: black pants and black shirt, so black against the light. Fitting, perhaps.

I climbed the Hall's steps. Cracks had split some, and others had crumbled. I didn't remember them being so neglected. Pausing at the top, I noticed other faults in the buildings around me. Corners were whittled away and capping stones were dislodged, while some had crumbled into ruins. Yes, much had changed.

Whispers floated on the breeze. *Liar. Thief. Soul Eater*, those whispers said. They were right, and the truth of it pushed down, weighting my steps and my heart even more.

The doors creaked open, and a towering burial-wrapped statue of Osiris met me. Easily five stories high, there were smaller buildings in New York. The statue was meant as a statement. Even in his absence, Osiris ruled. The crook and flail crossed against his chest were larger than my entire apartment. Feeling reduced, as was the point, I walked around the monolith and through an equally tall, narrow corridor. Hieroglyphs covered the floor, the walls, the ceiling. I reached a hand out and ran my fingertips over the colorful displays.

*"Rarru."* Hello. The word sailed into vacant spaces, seeking the familiar. *Raku*, I heard echo back. *Home.*

On the hallway stretched, and on I walked, passing by the depictions of

epic battles, wars, victories, and defeats, all chiseled into the walls and painted in a riot of color. These halls were a celebration of life and death and how one was irrevocably tied to the other.

I couldn't slow. If I slowed, I'd linger. If I lingered, I'd get comfortable.

*I can't stay.* This had once been my home, but now...now it was something else, somewhere I no longer belonged.

I dragged my feet but kept moving and emerged inside the flooded crossing chamber, where a small wooden sailboat bobbed against its mooring. The hooded ferryman held out his cotton-wrapped fingers.

"Osiris sends his regards," I said, dropping one coin into his palm.

I assumed the ferryman was male, though as far as I knew, nobody had ever seen his true face. There was no face beneath the hood, and no body beneath the robe—just the spirit knotted among its burial wrappings.

He made what sounded like a distinct chuckle and beckoned me aboard. The boat rocked under my weight but settled, and we pushed silently into the fog.

"It is good...you are here." His whispers were as insubstantial as the mist we drifted through.

I peered over the edge of the boat and saw hollow-eyed faces flicker in and out of focus beneath the water's surface. These waters were sacrosanct. I'd once—as a boy—swam with the souls. It was a secret only the ferryman knew and one that would likely add to my hefty rap sheet of sins should Osiris ever discover it.

"Many years have passed," the ferryman said.

I wet my lips, tasting the mist and the whispers. "*Seka kreak.*" *Time flies.*

I'd left in disgrace, but in the underworld, only my mother knew the real reason I couldn't return. The spirits of the underworld and the demon gods would assume, of course, that I'd been afraid to return. That might have been true for the first few centuries—and might still be true, if my trembling fingers were to be believed.

Another chuckle. “Your mother, weary she is.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees, and ran my fingers through my mist-soaked hair. “I’m sorry for that.”

“The Great Devourer speaks of regret.”

And so she should. It was one thing to banish your son, and another to hand him over to Osiris. I knew punishment, and that sentence did not fit my crimes.

Dragging a hand down my face to clear the memories, I peered over the ferryman’s shoulder into the fog. Massive columns rose out of the nothingness, reaching like mountaintops through the clouds. Like Osiris’s statue, the Temple of Light towered higher and farther than anything manmade. Even the gods were reduced to ants inside its walls. A wary warmth spread throughout my chest. Whatever happened, whatever I’d done, whatever I was about to do for Osiris, I was glad my path had brought me home.

The ferry gently nudged the steps. I thanked the ferryman, sparing his hooded face a smile, and jogged up the steps. The heavy doors swung open, and the warmth in my chest turned to ice.

The receiving chamber statues were toppled and shattered. Cracks sundered the marble floor. Who could do this? Who would *dare*? I drifted forward and winced at the sound of glass and stone crunching under my shoes.

“Amy?” My voice echoed into the quiet. The quiet was always thick here, like a living, breathing thing, but now I felt nothing in the silence—no life, just a hollow emptiness.

I strode on, paces lengthening, icy rage spreading in my veins. Every fallen column, every shattered dais—it would have taken an army to do this, or a god.

Where was Amy? She never would have let this stand.

I was running when I rounded a corner and slipped in a pool of blood.

Bright red splashes had fanned up the marble walls and left dripping streams. Their source, the body of a young boy, ripped open from groin to gullet. It was so unexpected, so out of place, that for a few moments, I did nothing, just stared at the boy's glassy, unfocused eyes. I hadn't known him, but the same family had served these halls for as long as I could recall. I knew his blood, now painting the floor.

I knelt down and touched the boy's neck. No pulse—I hadn't expected one—but his skin was warm. Whoever had done this could still be here, carving through my home, violating the sanctity of the temple.

Magic broiled, seeping from the air and the ground. It gathered around me like a cloud of darkness. *My home. My magic.* Rage burned bitter and sharp at the back of my throat. Old words fell from my lips, and here, in the halls, they quickly stirred the power residing in my soul.

This attack would not go unpunished.

"The Soul Eater has returned." I stepped over the body, pulled the darkness around me, and headed deeper inside my home. "And I'm hungry."

## CHAPTER 11



I HEARD them before seeing them—a storm of snarls, yips, and growls.

*I'll devour them all.*

The door to my mother's chambers flung open—untouched—in front of me. Jackals—countless numbers of them—tore muscle and flesh from my mother's bones. They bickered and snarled over her carcass, like she was meat.

The ice inside me shattered. A vicious, barbed spell built up in a blinding surge and exploded outward. With no focus, no anchor point, it whirled around the room, sweeping through the demons it touched, sinking its claws deep into their souls, and ripping them into shreds from the spirit outward. The spell swelled, and I fed, taking them all in, their poisonous darkness filling me up.

I fell hard to my knees as the screams poured in, on and on, threatening to sever my soul. Heavier and heavier, they pushed down. So many and so much darkness. I *could* contain them. I had to. None would escape.

I doubled over and heard the sound of my own ragged cry until it twisted into a monstrous roar. And then it was over. Silence flooded the room, only interrupted by my tattered gasps.

The quiet was too thick, too heavy.

I smelled hot blood and ash, tasted the souls on my lips, and felt them

burn deep inside.

Ammit was gone. If her soul had been here, I'd probably devoured it. I might never know, and it was too late to find out.

"*Daquir*," I muttered, releasing the spellword, and watched the dancing embers eat up the remains of the demons and the only god who'd ever cared enough to guide me. She'd been my protector in a world filled with monsters, and she had been the biggest, most terrifying monster of all. Someone had gotten to her, someone she hadn't seen coming.

Hours could have passed, or minutes, or no time at all. I knew I should move, that time would continue with or without me, but if I moved, I might break. That many souls... I'd taken them all. They strained and heaved and wrestled, but they were mine. Delight and ecstasy raced through my veins, lighting them on fire. I could do anything in that moment—raze buildings, move mountains, devour the sky—and I wanted to take it all and make it mine. I could. I dug my fingers into the marble floor. Cracks snapped outward, sounding like the gunfire from the mortal realm. New York. I had to go back. Chuck, Bast, even Shukra needed me.

*Godkiller.*

I pushed my body into motion, watching the shadows shudder in the corner of my eye. A broken laughter bubbled up my throat. I swallowed it down—for now.

With every step, flakes of ash stirred. Slowly, my thoughts pulled away from the stretching power and organized themselves around the present. The chamber was in chaos. Furniture was scattered and broken. Ammit had fought, but not as strongly as she could have. The jackals had come for her while she was weak and waiting to take her slumber.

I wandered through the room, absently righting furniture or kicking aside broken statue fragments.

"Soul Eater?" A serving boy stumbled inside the room. On seeing me, he froze.

“Inform Anubis that Ammit has been killed,” I said, voice cutting.

The boy hesitated. He couldn’t miss the ash, and being of Ammit’s house, he’d know what I’d done. He’d feel the pulsing magic broiling around me and taste it on his tongue.

“S-sire?” he stammered.

Anubis wouldn’t react well to the news. The boy was afraid, with good reason.

I picked up a small box from where it had fallen near her bed. Hieroglyphs of my mother’s name ran along its edges, coupled with a symbol I didn’t recognize—that of an animal with the body of a jackal and the head of a snake. Gems glittered at its corners. The artwork was precise, and old, before my time. The box was important. I knew every item of Ammit’s, every hiding place, every sacred token, but not this.

I gave the lid a twist. It didn’t move. I tried again, failing to crack the seal.

“Sire, I—”

I launched the box across the room. It bounced off the wall and skidded across the floor in front of the trembling kid.

“Go or by the damned I’ll sunder your soul where you stand!” A compulsion whipped out with the words.

The boy’s whole body jerked upright, out of his control, and then he was gone, sandals slapping on the hallway until the silence devoured that noise too.

I stared at the empty doorway and listened to the dark things inside me scream.

Whispers crept into the chamber. *Liar. Thief*, they hissed. Then I heard laughter, twisted and malicious. Madness. The laughter was mine.

Too many souls.

Too much darkness.

Too heavy.

I couldn't stay here in that room. If I did, I'd never leave. Already part of me wanted to stay and take up the mantle again. It was mine, wasn't it? I'd judge them all and find them damned.

*Liar. Thief,* the whispers proclaimed. They'd be silenced once I devoured them all.

The laughter cracked and fell away.

I placed one foot in front of the other. That was how all journeys started, no matter their destination. One step and then another. Simple, really. One step. Two. Three. Faster.

No, I couldn't stay. A world away, people needed me. But more than that, if I stayed, I'd fall, and this time, there would be nothing left of my soul worth saving.

I picked up the little box and left. I paid the ferryman with Osiris's final coin. He didn't speak, and neither did I.

The oars stroked through the river of souls, swift and silent.



BY THE TIME I returned to New York, another day had passed.

My apartment greeted me with its typical New York somber ambiance. Scaffolding had clad the building for weeks. Boards and poles blocked the light. Considering some of my more sensitive activities, I had kept the blinds closed. I stepped into the cold and the dark, not bothering with the lights.

"Poison" started playing from my cell the second I got in. I switched it off, found the vodka bottle and a glass, and slumped in the chair by the bed.

I'd witnessed horrors, I'd been on the receiving end, and I'd been the perpetrator. It took a lot to break me down. The last few days had ground all the fight right out of me—that and the slippery wave of souls rippling under my skin.

The sounds of traffic lulled my already numbed mind. The alcohol did the

rest.

Maybe I should have stayed in the underworld. Anubis was difficult to speak with, but he might have known something. As it was, all I'd done was arrive too late to stop my mother's slaughter and run.

I swallowed a deep gulp of vodka.

I'd made a deal to kill Thoth, for nothing.

"Great job, Ace." I lifted the glass in salute. "This is why we don't work for gods." I took a drink, letting it burn all the way down to the heat inside my soul.

Give me stupid rich kids any day. They were so much easier to frighten.

I should have been trying to think around what was going on, but really, I couldn't think at all. Too many black souls whirled inside. I'd swallowed down a storm. I could probably threaten Osiris with all the juice I'd absorbed. I'd fail though. I always did.

A few knocks at my door punctured my thoughts. I waited, in the dark, in the quiet. Shu wouldn't knock. She would have kicked the door in. Whoever it was would go away.

"I know you're back."

Bast. I smiled a bitter, hollow smile, and rolled the cool glass against my cheek. She wouldn't leave. Gods didn't know when to quit.

"Come on in."

She clicked the door closed behind her and strode over, stopping a few feet away to cross her arms and frown at me. "Why are you wearing a suit? I thought it was all robes and jewelry back home?"

"There was a party. Didn't yah hear?" I slurred.

Her frown darkened. She snatched my bottle away. "This isn't like you."

"Clearly this is exactly like me. Who else would I be like? Give that back."

She looked at the bottle and then at me. "Your eyes are dark."

"Yes, they are, so give me the vodka back and leave me stewing in the

souls of the damned.”

“How many?”

“I lost count.”

“Why?”

I finished off the vodka in my glass and leaned my forehead against it. “Ammit is dead. I got there too late. I...lashed out.”

Between one long blink and the next, Bast disappeared, but I heard her rattling around my kitchen. When she returned, she poured me a fresh glass, filled hers, and then sat on the bed. Her knee brushed against mine. I expected her to flinch away, but she didn't. She had to feel the darkness I'd gorged on. How could she stand to look at me, to touch me?

“Anubis will be furious,” she said, tasting her vodka and scowling into her glass.

“That's nothing new.” I slumped lower in my chair and closed my eyes. “I'm tired.”

She knew I didn't mean physically tired, but soul tired. It was a whole other exhaustion, an all-consuming tiredness that ate me up from the spirit out.

“You're too young to be tired. You're grieving.”

“Grieving?” The insane laughter was back, but this time I confined it to my thoughts. “She kicked me out, Bast. She gave me—my life, my soul, all of me—to Osiris to do with as he saw fit. She knew exactly what she was doing.” Maybe she'd hated me all along—the liar, the soul thief. “There was no love lost between Ammit and I.”

She stayed quiet, probably because she knew the truth: I'd deserved it.

“Don't do this to yourself.”

“I'm not doing anything. It's everyone else screwing with me.”

“You're not the same. I was wrong.”

She hadn't seen the smile on my face when I'd consumed the soul of the demon that had attacked Chuck. She hadn't heard me laugh after I'd gorged

myself on jackals. And she didn't know how I'd drunk the blood of an innocent with Osiris and Isis looking on. I hadn't changed. If anything, I was worse for pretending I could change. Osiris knew that and probably always had.

She settled her hand on my arm, drawing my eye. "I'm sorry about Ammit, I am, but I need you, and not like this."

What did she expect from me? I couldn't save people. That wasn't me. I condemned them.

She looked at me with hope, and that was even more crippling than if her dark eyes had accused me. I didn't deserve her hope.

She moved her hand away, but I caught it and turned it over, marveling at how smooth her touch was. She briefly looked into my eyes, despite knowing what resided there.

"Don't go." I hated how I sounded. I'd been the one to leave her, but I couldn't be alone. I didn't want to be tired and alone, listening to the whispers condemn and the souls accuse.

"Ace..."

Lifting her hand, I lightly kissed the backs of her fingers. She would turn me away, and so she should. A muscle fluttered in her cheek, her teeth gritting. We were thinking the same thing, how this was a terrible idea.

I set my glass down on the side table and pushed from my chair. Slipping a hand into her hair, I kissed her before she could tell me to stop. A gentle taste—something to keep me from the dark. When she opened up to me, I welcomed her and deepened the kiss, caught by a raw and sudden urgency to lose myself in the feel of her.

Her fingers made quick work of my shirt buttons. Her bold hands pulled me closer. Her nails scraped my back, and then it all became a rush of hungry touches and breathless pleas. I'd missed her, more than I'd ever let on to anyone, including myself. I'd let her go and pushed her away because I'd seen her soul, and it was light. So light and so good. I hadn't expected that.

Light and dark. The dark in me would have destroyed the light in her.

But after all that had happened, I needed her with me. It was selfish, and I knew that too. I needed a little light before the dark swallowed me down for good.

I really hadn't changed at all.

## CHAPTER 12



I CAME AROUND SLOWLY, aware of a curious weight settled across my chest. For a few blissful moments, all I knew was the sweet, wild scent of meadows and an exotic musk—Bast’s scent. She smelled like far-off places, like forgotten memories, and my steady heartbeat quickened with keen and foolish hope. I could pretend, just for a few moments, that I deserved to be content. Then the sounds of New York filtered into my apartment and reality chased away my hiding place, reminding me I was the monster in this dream and that I didn’t belong.

Bast ran a fingernail around my nipple and then sent those sharp nails lower. A scatter of delicious shivers stirred me fully awake. She hooked one leg possessively around mine and pulled herself over me. Her body was fluid in motion, muscles lean but firm—coiled strength—and her golden skin gleamed with the same luster as her alter ego’s black coat. She prowled lower, trapping my thighs between hers. Where her warm skin brushed mine, shivers sparked. I’d lost myself in her smooth skin and maddening curves last night and wanted to again.

I reached for her face, hoping to draw her up into a kiss, but she batted my hand away and growled low in her throat. She tilted her head up, mischief glowing in her green cat eyes. She grinned, displaying sharp, pointed canines, and ran the tip of her tongue over her lip.

Last night was a blur. What had started as a questioning kiss had turned into ferocious need. The many scratches and bites throbbing on my shoulders and other parts were evidence of Bast's enthusiasm. We'd each taken what we needed from the other and hadn't been gentle about it. But now, with the look in her eyes and the feel of her tongue in its slow, deliberate exploration—there was more to this than quenching desires.

She pulled up, planted her hands on either side of my head, and locked her gaze inches from mine, pinning me beneath her. If I touched her, she'd slap my hand away again. That gaze was an order.

*Prey, it said. Don't move. You're mine.*

My quick breaths betrayed my building anticipation. In five hundred years, no woman had trapped me quite like she did. I loved that about her, loved how fearless and dominant she was, but her dominance wasn't stolen by force. She had earned her alpha status.

I spread my hand against her hip, needing to touch her. Her responding growl reverberated low and deadly, thrumming through me and sweetening my desire, while also pooling heat way down below. I could have ignored the warning, ridden my hands up her back, pulled her down, and taken her, but that wasn't the game she wanted to play.

Leaning into my shoulder, she braced herself on an elbow and shifted her free hand lower, swirling her fingers across my bare skin.

My thoughts had funneled down to one thing.

*Lower*, I silently begged and may even have said it out loud. Lower her hand went, gliding, swirling.

"Look at me," she purred.

I turned my head and locked gazes with her. Her green eyes shone, and inside, her brilliance stirred.

I blinked and tried to turn my face away, breaking contact, but her hand caught my jaw and pulled me back.

"Look at me," she said again, this time teasing a thread of compulsion

through the words.

I felt the push and opened my mouth to warn her, but she planted a finger on my lips, sealing away the protest.

She was playing a dangerous game, one I couldn't resist. I flicked my eyes up and her glare captured mine while her hand closed around my cock. I arched into her grip. I'd never been very good at self-control. She laughed, a deep, salacious chuckle, and collecting the wetness, she moved her hand in a way that made me forget all the warnings I needed to tell her.

Our gazes entwined, my soul tugging at hers, sinking threads of darkness into her light. Her soul embraced it, welcoming me—the innocent always did—but no soul could withstand mine. As I sank into her, and her hand worked its rhythm, and the pleasure beat at my barriers, chilling stabs of fear plunged in. I wanted to go deeper and wallow in her brilliance, like maybe I could cleanse myself of the darkness if I drowned myself in her light. It felt like coming home, like I would always be safe, always be welcome, until the darkness in me rose up like a storm on the horizon. Pleasure wrenched the shreds of resistance away. Her eyes drew me in and led me on, and I stalked her soul. I could take her, make her mine, and swallow her down. Heated need beat in time with her hand, and the darkness surged, hungry and all-consuming.

With a cry, I tore my gaze away and squeezed my eyes closed, maybe I'd even told her to stop, but her lips were on mine, her tongue pushing in. Her hands were suddenly on my face, and she lowered herself onto me, capturing all of me.

"It's okay," she whispered against my mouth, hips rocking, her body driving me toward the edge. "It was always okay."

I still had hold of her light and pulled it tighter, higher, harder. Snapping my eyes open, I pulled her down, twisted, flipping her onto her back, and thrust deep. Her nails dug into my shoulders, and for a few blinding moments, I froze. She arched, her lips parted, breaths coming fast and ragged,

and I was sure I'd never seen any woman more beautiful than her. Body and soul, I could have both. A cruel, dark voice urged me to drink her down while she writhed and screamed her pleasure. I could devour her soul and fuck her until there was nothing left to take.

Horror thrust brittle ice through my veins. I whipped my head to the side, shattering the deep hold I had on her. Her soul slipped out of my reach like cool sand through my fingers.

“Bast, by Sekhmet, I can't...”

She quivered beneath me, sank her claws into my shoulders, and then raked them down my back. Pain chased away the fear, and when she growled my name, I lost myself in her until she came with a shattering cry.

A wide, gratified smile tugged at her lips. She pulled me down, darted her tongue into my mouth, and nipped my lip. I responded, but the kiss was hollow.

“You can't,” I whispered, words failing. “We can't...”

I pushed out of her arms and swung my legs over the edge of the bed, showing her my back. She had no idea how close I'd come to yanking all of the brilliance out of her.

“You can't tempt me like that.” Tremors rolled through me and my heart pounded, heavy and loud. Magic buzzed beneath my skin. It had been close—too close. Hunger plucked at the threads of pleasure, wanting more. Even now I wanted to turn and feed.

“You're stronger than you think.”

“You don't know me.” She thought she did. That was the problem.

Her hand ran up my back and over my shoulder. “I know you well enough. You'd never hurt me.”

She was wrong—so wrong. If she could see what I saw and knew the kind of darkness I was made of, she wouldn't be here. She certainly wouldn't have let me touch her. If she knew how close she'd come to being mine...

“You liked it,” she purred, close to my ear. Her hair tickled my shoulder

and my neck, and her soft lips followed.

Oh, I liked it. I liked it a lot. I liked the feel of all that goodness, all that light, and how I could crush it and devour it until there was nothing left. The fact she'd held my gaze, challenged me, and ridden my pleasure at the same time, I had no idea how I'd resisted, and that terrified me.

“You need to leave.”

She pulled back and a cool draft trickled down my back in her absence. The bed rocked, and I listened to her snatch up her clothes.

A slither of sunlight had pierced the gloom. My gaze strayed to the dust motes drifting through the daylight's glare, and then my thoughts fell to the spirits of the underworld, my home, and the death I'd found there. The sunlight fizzled away, my imagination turning the dust to ash.

When I twisted to look at Bast, she was tugging on her waistcoat. She kept her eyes down and focused on the buckles. Her fingers trembled. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, that I hadn't meant for things to get so out of control, that she should never have come to me for help, and that this was a mistake—again.

Instead, I asked, “Why did you decide to have the child?”

Her head jerked up. “Because”—she flipped her short hair out of her eyes—“I wanted to show you that you're capable of more than darkness.”

Her words struck me like a punch to the gut. I slumped forward and shuddered. She didn't know how bad it had gotten in the underworld. She didn't know the hundreds of innocents I'd devoured. She didn't know the high I craved when every soul went down.

And the girl, our daughter—the girl with no home and no hope. I prayed to whatever god would listen to me that she wasn't like me.

*Capable of more than darkness.* Emotion, sweeping and heady, caught a hold of me and I was glad Bast couldn't see my face. Why did her words hurt like this, like someone had punched into my chest and torn out my heart?

*More than darkness.* I wished it were true, and that was where the ache

came from. I wanted her—the woman with the soul filled with hope and light—to be right, but she was so very wrong.

“You should look to Osiris for answers,” Bast was saying.

I dragged my hand down my face and blinked my sight back into focus, back into the room and my life. When I turned again, my smile was back, plastered on my face like a mask.

“If I look to that bastard for anything, it’ll be for a place to stab Alysclair in deep.” I heard my voice going through the motions and saying the same things, but the hurt her words had caused rippled on.

Bast collected her coat and shrugged it over her shoulders. “Besides him and Anubis, there’s nobody left who can control the jackals. Anubis hasn’t been interested in any of us for as long as I can remember. But Osiris? There’s something about him... Like he’s buying time.”

Osiris’s words came back to me—how he’d been planning for millennia and how time was something a god had a surplus of. Yes, it would be better to focus on Osiris and the murders and not on the fact that I’d almost killed a good woman because it *felt good* to fuck and devour at the same time. If she knew the truth, she’d know I wasn’t fit to be a father, and she wouldn’t hold out the foolish hope that I could change.

I fell back on the bed and propped my head up on my hand. “This—you and me—can’t happen again.”

Her lips turned down. She managed to mask the pain in her eyes, but only after I’d seen the glimmer. “Don’t worry. There’s no chance of that.”

Apologies were back on my lips, but I swallowed it. This was for her own good, and telling her *sorry* would have been for mine.

“I need to go,” she said but didn’t move. Her gaze glided over me. All the desire was gone, and regret hooded her eyes. “You could stop feeling sorry for yourself and help me.”

“Why would Osiris attack your blessed?” I asked, turning the topic away from me while neglecting to mention I’d made a deal to kill a god so I could

return to the home I'd been cast out of for her blessed.

She sighed. "I don't know. I haven't spoken to Osiris in decades."

Interlocking my hands behind my head, I stared at the protection spellwork coating my ceiling, and traced the swirling lines and intricate hieroglyphs. The pattern helped clear my head and focus.

Bast noticed where my gaze was pinned. "Protection spells? You're paranoid."

"Ever have someone try to slit your throat in your sleep?"

Her brow shot up. "No."

Of course she wouldn't have. Everyone loved her. Which begged the question: Who would target her blessed women?

"There's a connection between the women," she said. "Something we're not seeing. I'll go over their activity for the last few months and see if I can find anywhere they converged."

A pounding on the door rattled my windows.

"Ace!" Shu barked from the landing.

Bast's lips twitched. She flicked her hair out of her collar and strode toward the door.

"Don't open—"

Shu entered my apartment like a whirlwind in a fur coat. She barely spared Bast a glance and didn't blink at me sprawled naked on the bed. "You have no idea the shit I've had to deal with in the last twenty-four hours, and here you are, fucking your ex?"

I didn't move. She wasn't pissed off that I was screwing Bast. She hadn't known whether I was back from the underworld or if I'd ever come back. Her anger buried what I knew had been real, heartfelt fear. Had I not come back, she would have had no choice but to return to the underworld, and the souls wouldn't be as welcoming to her as they had been with me.

"Bye, Ace." Bast sauntered out the door without a backward glance, leaving me to face Shu.

Five and a half feet of fierce ex-demon was fuming at the foot of my bed. “You turned off your cell.”

I padded naked to the shower. My bare ass wouldn’t deter her—very little did. Sure enough, she followed. I shut the shower door closed on her glower. “The kid?”

“Yes, the kid. He’s not a kid anymore. If you had your cell on you’d know Cujo has a lead. You need to get down there and deal with it. He’s been fielding reports to keep the cops from getting killed.”

I’d never tell her, but she was exactly what I’d needed: a reason to throw on my coat, pick up Alysclair, and go to work—a distraction. She kept my dark thoughts at bay. Ironic, considering who—what she was.

“Okay.” I switched on the water and buried my face in the hot jets. Thoroughly soaked, I asked, “Shu, do you know any illusion spells?”

“What for?” she snapped loud enough for me to hear over the hissing water.

“Insurance.”

A guttural sound filled the bathroom, the growl sounding more demon than human. “You need a lot of power to pull off one of those.”

I could just make out her outline, rigid and stubborn, through the fogged glass. I waited, knowing she couldn’t resist the promise of a challenging spell.

“I can craft one, but I can’t activate it,” she said. “Not in this useless body. But you could, in your current state.”

“That’s what I thought.” I ran my hands through my hair, washing off the smells of sex, ash, and the underworld.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

*That the darkness in my soul will never wash off,* I thought.



TRINITY CHURCH, on Broadway, had once been the focal point for the Lower Manhattan community and a beacon of hope for arriving ships. I remembered its destruction—twice. First by fire and then after a devastating snowstorm had weakened its walls beyond repair. New York's high-rises had sprouted around its third incarnation, reducing the impressive church, with its piercing spire and gothic embellishments, to a toy among monoliths erected in honor of the modern world. Like the old gods, the church stood proud and defiant, but lost in the shadows of the new world.

By the time I bumped the Ducati onto the curb, the weak winter sun was setting, but clung on to neighboring Wall Street and pseudo-darkness had descended on the church grounds. I left the bike on the sidewalk, risking a ticket. It was a whole lot easier chasing down a demon using 205-horsepower than by foot.

Alysdair was snug against my spine. The coat hid her profile, but not the handle and hilt. I usually confined the sword to nighttime use, but after the events of the last few days, having Alysdair within reach gave me options I sorely needed.

Collar up, I ducked through the high construction fencing and out of sight of passersby.

The church was in the throes of a substantial renovation project. The demon had likely sensed something of the old powers in the church grounds. Construction workers had reported strange noises and a sighting of what they'd described as a rabid homeless man to the cops. Cujo had fielded the reports and passed them on to me.

I'd been inside a handful of times in the past, most recently during 9/11. The inside of the church was a resplendent sight when properly illuminated. But today, with the aid of a few work lights, all that loomed out of the gloom were rows of sheet-covered pews.

I hesitated at the main aisle, motionless, and listening. New York buzzed and snarled outside. I listened deeper, to the quiet inside the church and how

it soaked up the noise. And there, at the back of the church in the darkest part, deep breathing rumbled.

“Remember me?” I asked, not needing to raise my voice for the quiet to carry it. “You’re a long way from home.”

“So...are...you.”

From the grainy growls behind those words, I was betting there wasn’t anything left of Jason Montgomery.

Alysdair whispered free of her sheath. Her weight and balance felt good and right in my hands. No more consuming souls. This demon was going out by Alysdair’s grace, not mine.

“There’s only one way this goes down.”

“Soul Eater. Liar...thief.” Its hisses sailed down the aisle and sounded exactly like the whispers back home.

“I’m all those things,” I replied with a knowing smirk. “And more.”

*And you should be afraid.*

Alysdair’s pale green glow washed over the pews a few steps ahead, lighting the way.

A large shape shifted in the darkness behind the altar. Roughly the size of a man, it could have been mistaken for someone hiding under blankets, but those leathery sheets weren’t blankets.

A quick spot check for exits confirmed the only way out was behind me. When it sprang, and it would, I’d be faster. Gripping Alysdair in my right hand, I raised the sword in a reverse grip, and fixed the mound in my sights. A few more steps and I could skewer it to the wall, ending this before it began.

Then the words started. Spellwords, from a demon? Ballsy.

“Oh no you don’t.” I lunged.

The demon flung its massive bat-like wings open, knocking Alysdair clean out of my hands, and punched me in the chest. I flew back, slammed into a pew, and fell forward. Damn, those wings had reach. With an ear-

splitting screech and a blast of air, the demon beat its wings and rose above the altar in ungainly, inexperienced jerks. Its twisted gargoyle face rippled with rage. Hollow eye sockets glowed red. Jason Montgomery was long gone.

I spared a quick glance for Alysclair but couldn't find her. So much for abstaining from soul eating. That promise had lasted a pathetic few hours. Spitting a curse, I pushed to my feet.

The demon screamed triumphantly and swiveled its glowing eyes onto me.

I smiled. "Hungry? I know I am."

"POLICE! Get your hands up!"

I snarled as all my plans shattered. Life had been so much easier when people ran away from demons. Now, too many of them rushed in. I lifted my hands so the cops could see I wasn't a threat—at least not to them.

Flashlight beams flicked over the pews, down the aisles, up the wall, and landed on the demon hovering in the air and whipping up a dust storm.

"DON'T MOVE!" More shouts. Boots scuffing. Gear rattling. They'd get themselves killed within seconds. Opening fire on the demon wouldn't stop it, but it would give it a target. Those talons would slice through the cops and their Kevlar like they were made of paper.

I thrust out my left hand. "*Hurzd.*"

Power throbbed through me, heady and intoxicating. The demon's flaming eyes widened, its wings locked up, and the thing tumbled out of the air, thumped onto the altar, and slid off.

"Sorry, peaches, no time for foreplay."

"DON'T MOVE!"

I sprang forward and clasped my hands on either side of the demon's hideously deformed face. The spell tumbled forth, words binding together and digging deep, and into the slippery darkness I went. Even as boots thudded up the aisle and the cops shouted at me to step away from the *thing*,

the spell latched on and yanked.

Power—dark and delicious—buzzed. The laughter returned, and I was right at home. Arms hooked around mine and tugged me off the demon. I felt it distantly and heard the cops barking orders as though they were in another room. I was thrown facedown and someone dug a knee into my back, wrenched my arms behind me, and slapped on the cuffs.

“... used against you in a court of law. You have a right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

Laughing probably didn't help, but there it was, bubbling from my lips.

“*Daquir*,” I whispered.

Sprites of fire danced over the demon's carcass, startling the cops who aimed their weapons at the rapidly vanishing remains, for all the good it would do them. Activity buzzed. Radios crackled. And in seconds, the demon was gone, turned to ash.

The cops muttered among themselves, no longer sure what they'd witnessed, and looked at me like I might sprout wings. They had no idea I was the real stuff of nightmares. In a few hours, they'd convince themselves it couldn't possibly be a demon they'd seen. It was a trick of the light. Fearful minds concoct imaginary foes.

After they bundled me into the back of a squad car, I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “I get a phone call, right?”

“Back at the precinct,” my police escort said from the cruiser's front seat and then asked, “What was that back there?”

“What was what?”

“The thing. I saw it.”

“I didn't see anything.” My smile was back, broader than ever.

## CHAPTER 13



I GOT my phone call and my own holding cell. I was under arrest for a slew of minor offences. They had yet to connect me with the three dead kids from the midtown high-rise, and if my phone call paid off, they wouldn't get a chance. But if they found Alysclair, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to place me on the roof where the kids had been butchered.

If my call didn't pay off, it might be time to leave the city. The thought of leaving New York wasn't pleasant. After a few decades, the city, its endless activity, its hard outlook, and its no-bullshit people were a part of me. I'd made a home here, settled here longer than anywhere else. But perhaps it was time. Stay in one place too long and the roots rot, so the old world saying goes.

It had been so much easier to slide under the radar when people weren't armed with cell phones and cameras. Now everything was filmed, recorded, and ferreted away into datacenters. It *was* more difficult than ever to hide—unless you happened to be like Osiris and relished hiding in plain sight.

A uniformed cop collected me from my cell and escorted me to an interrogation room.

The door clicked closed behind me, leaving me standing under the cool scrutiny of the straight-faced, charcoal-suited Thoth.

He appraised me from his sitting position at the table and said in a tone so

flat and sharp it could have cut diamonds, “No cell can hold you.”

I shrugged, finding myself restless under his gaze. He didn’t exude power the same way Osiris did. Thoth’s lurked deep. “I have to live this life. I’d prefer not to live it on the run.”

He opened his briefcase, removed a slip of paper, and slid it across the table toward me. “The evidence is circumstantial. They have nothing to hold you. You’ll be released. Sign here.”

Hands still cuffed, I eyed the mirrored wall. Attorney-client conversations were confidential, but it wasn’t the cops I was concerned about. Gods had many ways of eavesdropping on the unsuspecting.

After signing Thoth’s form—as confident as I could be that the God of Law wasn’t about to screw me over—I pushed the paper back across the table.

He gathered the document and neatly inserted it into the proper place inside his briefcase. Then he nudged one of his pens back in line, making it parallel with its neighbor. Gods forbid anything was out of place. He’d have a fit if he saw my filing system.

“You can’t afford me, Mister Dante,” Thoth said, still cold, still flat. He had about as much spark in him as a reanimated corpse.

“No, I can’t afford you, but like I said, I have information to trade.” What I was about to do, if it went wrong, could start a feud that would have far-reaching consequences. Or Thoth might try and kill me where I stood, because that would certainly be one fine way out of this mess.

Thoth leaned both elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. With his back straight, his shoulders rigid, and the dash of a goatee narrowing his already thin face, he reminded me of a blade, the kind of blade forged to look plain but that could slice through anything in its path. No doubt about it, my next words would either free me or condemn me.

He waited, probably wondering if he could trust a word I said. *Liar. Thief,* he’d be thinking.

“Osiris suspects you’re screwing his wife,” I said. The ground didn’t tremble. Thunder didn’t crack. Maybe I’d get away with this.

Thoth blinked twice and lifted his chin. “That’s unfortunate and quite incorrect.”

“Of course.” I couldn’t tell from his blank expression whether he was lying. I couldn’t read a damn thing on his face. I’d just told him the most powerful god, outside of the elusive Amun-Ra, believed he was screwing his wife, and Thoth had barely flinched. He really was hardcore. “But you are meeting with her?”

He blinked quickly again and abruptly stood. “That I cannot confirm or deny.”

*You just did*, I thought.

Thoth straightened his cuffs and sleeves so they perfectly lined up.

“Let me be clear, Mister Dante.” He looked up, and something dangerous peered out from behind his slate-gray eyes. “Isis’s love for her husband is enduring and eternal. It is the one constant in our ever-changing lives, much like the air we breathe or the ground we walk upon. There is no god, no force in this realm, the underworld, or the afterlife, that can sever their bond.”

“Besides themselves?”

He briefly bowed his head, conceding. Either he didn’t know Osiris like I did, or he didn’t care that the god had his crosshairs lined up on his back. And I was the unfortunate one who’d have to pull the trigger. But I had room to maneuver. I’d agreed to kill Thoth; I hadn’t agreed not to warn him first.

“Armies have marched off the back of love,” I said. “Thousands of people die every day for it.”

“Love is indeed a potent motivator.”

Thoth and Isis weren’t screwing, I knew that much, but they were meeting in secret, and that alone would be enough to put a wedge between Osiris and his wife.

“Whatever is going on between you and Isis, unless you tell Osiris the

truth, it will get you killed.” Killing a god was no idle threat, and I’d just laid it out bare.

Toth’s faultless expression gained a few fracture lines around the mouth. It was probably the closest he came to grimacing. “I cannot.”

“His suspicions will consume him.” *And the rest of us*, I added silently.

Toth’s bloodless lips pulled into a reed-thin smile. *By the gods, he does smile!* And it was a horrible thing to witness. “I appreciate the concern, but it’s not necessary.”

“Oh, I’m not concerned for you.”

Toth stood, picked up his case, and came around the table. Easily a foot taller than me, he peered down his narrow nose, meeting my eyes for as long as he dared before shifting the briefcase to his left hand and straightening his tie. “We are each confined to our word.”

“Indeed we are.”

He knew I’d be coming for him and that I’d told him more than enough to protect himself—and hopefully me—when the time came.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again soon, Mister Dante.”

“Of that, I have no doubt.”

Without delay, he marched out of the interrogation room. The cop entered moments later. She unlocked my cuffs and spared me a smile. “That’s one efficient attorney you have there, Mister Dante. You’re free to collect your personal belongings and go.”

I rubbed my sore wrists and wondered if I’d earned myself a friend in Toth, or an enemy.



SHUKRA WAS WAITING outside the precinct, her face like thunder. A pair of sunglasses hid her eyes and protected them from the glare coming off the fresh snow dump. The rest of her, wrapped in a fur-lined coat, stood rod

straight and immobile, warning me she was about to grill me.

“What part of *don't get caught* did you not understand?”

I flicked my coat collar up and flashed her a smile. “Like a red rag to a bull.”

“I hate you.”

“I noticed.”

“How did you get off?”

“Thoth.”

She balked at that, probably wondering where I'd gotten the cash to hire one of the best attorneys in the city. Her questions were incoming and would hit once she worked through the details in that steel-trap mind of hers.

Plucking my cell from the police-issued plastic bag, I switched it on and waited for it to boot up. My breath misted the air. Steam rolled off the street and the cold gnawed on my face and fingers. Squinting into the too-bright winter sun, I spotted a red Ducati parked outside the precinct's parking lot.

Shu shook her head. “Wasn't me, but I did pick up Alysclair from the church. It tried to eat me. You're welcome.”

I headed for my bike and resisted the sudden and alarming urge to thank Shu. Her touching the sword was no minor thing. The blade had likely burned her and tried to draw her soul into itself. Her going within three feet of the blade was an unexpected act of kindness from a demon that supposedly wanted to scoop out my insides with a spoon. She'd want compensation.

The Ducati's keys were waiting in the ignition. Thoth *was* thorough. It would be a shame when I had to kill him.

“Was the Montgomery problem dealt with?” Shu asked, stamping her feet and puffing into her hands.

“Yeah.” My cell chimed a message alert. “But I've collected a few more since then.”

I didn't have to tell Shu anything, but we'd learned over the years that secrets didn't last long and usually caused more trouble than they were worth.

Besides, she knew my soul. There was no greater secret than that. Bizarrely, I knew I could trust her. Besides Osiris and Cujo, she was the only other being who knew the exact details of my curse—because it was also hers. In five centuries, she'd never told another soul.

My cell vibrated. I glanced at the screen. *VOICE MESSAGE: BAST.*

“We need to talk,” I told Shu and lifted the cell to my ear.

*“Ace, two more of my blessed are dead. I’m on my way to a suspected third. Call me back.”*

The message ended, and another began, this one from a few hours ago. *“Chuck is missing. I think I’ve found their connection. Meet me at the corner of two-thirtieth and Edgewood. The others are dead, Ace. All of them.”* The message ended, cutting to silence.

“Damnit.” I dialed Bast’s number, but the call rang out. “Shu, are you armed?”

“Always.”

I swung my leg over the bike and rocked it upright. “Follow me. Keep up.”

Almost three hours had passed since that call, and Bast hadn’t called back. Whichever way I looked at it, my ex-wife’s silence was a bad omen.

The Ducati roared to life beneath me. I rolled the bike onto the road, spotted Shu climbing into her beat-up two-seater sports car, and opened the bike’s throttle. The tires gripped with a screech, launching me through blurry New York streets. Shu wouldn’t keep up, but she’d find me. She always did.

Chuck was missing. Bast’s women were dead. My mother had been slaughtered in her own chamber. The jackals suggested the events were linked. It was unlikely that Ammit had been pregnant like the other victims. Perhaps she’d known something, and the killer—with enough clout to turn the Devourer’s jackals against her—had wanted her silenced. As much as the thought sickened me, I had to talk with Osiris.

I turned the bike onto Edgewood and rolled to a halt. EMTs, cop cars, and

a growing crowd blocked the residential street. Was Bast here? I tried her cell again. Nothing.

The crowd strained against a stretch of police tape. I carved my way through them to the front. The stark winter sun highlighted bright splashes of blood in the snow. Bulky body bags gave the rest of the scene its finality. Someone or something had ripped through a squat, single-story building and torn through anyone who had gotten in its way.

Radio chatter drew my eye to an animal control van. Bast?

Among the slushy mess of blood and snow near the front steps, I spotted large paw prints. Bast wouldn't have done this, but she'd been here.

"Ace." Shu drew me away from the frontline, thumbs tapping on her phone. "This address is listed as a modeling agency, but there are some indications online that that wasn't all they did."

"Like what?" I scanned the crowd, the cops, and the dozens of vehicles, but Bast wasn't here. She could have picked up the killer's scent and started tracking them while I played catch-up. Why hadn't she called me?

"Escorts."

I spotted an ambulance with its rear doors hanging open and started toward it. "Escorts as in professional friends or escorts with benefits?"

"The benefits kind," Shu replied.

Escorts—the connection Bast had mentioned. The dead women had been on the payroll?

An EMT loitered near the back of the ambulance with her head down, busy filling out paperwork.

"Shu, go over there, be dramatic, and make it good. I need a few minutes alone with the witness in the back of that ambulance."

Her sunglasses couldn't hide the way her eyes lit up at the promise of mayhem.

"Don't hurt anyone," I quickly added before she could summon a biblical plague.

“Happy to help.” She tucked her phone away, removed her sunglasses, and sauntered toward the EMT.

I took up a hapless bystander position at the front of the ambulance, checked that the driver was busy in the cab, and waited for Shu’s signal. Sure enough, she let out a cry and dramatically fell into the crowd, causing enough of a ruckus for the EMT to rush in.

I climbed into the back of the ambulance, spooking the guy wrapped tightly in a space blanket. He shrank away.

“Hey, just a few questions—not gonna hurt you.”

“Who are you?” He had the wide, glassy-eyed look of someone in shock, and he blinked at me like I might be a figment of his imagination.

“Someone who can help.” Shu’s commotion continued outside, but I didn’t have long before the EMT returned. No time for small talk. “Did you see who did this?”

He shook his head. “No, man, I was out back. We heard the shouts, and then the screams started...I heard Jimmy sayin’...” He trailed off, the memories dragging him under. He’d be reliving them for a while.

He swallowed and looked down at his hands cradled in his lap. “He was begging, yah know? You’re supposed to stay in your room. They told us on that terrorist training course, yah know, after nine-eleven. If anything happens, like this... I mean, not like this. Nobody expects someone to come in and start...cutting.”

“Just one person?”

He nodded. “I think so. The door was shut, but I heard...”

“Did anyone say anything that could help? Any names? Anything at all?”

“Jimmy...” He winced. “He said the girl wasn’t here.”

“What girl?”

“I could hear Jim clearly, but...” When he looked at me, there were questions in his expression, and confusion clouded his eyes. “I should remember, shouldn’t I? Something? Anything? The cops asked. They looked

at me like... I dunno. I should—I can't..."

"What girl?" I pressed, keeping my voice calm while my heart raced.

"I don't know, man." His fingers were trembling so he curled them into fists. "Jimmy said she was in the old warehouse apartments down by pier fifteen and then...and then he didn't say anything else. I found him." His shoulders shook. "His throat was..."

I had a lead. It was something. "Thank you."

"Shock, right? Why I can't remember? It's shock. I mean, the cops said it was. It makes you forget. Makes you see things?" He giggled in a wholly unhealthy way. "Because, man, when I saw that panther, I thought I'd lost my shit for good."

I smiled in what I hoped was a reassuring way. "You've been very helpful."

He smiled back and puffed out a small laugh. "I wish there was more I could tell yah."

I turned to jump down from the ambulance but paused. "Did the panther happen to say anything?"

He frowned, and his eyes cleared. "Cats don't talk, dude."

"Of course." It had been worth a shot.

I jumped down from the ambulance and strolled back to my bike, keeping my head down and collar up. I knew the address he'd mentioned, pier fifteen. The converted ironwork factory had once housed low-income families. Now it was marked for demolition to make way for a new waterside "village." Pier fifteen was the regular site of muggings, shootings, and all the other wonderful crimes that seeped into areas that had been cut out of New York and left to rot.

Shu was waiting beside my bike, shades back on, and lips pressed into a grim line.

"The witness was suffering from memory lapses," I said. "His pupils were dilated and he was exhibiting slight delirium. Symptoms of shock."

“Godstruck,” she replied, echoing my thoughts exactly. “You think this is *Osiris’s* doing?” She hissed out his name like the taste of it burned her tongue.

“I think it’s a possibility and one we need to consider before we go any further. The attack here, it was different. I saw paw prints large enough to be Bast’s, but no sign of the jackals. The jackals are search and destroy. This was...this was someone who’s run out of patience.”

“I’ll get Alysclair.” Shu marched away and disappeared around the street corner.

She wouldn’t like what I was about to tell her. If this was *Osiris’s* doing, she couldn’t get involved, and there was nothing Shu hated more (besides me) than being sidelined.

I started the bike, rode around to where she’d parked her car, and pulled up beside her. She was leaning against the hood. I cut the engine.

“We can’t stop him,” she said, her sunglasses hiding her eyes.

I planted my feet on either side of the bike and straightened. “We can’t.”

Her cheek twitched. “I’m not sitting this out.”

She wanted to bloody her daggers with *Osiris’s* insides as much as I did. “There’s no point in him making us both dance. If he gets us together, he’ll screw with us, like always.”

We shared the same memories of past *performances*, courtesy of *Osiris*. I’d turned to Vodka after the last time. Shu had other means of forgetting, but what they were she hadn’t shared with me.

The growl that sounded in her throat was a sound not belonging to this world. Something of the *Shukra* from old lurked in that threat. “There’s nothing left to hurt us with.”

She was so sure of that. I wasn’t. “Keep your cell on and go to my apartment. As long as we’re apart, *Osiris* can’t screw our souls down even harder than he already has.”

“I’d like to see him try.” That was a lie driven by fear. She wouldn’t and

neither would I. Being shackled to the soul of your worst enemy was just one of the many painful and inventive methods Osiris used as torture. He'd had a few millennia to think up new and exciting ways of doing far worse. "I'll claw out his eyes and feed them to his bitch wife."

She may have once been powerful enough to do it too. Before the curse, before Osiris had dragged her into my punishment.

"If this is Osiris, I'll deal with it," I said. "We can't be together around him. It has to stay that way."

"Fine, but next time, I go alone and stick my daggers in him."

If only it were that simple. "I tried that, remember?"

She looked away, sending her gaze down the street. She was the first to find me after Isis had finished punishing me for my assassination attempt on her husband. In every image and statue, Osiris was depicted as holding a flail for a reason.

"I don't like this," she said, her words no less angry because of their calm undertone. "I don't like not knowing. I don't like being put on the bench. I don't like you." She reached in through the open car window, retrieved Alysclair from inside, and with a snarl, threw the sword at me.

I snatched it out of the air before the weighty sword could smack me in the face.

Her top lip rippled. "And I don't like that damn sword."

"Noted." I pushed Alysclair home inside its sheath. Shrugging the substantial weight into place against my back, I felt lighter for having the sword where it belonged.

"Don't get dead," Shu grunted and climbed into her car.

I started the bike and launched away from Shu. She wouldn't follow. In everything else, I had no sway over her. She'd fight, argue, and go against my wishes every step of the way, but when it came to Osiris, she heeded me.

## CHAPTER 14



THE QUIET WAS BACK, as thick as soup, as heavy as the night that had fallen, and entirely unnatural. I rocked my bike onto its stand and peered through the fence at the converted apartment block. Across the ink-black river behind me, New York buzzed. A helicopter beat the air somewhere, horns blared, and sirens wailed. But ahead, silence devoured the sound as greedily as I devoured souls.

My darkness-adjusted eyes picked out a few glowing windows in the abandoned building. Up on the fifth floor, where scaffolding hugged the façade, someone was home.

I trudged across a churned-up wasteland of mud and grass and up the nearest stairwell. The apartments had been gutted months ago, most now open to the elements. Any signs of their former owners were long gone or buried under weeds.

Orange lantern light illuminated the first den and a few nervous eyes peered out of the gloom. My heart constricted when I thought of Chuck living like this, huddled in the dark alone. I moved on, purposely making my steps heavy and my presence known.

A few dens in, I found the first body. Fresh blood had crept from the corpse and shone like oil in the dark. Careful to keep one eye on the shadows surrounding me, I crouched down and pushed the body over: male, late

forties, and his throat had been cut. His arms and hands were cut up too—defensive wounds.

The hairs on the back of my neck stirred. Something was watching me. Not a god—but someone with magic at their disposal.

Hands out, showing I was unarmed, I straightened and slowly turned.

The girl stood with her back to a window. Milky moonlight washed in from between the broken pane, casting her in silhouette. Her features were difficult to make out, but her eyes weren't. They captured every tiny sliver of light and sparked alive. I felt it then, the tug, the trap I could fall into. My soul hungered for hers, and hers hungry for mine.

She looked away at the same time I did.

“There are more bodies down the hall,” Chuck said.

Bast had said Chuck was frightened, but if Chuck was afraid now, she hid all signs of it. She stood in the moonlight as rigid and cool as stone.

“I want to help you,” I said.

“Help me?” Her teeth flashed in what could have been a smile or a sneer. “No one can help me.”

“Who did this?”

I heard her swallow. “They came for me, the dogs, and then...someone did this, but I can't... I can't remember. I hid...and then here *you* are.”

I deserved her mistrust. I wouldn't trust me either. “You don't have any reason to believe anything I say, but I'm the best chance you have at staying alive.”

“You and that woman. You know what's going on, don't you?” With her chilling tone and her still body, I couldn't tell if she was angry, about to run, or too terrified to move. “You know everything?” she asked.

Bast would bring a whole world of pain down on me if she found out I'd told Chuck anything without her. I could lie, but something told me Chuck wouldn't fall for any more bullshit.

“Tell me the truth, and I'll go with you.”

The truth? That Egyptian gods were real, most of them walked among normal people, and she was potentially one of them? The chances of that conversation going well were slim.

“I will, I’ll tell you everything, but not here.” I moved forward, just a step.

She backed up toward the window, hands spread and ready to lash out. Light fell across her face, washing all color from her skin. The glimmer in her eyes brightened. She looked too young to be here and to have death stalking her.

“I won’t hurt you,” I said.

“It’s not you. It’s me. What if...what if I did that?” Her last words came out in a whisper, and I understood what she was really afraid of. Not the jackals, not the unknown chasing her down, and not me. She was afraid of herself.

“You didn’t kill him.”

“I might h-have.” She took another step back. “I... I do things. I see things.”

“I know.” I held out my hand, reaching for her. “Please, come with me.”

She looked at my hand, at my face, and then finally at my eyes. If she looked deep enough, she’d see what I was truly made of, or maybe she’d see the fear—a fear just like hers.

Her face betrayed her emotions and thoughts so openly. First I saw confusion, and then I watched as she recognized that maybe she was looking into a distorted mirror and seeing more than just a man. Her eyes widened. Maybe she knew me. Maybe she’d always known me.

A jackal shot out of the darkness and slammed into her chest, throwing her off her feet and into the windowpane. Glass shattered. Chuck cried out. I grabbed for her ankle, but I was a second too late. Chuck and the jackal tumbled out the window.

I vaulted over the sill, expecting to fall several stories fast, but I abruptly

landed on the scaffolding. Boards swayed under my feet. I grabbed the top rail to steady myself, but it snapped under my grip and fell into the darkness below. A few seconds later, the pole clanged against the ground. The wind howled and moaned, rocking the platform.

“Ace!”

Chuck was running down the boards, the jackal snapping at her heels. I bolted after them. Something vital twanged inside the framework, and the scaffold frame shuddered. Chuck slipped and went down. She reached to grab a hold of a rail. The sounds of boards cracking ricocheted into the night, and the board beneath her gave way.

She jumped—pale arms out—the jackal disappeared, and then something like a sledgehammer hit me in the shoulder. My breath whipped out of me, my hip hit a rail, and the weight of the thing almost shoved me over.

Teeth clamped into my upper arm and pain burst up my shoulder. Then the top rail I’d been pinned against snapped.

Air.

Weightlessness.

My heart lodged in my throat.

And then an abrupt tug yanked on my side, halting my fall. Ripping snarls rumbled around me—snarls from the jackal clamped on my arm and from where my coat had snagged on a rusted pole.

“Ace! Help!” The wind tossed Chuck’s screams at me.

If she could shout, she was fine, unlike me, dangling over what was a fast fall to a painful impact.

The jackal growled and gurgled around the muscles in my shoulder, its teeth sinking deeper with every tug. Pain and anger bloomed, smothering any cohesive thought.

I reached around my front and clamped my hand around the jackal’s muzzle. It snarled a warning. I dug my fingers into its mouth, sinking them around its sharp teeth, and heaved its jaw open. More snarls. The beast

bucked, kicking its back legs against mine, apparently intent on making us both plummet several floors. It would tear my arm off at any second. Prying its jaws wasn't working. The jackal's eyes glowed, and deep inside, it was laughing.

My coat seams ripped, dropping me an inch. "Screw this."

"Ace!"

"Busy!" I curled my hand into a fist and punched the jackal in the jaw, once, twice, and then something cracked—its teeth or my knuckles. Again, I punched, giving it all I had and finally its grip released me. This time, when I got my hand around its muzzle, I yanked its jaw wide and kicked the jackal into the dark. A few seconds later, it landed with a heavy *thwump* below.

The scaffolding shuddered, and somewhere inside the structure, something else twanged. *This is a bad place to be.*

Hooking my good right arm around the lower guardrail, I heaved myself onto the boards in time to see the dark warehouse windows spewing packs of jackals onto the scaffolding, one after another, more and more. Some split my way, and others ran for Chuck.

"Sekhmet's ass." My left arm was damn near useless, and somewhere distantly, between the throbbing and the agony, my body was telling to go lay down.

*Leave the girl*, my doubts said. If she survived this, she'd be hunted to the ends of the earth. What was the point?

Chuck had crawled onto a lone scaffolding tower. The structure swayed away from the wall, tugged by the wind. The jackals dashed right for her, and they'd clear the gap. The weight of one would be enough to topple the whole tower, and Chuck had five incoming.

*None of this is her fault*, I growled at that doubting voice inside my head.

"The window," I yelled, but the wind tore my shout away.

The window was her only escape, but she only had eyes for the jackals.

The first wave of jackals bore down on me, eyes ablaze, paws beating the

boards, and claws scraping. I braced myself, brought my right shoulder down, and dug in when the first jackal hit hard. Using its own momentum, I shoved it upward and threw it over my back, hoping the damn thing would fall off the scaffold.

As I rose, I clamped my hand around Alysclair and swung the sword free, bringing it down in an arc and cutting through the flank of another jackal just as the demon sprang for the kill. They kept coming, and I kept slicing and slashing, Alysclair seeking flesh. The blade sang, aglow and hungry.

Chuck's scream pierced the howling wind. I lifted my head in time to see the scaffold lean out too far. She scrabbled to the higher side, balancing her weight against the fall, and then the first jackal leaped. It landed half dangling off the side. She kicked it in the jaw again and again, but the added weight was already pushing the scaffolding over.

She couldn't die. Not here and not like this. She'd survived on her own against everything out to get her. This wasn't how it ended for her. She deserved more.

I flung out my numb left hand, clenched my teeth against the agony burning up my shoulder, and spat the word, "*Hurzd!*"

Magic snapped out of me and hooked into the tower. The scaffold snagged in the air, mid-fall. A power ricochet slammed into me, snapping the magic taut, threatening to break my hold.

Chuck kicked at the jackal again, but the other demons were almost on her. She didn't see the next one coming until it skidded across the boards in front of her.

"The window!" I yelled.

Magic throbbed, and with every beat, it fed off my soul, and the blinding pain started gnawing on my strength.

*Hold, damn it. Hold just a little longer.* The tower jolted, but I had it. *A few more seconds.*

"The window, Chuck! I can't hold it."

I don't know if she heard me. I couldn't look, couldn't think of anything but holding the frame frozen in the air. The magic pulsed harder, over and over, draining me with every wave.

A jackal slammed into my back, throwing me off my feet. My cheek hit the wall, then the boards, and the world ripped and shattered. The spell snapped and lashed back, slicing soul deep. A cry shot from my throat, and in its wake, I heard the chiming clangs of Chuck's tower collapsing.

*Capable of more than darkness*, Bast's words mocked.

A jackal landed on my back. I got my hands under me and pushed up, but hot pain flared brightly in my shoulder, almost robbing me of the dregs of the strength I had left. Alysclair strummed in my hand. I gripped the sword tighter, listening to her sing.

The jackal's low growl trembled through my back. Its hot, stinking breath pushed against my neck. Drool slid down my cheek.

A high-pitched whistle sounded, and the jackal's weight lifted.

"Hey!" Chuck called.

The weight vanished.

I twisted and saw Chuck at the other end of the platform, crouched low. Her golden eyes shone in the darkness, undeniable and hungry. The jackal started toward her, but didn't sprint like it had before. It managed a nervous trot and then sank onto its belly. Chuck stood, and with a stride too confident, she closed the distance between them. Those golden eyes glowed. Shit, she had the demon enthralled.

She stopped and looked the beast in its eyes.

Through the haze of pain and exhaustion, I finally realized what she was doing. "Don't," I growled. "Don't!"

Her eyes brightened. She drew back her lips in a smile I'd seen too many times in the mirror.

I got my feet under me, dragged Alysclair at my side, and staggered. I might be too late, like I'd been too late for everything, but I wouldn't let her

damage her soul over this pathetic demon.

I plunged Alysclair into the beast's side, owning its death. "*Tra k-dae amcru-kak sra ksork, kosec amcru-kak esk kassrakamsk, omd kae kuir amcru-kak aeuirk.*"

Chuck gasped and fell back, her connection with the demon severed. Her glittering, envy-filled eyes fell to Alysclair, the steel aglow.

When the soul was gone, I said, "*Daquir.*"

The carcass fizzled to ash and embers. The others, sensing a Soul Eater among them, had vanished.

Chuck lifted her chin. Her bottom lip trembled and her skinny shoulders shook, but a new fierceness burned in her Soul Eater's eyes.

I had a lot of explaining to do.

## CHAPTER 15



CHUCK STEPPED into my dark apartment and stopped dead. Yellow eyes shone in the gloom.

I flicked on the lights. “Hey, Shu.”

My business partner was sitting poised in the chair by my desk, giving her a direct line of sight to the door. She still wore her sophisticated pantsuit, but her demeanor was of a coiled snake about to strike, until she saw Chuck and the flicker of rage fizzled to curiosity.

“Bit young for your tastes, Acehole?”

The throbbing pain in my shoulder and the battering my body had taken had drained the fight right out of me. “Chuck, meet Shukra. Shu, meet Chuck.”

Chuck stood rigid and was probably considering running. She’d likely sensed something was off about Shu, but given she had no idea what the hell was going on, she couldn’t know Shu had once been a demon.

Shu pushed out of the chair and blatantly dragged her gaze over Chuck from head to toe and back again. “There’s something familiar about you.”

“Leave it,” I warned, pushing the smallest hint of a compulsion into the words so she’d know to back off.

Her dark eyes caught mine. She didn’t ask, but she did circle around Chuck in a way normal people didn’t do unless they were psychopaths.

Chuck narrowed her eyes on the woman eyeing her up. “I thought I had issues.”

I peeled my coat off my mangled shoulder. The fabric tugged on scabs of dried blood, reopening the wounds. Dumping the coat on the bed, I asked Chuck, “You hurt?”

“No,” Chuck replied, and then added softly, “Don’t think so.”

Besides a few scrapes and bruises, she’d survived the warehouse relatively unscathed. I, on the other hand, hadn’t. My coat was torn, my shoulder was on fire, and the magic backlash still raked at my insides, turning them to mush. All I wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep it off, but the night wasn’t over yet, and those jackals would keep on coming.

I flicked my gaze up at the protection spellwork on the ceiling.

“Added some improvements,” Shu said.

She had. I could see the new hieroglyphs and how they complemented those already in place. It was fine work, worthy of a display in a museum, but I’d expect nothing less from a demon sorceress.

“I also cleaned out your vodka and finished the Chinese takeout in the fridge.”

That takeout had been a week old, but I’d seen her eat beating hearts. She could handle it.

“Did Bast drop by?”

“No. Just me, left behind, all alone.” She jerked her chin at my arm. “Looks like you could have done with an extra pair of hands.”

“We lived.”

Chuck watched Shu with hooded eyes, the girl’s young mind trying to wrap itself around what she was really seeing. Her skin was probably crawling off her bones.

“Are you two like...together?” she asked.

Shu barked a laugh. “You couldn’t drown me in souls to touch his—”

“Bye, Shu,” I butted in.

Shu snarled, and the temperature dropped a degree. She eyed me like she might argue. She'd grill me in the morning. Who was the girl, where had I been, what was really going on? It could all wait until the light of day.

Chuck continued to stand in the middle of the room after Shu had gone, eyeing my furniture like it might come alive and attack her. She'd seen some things back at the warehouse—impossible things. That had to make her take a fresh look at the people and things around her. She'd need time, weeks or months. Some people never adjusted to the truth.

“You can relax,” I said. “This is probably the safest place in the city for you right now.”

I eased Alysclair's custom sheath off, over my head and down my good arm. The sight of the sword tempted Chuck a few steps closer. With the blade sheathed, she couldn't see the glowing spellwork, but she couldn't have missed it back at the apartments. If she listened, she'd hear its low-frequency hum.

She reached out a pale hand. “What is it?”

“Enchanted sword. It eats souls.” There was little point in beating around the bush when we'd already set the bush on fire.

A grin broke out across her lips. “That is so badass.”

“Badass, yes, and also extremely dangerous. It doesn't discriminate. Good, bad, young, old—it'll eat everything.”

“Where'd you get it?”

“My mother gave it to me.”

Chuck worried her top lip between her teeth. “I never knew my mother.”

I decided to leave that conversation well alone and busied myself with retrieving the first aid kit from the bathroom. Spreading the antiseptic wash and bandages across my desk, I pulled off my shirt and set to work cleaning my shoulder, keeping Chuck in the corner of my eye the whole time. She touched Alysclair but quickly pulled her hand back. She'd feel it, the slow pull, like the sword could suck the life right out of her bones.

She dropped her gaze to my coat and ran her fingers over the many ragged holes. “The sword and the long coat...some people who were kind to me back at the warehouse, they talked about a guy who scares off the undead. I thought they were nuts. Is that you?”

“Hard to tell. I’ve never met another guy with a sword who makes a living killing demons in New York, but hey, it’s a big city.”

“Is that what those dogs were? Undead demons?”

Where to start? I really wasn’t in the mood for the big reveal, but when I looked at her face and saw her raw, needy expression, I couldn’t keep the truth from her. She’d probably known she wasn’t *normal* her entire life. If I didn’t tell her, she’d go looking for answers and get killed.

“They’re not undead,” I said. “Demons are—” I pressed a dressing against my shoulder and hissed as the antiseptic burned its way into the bite. “The underworld, where they come from, it’s brimming with souls. Some are lost, some like it there, and most are just passing through on their way to the Hall Of Judgment. But occasionally, a few stick around. They listen and they learn. They attach themselves to...” *Gods* just sounded too far out there, but what the hell? She was already looking at me like she might call the cops the second I turned my back. “Some devote their services to a few of the underworld gods. The influence of the gods, especially the darker demon gods, turns the souls into creatures like the jackals. Demons.”

“That’s how your sword was able to *eat* them?”

I nodded. “Then some idiot gets it into his head that ancient Egyptian spells look like fun, something to impress the girls with, and before you know it, you’ve got two demons possessing human bodies, contorting their DNA, turning them into creatures that shouldn’t exist, and unleashing chaos in midtown. I tidy up the mess and try to avoid getting arrested, or shot, or bitten. I’m not always successful.”

Her eyes couldn’t get any wider. “Did that happen?”

“Yesterday—or the day before. I’m losing track.”

“This is all real?”

“As real as the child you’re carrying.”

Her hand settled low over her stomach. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

“*That* is a very good question.” I dug out a fresh shirt from my dresser and worked it on without igniting my shoulder all over again. With rest, I’d heal in a few days. Until then, I’d make sure to play the sick card with Shu—make her buy me some slippers.

Chuck ran her trembling fingers through her short hair. Chewing on her lip, she lifted her gaze to me. “I’m not normal, am I?”

“Not in the least.” Leaning against the desk, I watched her process all the questions she had and whether she really wanted to ask them. “Being normal is all well and good until the demons are out to get you. You survived because you’re not normal. You did well out there.”

She looked again at my sword, its presence a constant reminder of how shit was as far from normal as it could get.

“Why don’t you take a shower,” I suggested. “Think over what you’ve seen and what I’ve told you. I don’t have much in the way of food, but I’ll whip something up. Once you’re rested and fed, we’ll talk some more.”

I gave her some space to adjust, busying myself by microwaving two batches of flavored noodles. I tried Bast’s cell a few more times, but each time it rang until her voicemail picked up. There was a chance she was deliberately ignoring my calls, especially after I’d brushed her off. Goddesses held grudges longer than empires reigned. But Bast would have set aside me acting like an asshole to know Chuck was safe. Something had happened to her between the modeling agency and the warehouse—something that was stopping her from getting in touch.

I returned to the lounge with two bowls of noodles. Alysclair thrummed, tempting me to pick her up and head back onto the street to hunt Bast down. But the goddess could look after herself. Chuck couldn’t—not yet and not

with demons on her tail.

I tucked the sword safely away in its slot wedged between the desk and the wall. When I turned back, Chuck emerged from the bathroom, hair knotted in a towel, wearing one of my shirts. She looked tiny, and pale, and vulnerable, and I had no idea what I was supposed to do with her.

I shoved the bowl of noodles under her nose. “Get that in you.”

She dropped onto my bed and dug in.

I retreated to my desk and ignored the spreading, heavy tiredness. I needed to rest, needed to see Osiris, and needed to find Bast, but above all that, I needed to keep the girl safe. I hadn’t expected to feel anything for her. Why would I? We were strangers. And yet there was something in me that had started to grow since Bast’s return. I knew what it was. I’d experienced it before: *hope*. Hope that this girl might escape everything I’d been through and that maybe I really was capable of more than darkness. If I could save her, that meant something. Didn’t it? I wasn’t expecting that one good deed could wipe away five centuries of sins, but maybe it was a start.

After inhaling half her bowl of noodles, Chuck asked, “Why’re you helping me?”

*Because saving you is easier than saving myself.* I hooked a shallow smile onto my lips, hoping it looked real enough. “Like I said, I get paid to help.”

She accepted that and twirled her noodles on her fork. “Who’s paying you?”

“Bast. The woman from the shelter.”

More noodles went in. She chewed and then asked around a mouthful, “I’ve seen her in there a few times. She stands out.”

“Yes, she does. Like a goth at a white wedding.” I kicked back at my desk and worked on devouring my noodles.

“What’s her deal?” Chuck dug into her bowl.

“She’s one of the good ones.” A little knot twisted tighter inside. Guilt and I were old friends. “There aren’t many good gods.”

Chuck's head whipped up. "She's a god?"

"Goddess Bastet—"

Her mouth fell open. "Goddess of Cats?" She saw my smile and said, "My foster mom taught middle-grade. She had a cool kid's book about Egyptian gods. The cat..." She blinked. "Oh. The big cat I saw...holy shit, that was her?!"

"That was her." I gave Chuck time to absorb that revelation and watched her look around the room as though seeing it for the first time. "She's also the goddess of pregnant women and the protector of those in need. Some women she takes under her paw, like you."

"This is insane." Chuck laughed, shook her head, and continued stabbing at her noodles. "I mean, shit. I... I knew she was different. Yah know, you can feel it. I can feel it. Same as you...wait...what the hell are you, then? Are you an animal too? The eyes? You have—"

I waved her questions away, finished my mouthful, and said, "I'm not important. Don't even have a name. But you and your unborn child, you are important. Important enough to want dead." Setting the bowl aside, I brushed my hands together and leaned forward. "Chuck, I need you to answer me one question."

She wet her lips and blinked wide, innocent eyes.

"Who is the child's father?"

Her eyes clouded over. She looked into her bowl at the mass of noodles for answers and clearly didn't find any because her little shoulders shrugged. "This is gonna sound crazy—and stupid. I mean, I think I was high...but I..." She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of the borrowed shirt. "I don't know." A nervous smile darted across her lips. "Maybe I was high, or maybe I was roofied, but I'm careful. I look out for that shit. I don't remember anything. Maybe it was Immaculate Conception?" She laughed a nervous, tinkling laugh that held no humor.

There was another word for Immaculate Conception: Godstruck. She *had*

been drugged, but not by any conventional means.

“You worked at the modeling agency?”

Her frown deepened. “Once, but they fired me when they found out where I live.”

“Do you remember that one time you worked for them? Do you remember where you went and who you were with?”

She set her bowl down on the bedside table and pulled the towel from her hair, ruffling her tangled locks. “Sure, it was just some guy. He hired me to hang around with him and look pretty on his arm. It was just a few hours. I smiled and kept my mouth shut. I figured he was lonely or something. Pretty dumb, but some people pay for weird shit.”

“Describe him.”

“Tall. Nice looking, really. He had pretty eyes. Dark hair, tanned skin, like he came from somewhere exotic.” She frowned and scratched her head. “I dunno, just a guy. Nothing special.”

I was certain magic had eaten away at her memories. She remembered only what the magic had deliberately left her with. “Do you remember anything else? What was he wearing? Did he have any assistants or mention any events?”

She shrugged. “Nothing.” Her frown cut deeper. “Wait, there is something...”

My heart seized, already anticipating where this was going. “Go on.”

“He drove one of those fancy electric cars. Not the ugly ones, but those sleek, fast-looking things.”

“Color?”

“Black. Definitely black.”

A black Tesla. Osiris. Fuck. All the fucks. Osiris was the father of Chuck’s child, and he wanted my daughter and her unborn child dead. I’d suspected it, but the car, the car was key. Osiris. The one god nobody could touch. If he found Chuck with me, he would probably compel me to kill her,

and I'd do it too. I slumped back in the chair and rubbed my forehead.

"You know who he is..." Chuck said, her voice small. "Was he someone important?"

I couldn't hide her in the underworld. He'd find her. There wasn't anywhere he wouldn't find her. Goddamn gods. He was tidying up his mess, probably before Isis found out he'd been screwing escorts and planting seeds.

"Ace?" Her small voice trembled.

"He's..." I wet my lips, met her frightened gaze, and tried again. "You don't remember anything because he's a god. If you spend any extended time in the presence of a god and they aren't reining in their magic, you'll end up godstruck. You won't remember anything afterward. It's how they get away with...everything."

She swallowed hard. "He raped me?"

Osiris wouldn't see it as rape. His perspective from up on his godly pedestal had been warped by millennia of worship. He'd probably consider it a gift that he'd chosen a lowly mortal like Chuck. "Yes."

A dangerous glimmer sparked in her eyes. "That fucker. I'll kill him."

"And I'd be right alongside you, except I've tried."

There was another way. I could bargain for her life. Trade something of worth. Osiris never could resist a good deal. Or I could trick him. Trick a god who'd lived seven millennia and seen it all? It'd be easier to bargain, but what did I have left to bargain with? He already had my soul.

"My baby is a god's baby?" Chuck pressed her hand to her belly. Her face had lost all the color she'd regained.

"It's a loose end, an unknown, and that's something all gods hate." I leaned forward, resting my chin on my steepled fingers. My gaze wandered to the protection spellwork above the bed. "There may be another way..."

## CHAPTER 16



“NAMELESS ONE...KILL THE GIRL.”

Osiris’s mansion. Their bedchamber. The vast bed. I clawed at the memory—the dream—trying to tear it into pieces, but I couldn’t stop it.

The blade cut through the young woman’s throat like her skin was made of nothing but mist. I could hear myself screaming to stop, but the words never left my silent lips.

“I want to see you eat her soul.” Isis’s whispers poured into my ear. Her hand slid up my arm and over my shoulder until her fingertips fluttered across the back of my neck. My pulse raced so fast I could feel it beating on my tongue.

“Devour her soul.” Osiris’s compulsion tore through me, driving me to my knees. I caught the dying woman’s face in my hands. Her brilliance shone, the light inside her welcoming and embracing me, like all good souls did. She looked at me, her eyes dulled by magic, and I fell into her as the two gods watched. The second I latched onto her soul, the consuming high gushed in. The deeper it flowed, the harder I pulled, so hungry for the light, until I had all of her embraced. And then, in that breathless, mindless moment, I wrapped the darkness around her and made her mine.

The liquid, intoxicating sound of Osiris’s deep, rich laugh caressed my mind.

Isis's lips burned on mine. I thrust my tongue in, starved of her. She laughed and was gone, leaving me swaying on my knees, my soul burning, and the high riding me hard.

"Mm... our monster," the goddess mused.

The room shifted, or I did, and settled again. Osiris was gone, and the dead girl's body had vanished. Isis was lounging at the table, naked but for a gossamer gown. Blood clung to the edges of the crystal glass in her hand.

"Are you ever sated?" she asked.

I ran my gaze up her smooth legs, over her thighs and the curve of her waist, to where the wispy material clung to her breasts. I imagined my mouth there, my tongue running over her hard nipples. She'd arch under me, responding to my touch. Somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind a warning fluttered but soon died. Isis came alive under me—so smooth and so forbidden. I ran my hand lower. She parted her thighs, giving me permission. I kissed her lips, tasting honey and sweetness, and pushed my fingers between her legs as I drove my tongue in against hers. Breathless, I was mad for more.

A gasp—hers or mine—and I snapped open my eyes. My apartment, draped in shadows.

I darted my gaze around and straightened in the chair. The bed sheets outlined Chuck, asleep in my bed. Everything else was right where it should be. Nothing had changed. Nothing had happened. But my heart was racing, pounding its way out of my chest and pulsing hot blood through my veins. Adrenalin buzzed like an electrical current, as did magic too. Lust had me painfully aroused.

"Just a dream." I didn't like the way my voice trembled. Didn't like it at all.

Rubbing my hands over my face, I tried to sweep the dregs of the dream away, but they clung on like the whispers of the damned. Around and around the images spun, conjuring the taste and the feel of the goddess under me.

I staggered to the kitchen, flicked on the light, and blinked back into harsh reality. Coffee. Lots of coffee. Vodka too. Both would chase the dream from my head.

I searched the cupboards and found the empty vodka bottle. “Damn you, Shu.”

A whisper of a warning tickled my neck and I spun around, lifting a hand to block—

Isis plunged a dagger into my gut and punched it right up to the hilt, delivering a shock of cold.

She caught my shoulder and pulled me into the blade, yanking me close. All I could see were the fine kohl lines outlining her brilliant eyes. Power pulled tight between us, mine and hers, but hers rose up like a mountain, filling the room, the apartment, the building, and folding in around me, making me small inside her embrace. She could crush me under the weight of it. The smallest of smiles in her eyes told me so. I was nothing to her, nothing but sand and dust.

She twisted the blade. Fire surged up my insides or ripped them out; I couldn’t think around the pain to tell the difference. Her lips were on mine, her tongue sweeping in.

Withdrawing, she whispered, “Bad monster,”

I breathed her words down, feeling them harden like ice around my heart.

“The girl is mine.”

“Don’t...” I rasped.

“Mm,” she purred, “aren’t you sweet.”

She pulled the blade out and stepped back. Weakness rushed in. If it weren’t for the counter holding me up, I would have fallen.

“Nameless One...you should know by now not to interfere.”

I held her gaze and felt her slippery soul moving inside her. “Let her go.”

I couldn’t help the compulsion; it came like a reflex, adding weight and intent to my words, but it washed right off her.

“Oh, that would be nice, wouldn’t it?” She tapped the blade against her chin, leaving a smudge of blood—my blood—on her flawless skin. “But no. She’s the last girl.”

She turned and glided barefooted into the lounge.

I thrust out my left hand. “*San!*” *Stop!*

Isis laughed. The power in that laugh whirled around me, squeezing me tight, until it was all I could do to stay standing. On and on her laughter wove.

Chuck. I had to get to Chuck, whatever it took. Blood spilled between my fingers, slick and slippery. I fell forward, against the doorframe, smearing bloody handprints on the wall.

“Isis, please.”

“Oh beg, please do. It’s been so long.” All around her the air glittered as if she were a being of light, of good. It was a trap, that light.

“Ace?” Chuck mumbled in a sleep-addled voice.

The ice around my heart shattered. Isis snapped her head around and fixed her sights on the girl sitting up in my bed.

“Run!”

I lunged forward, throwing everything I had into getting between Isis and my daughter. Isis merely swept her hand to the side, and invisible hooks punched through my chest, snapping me sideways. A moment of weightlessness took hold and then glass shattered around me. New York’s din blared too loudly in my ears. A shock of cold hit me, and then my back slammed into the scaffolding guardrail. Without that, I’d have fallen fifteen floors.

“Ace!” Chuck yelled.

She didn’t stand a chance.

“Wait. Isis. Stop.” I dragged strength from somewhere inside and struggled to my feet. “Anything. I’ll do anything. Don’t hurt her.”

Half stumbling, half falling, I scrambled back through the broken window

and dropped to my feet. *Capable of more than darkness.* I could do this. I would do this—to save the girl.

“Ask anything of me.”

Isis cocked her head. Her eternal eyes shone like jewels. “I did.”

This wasn’t about me turning her down. It couldn’t be. “Something... there must be something. You wanna fuck? Fine, we’ll do it now. Keep me for however long you want. I don’t care.” I held out my blood-covered hand. “Please. Just let her go.”

Isis tapped the dagger against her thigh, leaving spots of red on her flowing gown. “Such a tempting offer, but really, this isn’t about you. It’s none of your concern, Nameless One. I kill the girl. All ends well. It’s very simple. Look away if her death pains you so.”

She took a step toward the bed, and Chuck scurried away, clutching the sheets against her like they might offer some protection. Her young, wide eyes swam with tears. She was brave, she was strong, but against Isis, that strength crumbled.

“Why? She’s just a scared girl.”

“The girl carries my husband’s son,” Isis snapped. “She must die.”

“C’mon! This is Osiris. He fucks anything with a heartbeat.”

“He is not supposed to impregnate them!”

“So the women had to die because Osiris lost his load?!”

Isis pointed the dagger tip at me and lined up her sights down the blade. “You do not stand in judgment over us!”

*Yes, focus on me. Get mad at me.* I stepped back, nudging up against my desk. City sounds buzzed behind me, and the cold air chilled me to the bone, or perhaps that was the blood loss hollowing the life out of my body. “Isis, you are the Queen of all Things. This girl is nothing.”

“I don’t *want* to kill her,” the goddess waved a hand, shoos my argument away. “I have to. It is written.”

“What is?”

“Thoth told me the son will sunder the king, my beloved. I do this for love, Nameless One. I wouldn’t expect a monster like you to understand.”

By the gods, a prophecy? Of course it was a prophecy. Nothing else would move Isis to act like this. “You don’t need to believe the nonsense written by zealots. Thoth could be screwing with you—”

“Thoth doesn’t lie.”

That we were aware of. “My queen, you’re more powerful than some thousand-year-old prophecy. The mutterings of mad priests are beneath you.”

My heart pounded, squeezing my every breath. Blood was running through my fingers and down my waist, cool and wet—as cold as the chill spreading through my body. My life, draining away like the seconds I had left.

Isis’s smile crawled across her lips. “Why take the risk?”

She moved in a blur of magic and mist.

I wrenched Alysclair free from its hiding place, raised the sword, and launched forward.

Isis sank her fingers into Chuck’s hair, pulling her upright. Chuck screamed. Her wide eyes sought me out, pleading with me to keep her safe. I’d told her I would, but she would never be safe from the gods.

Isis pressed her blade against my daughter’s pale throat. A bright droplet of blood welled. But I was there, Alysclair slicing through the air, so close. In a blink, it would be done. The sword sang. The blade flared, hungry for the god’s neck and Isis’s soul—

“Stop!” Osiris’s command slammed into my body, yanking me up short. I dropped, but his wife didn’t hesitate. She pulled the dagger across my daughter’s throat, parting flesh, spilling blood.

The blade cut as cleanly as it had the last time I’d used it against another innocent’s throat not so long ago. So quietly, it opened Chuck’s throat, pouring forth streams of dark blood down her chest and silencing her scream.

I strained against Osiris’s hold, the sword still buzzing, the power still

lusting for Isis's death. Harder and harder I pushed, until my thoughts swam in the madness and my body turned to fire, but the compulsion held. With every second, every silent, reaching gasp, my daughter's chance of living her life died right before my eyes.

## CHAPTER 17



SOMEONE WAS SCREAMING—A woman. The shriek sliced through the pain, piercing my soul. The power within broiled, and from it, a curse spilled from my lips. I'd curse them both and make them burn. With all the power of the underworld, with everything I controlled, I'd bury their souls.

*“Bae sra sudk, omd orr sros rok reqad. Bae sra kuir uk sruka I roqa cumkikad. Bae sra resrs, sra dord, Ikek, I cumdakm—”*

*“Seramca!”* Silence, Osiris boomed.

His glare pierced me as sharply as Isis's blade. The compulsion, and his power, thrust deep. I slumped over my knees. Silenced, perhaps until I died, which, given the amount of blood I'd lost, could be very soon. The terrible thudding sounded like a death knell and pounded throughout my body. With every beat, the numbness crept deeper into my bones.

“Husband!” Isis gushed. “It is done. You are safe.”

Osiris's power shifted around him, flexing, pushing, and settling, but I wouldn't look. I couldn't.

“What is this?” he asked, mildly intrigued.

“She was the last girl. My gift to you, my beloved. Thoth warned me you'd been sowing seeds in fertile ground. From one such seed a boy would spring who would have ended your reign. Thoth never lies. I know you are busy with politics—with those stuffy men and their silly world—so I acted

on your behalf. It is done.”

I heard a sob and lifted my head. What was left of my heart broke as I watched Bast frantically trying to cover the gaping wound in our daughter’s throat. It occurred to me, somewhere distantly, where my thoughts had gathered to be alone, that Bast had gone to Osiris. She’d told the god everything, hoping to stop him, but Osiris hadn’t done this. We’d been wrong.

“Isis, my light...” Osiris crooned. “My love. Once again, you save me. Every day you save me.”

“Wa roqa orvoaek baam susasar. Wa verr orvoaek ba susasar.” she replied. *We have always been together. We will always be together.*

Bast roared. The sound shuddered through the floor and beat the air. Something wild, ageless, and primal had joined us in the room. She whirled on the couple, her fingers stretching into claws.

Isis flicked a hand. From the queen’s fingertips a blast struck Bast mid-leap, tossing her against the wall.

Isis laughed. “Bad kitty.”

I heard Osiris rain apologies down on Isis and the two gods declare their love like it was a glorious thing and not the twisted obsession that had killed a dozen innocent women. I might have fought, might have argued, but crippled with pain, chilled and suddenly so empty, I was done. I hit the floor, falling onto my side, and rolled my gaze toward the protection spellwork on the ceiling. I traced the design the way I always had. I *was* tired. It was time.

“As entertaining as your death would be, I’m not finished with you.” Osiris’s warm hand settled on my abdomen. The other hand he placed over my eyes. Flesh spasmed, squeezing pain out of every cell. I’d have screamed if I’d still had my voice. He spoke old words, ancient words, words I didn’t understand, and then, too quickly or not soon enough, he let go.

The god towered over me. His eyes narrowed and a displeased frown marred his timeless face. He looked at me as though puzzled, or perhaps

surprised.

I blinked, and he was gone—Isis too. The combined weight of their presence bled away until all I could hear and feel was the cool wind, which brought with it New York’s cacophony.

Bast’s hands fluttered around my chest and came away glistening with blood. “Ace...oh, by Sekhmet. What were you thinking?” Her hands clasped my face, and she searched my eyes. A tear fell from her eye and tapped me on the cheek. “You stupid fool.”

“Chuck...” I croaked. At least I had my voice back.

Bast shook her head and more tears fell. “I was too late. I’m sorry. I thought... I thought Osiris would stop if I could bargain with him. I didn’t know it was Isis. *He* didn’t know. I tracked her scent here, to you...she could have killed you.”

I reached for Bast’s face and brushed a thumb against her cheek, mixing my blood with her tears. “Chuck...”

Her hand caught mine. She clutched it close against her chest. “She’s gone. I’m sorry, so sorry. I wish I’d never told you.”

She buried her head in my shoulder, sobs racking her body.

Turning my head toward the bed, I fixed my sharpening gaze on the pair of gold-flecked eyes peering out at me from under the bed.

“Chuck...” I croaked. “Come out. It’s safe.”

Chuck slithered forward on her belly, crawling out from under the bed. She still wore my shirt, which was now covered in a few years’ worth of dust. She coughed.

Bast lifted her head. She blinked at the girl, who was very much alive. Her face went from despair to rage in a split second, and the next thing I felt was a slap burning my cheek.

Bast scabbled off me, onto her feet, and backed up. “What? How—I...?”

Chuck shrugged in that noncommittal way of hers. “Ace said it would work.”

I'd admit that smiling probably made matters worse.

Bast's green eyes flared all cat like. "You bastard!"

She moved in for what would have been a decent kick had I not shifted sideways. Osiris's healing had chased away death, but I still had some healing to do. Healing that a kick to the gut wouldn't help.

"Hey! The dead girl was fake, but nearly dying wasn't!"

"I hate you!" Bast snarled, rumbling the walls again.

"I get that...a lot." Clearly nobody was going to help me up, so I hooked my fingers onto the bed and dragged myself onto my knees. The body was still there, in all its gory detail.

"I don't..." Bast mumbled. "I can't...she was dead. She's dead. She's there. How?"

I sat my ass on the bed and focused on breathing. That had been close—too close. I'd been ready and willing too. I'd have died to keep Chuck safe, a girl who deserved to live more than I did.

"Shukra switched my protection spellwork for an illusionary spell," I explained. "The body isn't real. None of it is real."

Bast marched to my bed and looked at me. "You brilliant bastard." She rounded the bed and touched the illusion of the dead body. "It feels real. I can smell the blood."

"It's a good spell." It had to be to fool Isis, although it had been designed to fool Osiris. "I can't dispel it while I'm drained. Would you do the honors?"

Bast hesitated, sweeping her eyes over the carnage, and then undid the spell with a few ancient words. The body and the blood shimmered and dissolved, leaving no trace. Above, the spellwork glowed and burned itself out.

Bast swore some more, throwing in some colorful, ancient curses for my benefit.

I looked at Chuck. She'd been hiding under the bed the whole time,

listening to it all and seeing Isis toss me through a window. I'd told her to stay hidden—no matter what. It had been important that the gods sensed her inside the room. She'd hidden well.

She caught me watching her and smiled. "Is your life always this interesting?"

"Only on Tuesdays. What day is it?"

She laughed, and Bast cursed my name until she ran out of breath.

We'd survived the wrath of the gods, but it wouldn't last. Chuck had to run, far and fast, and she might never be able to stop. If either of them discovered she was alive, there wasn't anywhere she could hide.

I fell back on the bed and closed my eyes, exhausted, wrung out, and running on empty. "Wake me up for the next disaster."

## CHAPTER 18



CHUCK WAS WRAPPED up in a fur coat I'd stolen from Shu's office. Shu wouldn't miss it. She had hundreds. Color touched Chuck's cheeks where the cold wind bit, but her smile was warm.

She threw her arms around Bast, and they exchanged a few words. I hung back and settled for watching people file into waiting buses. They all had places to be, and Chuck would find hers.

Bast had given Chuck enough cash to get her started somewhere far, far away from New York. She was a good kid. She'd survived a brush with the gods. Few lived to tell those tales. I had faith she'd do just fine.

"Hey." She stood in front of me, her pale little hands stuffed in her coat pockets. "Thank you."

I smiled back. "Not necessary."

She pulled her hand from her pocket and held it out. I closed mine around hers, yanked her into my arms, and hugged her. Bast saw and looked away, but not before I caught her smiling.

"You're gonna do just fine," I said into Chuck's hair, squeezing her a little too tightly, absorbing what I could of the moment before it passed. If everything went as planned, I'd never see her again. That was how it had to be, but it hurt in ways I couldn't describe and didn't want to think about.

"Sure I am." She pulled back and adjusted her backpack. "I wish I could

stay. There's so much I want to know."

"Bast will follow once she's certain it's safe. There's a lot you *need* to know."

She hesitated, looked at Bast, and then back at me. "We're the same."

I'd been afraid she'd ask, but there wasn't a question there. She knew the answer. What I wanted to tell her, the things she needed to know about who and what she was—that was a conversation for another time and place.

"Try and control it. Don't let it control you." It was the best piece of advice I had, and advice I'd failed at.

She grinned and shot a finger-gun at me. "Stay awesome."

"Is there any other way?"

Bast and I watched her climb onto the bus and take a seat near the back. She wiped the condensation off her window and waved at us as the bus pulled out of the depot. Bast waved back while I did my best to smile as doubts poured in. She'd be fine, I knew that, but I would have liked to have time to get to know her and help her.

"She'll be all right," Bast said, sounding very much like the voice in my head.

"Yeah, she will."

"Are we doing the right thing?"

"Hell if I know." Judging by Bast's frown, that had been the wrong thing to say. "C'mon."

We started walking back toward the parking lot. Bast's gaze was as far away as my thoughts.

"If she'd stayed," I said, jogging down a few steps to where my bike was parked, "Isis would have found her. If her child is prophesied, she's a weapon, one any god will try to wield. It's better she stays away from us."

Bast sighed, but then she nodded and mustered up a smile. "I wonder if maybe I'd gone to Osiris earlier, he might have stopped Isis."

Stop Isis? I wasn't sure anyone could stop her, even Osiris. "Or he would

have helped her.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No.”

And that was playing on my mind. It had only been a day, but the god wouldn't forgive me for raising Alysclair against his wife and then attempting to lay a curse on them both. He'd make me pay for that. But I'd had to make the act look good enough to convince them the girl's death mattered, and to end it. Against the odds, it had worked. They didn't know she was alive, and they didn't know Chuck was my daughter. I planned to keep it that way indefinitely.

“I need you to do something for me.” I leaned against my bike and fixed all of my attention on Bast.

She eyed me suspiciously.

Outside of Cujo and Shu, nobody knew what I was about to tell her. She'd hate that I'd lied, but lying was what I was good at. It wouldn't surprise her.

“Osiris did more than curse me to walk this realm and tie Shu to me. The curse...he can compel me to do anything he wants.”

She tensed and tried to hide the shock from her face, but I saw the twitch in her lips as the snarl tried to break through.

“I have no resistance against him.”

She blinked and her chest rose and fell quicker than before.

“Any word, any deed he orders me to do, I will.”

“Since when?” Her two words were both sharp with anger.

I wanted to look away, to bow my head and fix my eyes on the floor, but I didn't. “It's always been that way. I don't like to broadcast it, for obvious reasons.”

“There's a way out, surely?”

“No, I've looked. I can't get around it. Shu is the best sorceress there is and she can't unravel it. The things he's had me do... Bast, I...”

“You don’t need to explain.”

She held herself still as if she were tempering her rage. Her throat moved as she swallowed. She looked at me, and I wasn’t sure I could stand to see the sadness softening her eyes. I didn’t want her pity. It was why I’d never told her.

“I need you to wipe Chuck from my memories.” There, I’d said it.

She frowned, and I knew she’d say no.

“If you won’t, I’ll get Shu to do it, but there’s no knowing what she’ll wipe from my head. I trust you to do it right.”

“There must be another way?”

“There isn’t. If Osiris asks me anything about that girl, I’ll tell him. I’ve done worse. Much worse.”

She closed her eyes. A muscle ticked in her cheek. “If I do this, you’ll forget I was here.”

“I know.” *Was that so bad?* I wondered.

“I can’t. I...” She pinched her bottom lip between her teeth. “It’s wrong.”

“And how wrong do you think it’ll feel when Osiris learns Chuck is not only alive, but that she’s our daughter and her *prophesied son* is still out there? You have to do this, for her. You’ve kept her safe for twenty years. This is just another part of that.”

“You won’t know you have a daughter...”

“I didn’t know before, and it didn’t kill me.” But it hurt now, like a vise had hold of my heart and was slowly crushing it. To lose her again after only just finding her...it wasn’t right, and it wasn’t fair. I’d be alone again. But life was like that, and I couldn’t say I didn’t deserve it. “You have to do this.”

“Yes.” The sadness was back, pulling her lips down at the corners. “I’m sorry.”

I tried to smile but didn’t quite manage it. “We do it tonight. Before then, take me out to dinner at that fancy restaurant you took Chuck.”

*One last night.* That vise around my heart squeezed tighter.

Her smile, small and fragile, was for my benefit. “I’d like that.”

## CHAPTER 19



I WORE Osiris's borrowed suit. It was the only suit in a closet consisting of dark clothing only suitable for walking across rooftops at night. I'd considered shredding it and lighting it on fire, but Osiris wouldn't give a shit and I'd be down a perfectly good suit.

Bast had toned down her scary-goth look and wore a full-length, plum-colored gown. I'd told her she looked good enough to eat and then winced and tried to backpedal with disastrous results. She'd found my attempts hilarious.

We ate expensive food and talked about my business and Shu's early antics as a human-bound demon—anything but the gods. We even talked about what might have been, with Chuck, with a life away from the pantheon. It was fantasy, of course, but seeing as tomorrow I wouldn't recall any of the conversation, it couldn't hurt.

I should have known the gods wouldn't let me have one night of peace.

I didn't feel him approach. He had deliberately folded his power around him, tucking it in tight, allowing him to slip unnoticed through the real world until he'd eased into the empty space beside Bast.

"Do not move," Osiris said to me, freezing me in my seat.

Bast snatched up a table knife, but Osiris snagged her wrist and wrenched it, cracking bones. Bast let out a sharp cry and dropped the knife. And all I

could do was sit and watch. Nobody around us batted an eyelid. Osiris must have cast a minor spell to shield us.

Osiris—the bastard—smiled, clearly delighted. “Isn’t this pleasant.”

“Why are you here?” Bast snarled, cradling her wrist. She’d be thinking of all the ways she could repay him for the broken bones.

“Don’t,” I warned her, already sounding as though I’d given up. Whatever was about to happen, the best thing we could do was play along and weather through it, and if Osiris was in a forgiving mood, it would end, eventually.

Osiris had kept his right hand hidden out of sight under the table, thinking he could hide what he’d brought along, but I could sense Alysclair’s background hum. There was no good reason for him to go to the trouble of collecting Alysclair from my apartment and bring it here.

“You’ve had your fun, Osiris,” Bast growled.

“No, what I had was a minor god tell me my wife was murdering women, and the Nameless One—of all the creatures—raise his sword against my beloved.” His glare cut to me. “You attempted to kill Isis. That is treason.”

“I…”

“Don’t lie to me.”

I shut my mouth.

“Isis has many colorful ways in which she’d like to punish you, but the task is mine.”

I ground my teeth together. Clearly he’d brought the sword to use against me. There was a sort of ironic justice in that, which was typical of Osiris. He wouldn’t kill me though. I wasn’t that lucky.

He returned his attention to Bast. “Has he told you of his affliction?”

She glared at him but wisely stayed quiet.

“He has? Good. So you know the Nameless One is under my control. I wondered, at first”—he reached for Bast’s half-finished glass of wine, leaned back, and took a sip—“what it might be like to have Ammit’s student. Let’s

be honest, shall we? He's not known for following orders. He was the model godling...until his little addiction was discovered. So shocking it was that the underworld kicked him out." Osiris chuckled. "They don't shock easily in the underworld."

Oh yes, he liked the sound of his own laughter and voice.

"A stallion, this one. One made of scorching desert sand, like the *šarq*—a creature of myth that could not be caught or tempered. He was quite the presence in the Hall, a fierce beast to be sure, but one who could—and should—be controlled." He paused, probably sensing how I was straining against his mental shackles.

I tried to lift my hand off the tabletop, pushing every measure of strength I had into that one tiny goal. Just a twitch, that was all I wanted—something to tell me I could work around his compulsion. My hand didn't move.

"Make no mistake, Bastet. The Nameless One wasn't given a name for a reason. The most dangerous of our kind inhabit my domain, and to give one such as him a title would be...well, he'd likely unseat the Great Devourer—"

"Ammit is dead," I sneered. "Killed by the jackals as your *beloved wife* commanded."

Osiris blinked, and his smile tightened. "Ah, yes. Unfortunate. Still, slumber or death? It's all the same."

It wasn't, and to hear the god of rebirth speak so flippantly of life and death sickened me. "If you were ruling in the underworld, you could have stopped it, but instead you were here, playing the mayor, and your wife wielded your weapons. Isis makes a fool of you."

He worked his jaw and dropped his gaze. I fully expected him to silence me once again. When he looked up, he still wore the perfect act of an indifferent god, but his smile had lost its luster. "Do you have proof?"

"I witnessed the jackals tear Ammit apart."

"Did you see Isis command the jackals to kill your mother? The truth now. No lies."

I knew where this was going and growled, “No.”

“Did anyone else besides you witness Ammit’s death?”

“No.”

His smile was back in true form. “The testament of the Nameless One, the infamous liar, is no testimony at all.” Osiris sighed and placed the wine glass down on the table. “Her sudden demise certainly explains why you’re wanted for your mother’s murder.”

My heart skipped a beat and my mouth went dry. “I didn’t—”

“Where is her soul? In the great river, I presume?”

Fear lashed through me. I wasn’t sure where Ammit’s soul was. I hadn’t stopped to properly weigh and judge all the souls I’d consumed in her chambers. Her soul could have found its way to the river, but there was an equal chance I’d devoured it.

Who was I kidding? I’d taken it along with every other living thing in her chamber. I’d taken it all.

Bast was looking at me with suspicion glittering in her eyes.

“I didn’t kill Ammit,” I said, pushing the words between my teeth.

“She gave you to me,” Osiris countered. “A transaction you’ve searched for a way to be free of for centuries. I’d consider that quite the motive.”

My thoughts raced in circles. Anubis believed I’d killed my mother? The implications were huge. I had to speak with him, but would he listen? As Osiris had pointed out, I wasn’t exactly the underworld’s poster boy for obedience.

“It was Isis. She had control over your jackals. She sent them after Bast’s women. Your wife did this, Osiris. You know it.”

He didn’t deny it. He probably knew exactly what had happened and maybe had even shared a glass of an innocent’s blood while Isis regaled him with all the details. But like the bastard he was, he’d prefer to see me suffer than let his wife stand accused before Anubis.

“Why would she kill your mother?” Osiris asked.

“Probably because...” I bit off my sentence, finishing it in my head instead:... *your wife had her hand on my cock and I turned her down.*

Killing Ammit seemed extreme, even for Isis, but she was as screwed up as a bag of snakes and gods with damaged egos did crazy things, like stop the Nile from flooding, destroying a civilization in the process, or kill other gods and point the finger at me. If I told Osiris why, he’d probably stab me with Alysdaire. I wanted to get through this conversation with all my body parts intact.

“Don’t keep it to yourself, now,” Osiris pushed.

“Ask your wife.”

Bast’s suspicion grew, shock and betrayal on her face. I wanted to tell her the truth, and I would, later. I had to withstand the guilt she was piling on. I chewed on my lip and glared at my hand, attempting to will it into motion. Just a tiny flicker—a little hope that his compulsion had weakened. Anything.

“I could compel you to answer.”

“Yes, you could.” I gave up and glowered at the god. “You won’t like my reply.”

Rubbing his fingers together, he considered it. Maybe he already suspected the answer.

“Was it your idea?” I asked. “To allow my safe passage home to see Ammit? Or did Isis whisper it in your ear?”

He didn’t reply.

Isis had set me up.

“What’s done is done,” Bast said, the voice of reason. “Osiris, if we have offended you, I am truly sorry. Had Isis come to me, perhaps we could have stopped this bloodshed, but there is no use debating what might have been. What can I do to make this right?”

He turned his most charming smile on Bastet. “You, my dear Bastet, can do nothing. He, on the other hand, must pay a debt. Treason is a damning offense, is it not, Nameless One?”

Technically, no, but he didn't want to hear how a soul's weight was measured on good and bad deeds, not on whether the person happened to piss off the God of the Underworld. I'd consider that a damn good deed.

"Just get it over with," I growled.

Whatever degrading act he'd force me to do, I'd forget it anyway. Bast would take the memory away and I'd be blissfully unaware this conversation had ever happened or that the punishment had taken place—unless I was dead. But there wasn't any risk of that. He'd brought me back from death a day ago. Whatever he wanted from me, it wouldn't be fatal. I'd survive. Always had and always would. Like he'd said, he wasn't finished with me.

He heaved Alysclair onto the table, rattling the plates and toppling Bast's wine glass. The wine splashed far and dribbled off the edge of the table. I looked around to see if we'd caused a stir, but people continued chatting and eating their overpriced food.

"They can't see us," Osiris explained, and then added, "Pick up the sword."

My hand moved like it had a mind of its own. I had to stand to get a good grip, and my fingers curled around the handle. The familiar warmth spread over my hand and up my arm. I'd had the sword for so long that she was practically an extension of me—of my will—and an escape.

Osiris looked up at me from his relaxed position. "I want you to know, this was the lesser punishment."

*Here it comes.* I swallowed, sword in hand. "The bitch pulls your strings even now?"

Osiris's dark eyes flared gold. "Kill Bastet."

I knew I couldn't stop it. I knew, after centuries, that nothing could weaken Osiris's hold on me. I knew, as I thrust the sword through my ex-wife's chest, that it wasn't me doing this, but knowing didn't change the reality that those were my hands on the sword and it didn't change the feel of how the blade shuddered when it sank between her ribs, into her heart.

She gripped the blade, and I remembered how she'd reached across this same table not so long ago and told me I'd be okay. She'd told me I was capable of more than darkness. Even now, her eyes said sorry, like she knew what this would do to my soul. Something inside me broke and crumbled away. Alysclair sang, drinking down the lightest soul I'd ever known, and I hated the sword, hated what it could do, and hated that Bast had to suffer for all eternity because I'd screwed up.

I held her gaze as the light inside her faded and her eyes dulled. I wouldn't look away. Not this time. I owed her that much.

Osiris picked up my glass and drank down the wine. "With that done, I have politics to juggle." He stood and flashed me a smile. "Enjoy the rest of your meal."

*"Daquir,"* I whispered.

Ashes and ambers ate away at Bast's body until there was nothing left of her. I sat down and enjoyed what remained of my cold meal.

## CHAPTER 20



SHUKRA FOUND me sitting on my office floor, leaning back against the wall, surrounded by scattered papers and splintered remains of my desk and all its contents. I'd taken Alysdaire to everything before thrusting the sword into the wall, where it had stubbornly stuck.

Magic whipped around me, dark and deadly. I didn't hide it. Didn't care.

It hurt, everywhere and nowhere. I wanted to tear out my heart and make the horrible, consuming emptiness go away or fill it with drink, or death, or something—anything. *Just make it stop.* I'd tried drowning the ache in vodka. Broken bits of the vodka bottle glistened on the floor around me.

*Godkiller.*

I pressed the back of my hand to my mouth, and curled my hand into a fist. Grief swelled inside like an incoming tide. I couldn't escape it. Through every barrier I erected, and every time I tried to sidestep it, the weight plowed inside, filling me up and hollowing me out all at once.

Shu was watching me, considering her words. I hadn't looked up, but I knew she was there, careful to skirt the fringes of my power.

"What do you need?" she asked after minutes or hours.

It was a good question. I needed the curse gone. I needed to kill Osiris and make Isis watch. I needed to be better—to be someone who saved people and didn't kill them. I needed to be the man Bast had believed—had *hoped* I

could be.

“I need you to wipe my memories.”

Shu stalled again, treading on ice. “Which ones?”

Through the fog and the pain, I lifted my head and found Shu’s face set in a grim mask. “Anything relating to Chuck and...and Bast. She didn’t walk into my office. She didn’t hire me. She was never here.”

She blinked slowly and evaluated the destruction I’d wrought. “That will be difficult.”

“Not for you,” I drawled.

“Can I ask what happened?”

“No.” I yanked off my wedding band, pulled my knees up to my chest, and rested my arms there. Light flowed over the ring, turning it to liquid gold in my hand. “Take this. Put it somewhere safe. Somewhere I won’t find it. But...” My throat tried to close off the next words, so I cleared it. “But don’t throw it away.”

She didn’t move. Her eyes darted to the sword sticking out of the wall and back to me, sitting on the floor. Her eyes, her stance, it all said no, but fear stopped her from denying me. It said a lot when the most proficient sorceress the underworld had ever produced was afraid of me.

With a reluctant sigh, she ventured closer. “I’m going to regret this.”

I wouldn’t. I couldn’t regret what I didn’t remember.



THE SNOW WAS MELTING FAST, trickling into gutters and gurgling down the drains, as I pushed through the stained-glass door into the store Curiosities. The heat hit me first, like it always did when I stepped off New York’s winter streets into Maf’s store. Evocative smells of cinnamon and thyme tickled my memory. Old scents from an old world.

An electronic bell buzzed, its modern sound at odds with the rows of

shelves stacked to the ceiling with artifacts, tourist junk, and witchcraft paraphernalia. Glass skulls sat next to dozens of papyri, their potency hidden among the trinkets.

The ancient and infallible Mafdet—Slayer of Serpents—was tucked behind the counter. Her ample bosom rested on the countertop, threatening to spill out of her flower-print top. She threaded a string of colorful beads through her fingers, drawing my eye to the valley between her generous assets. It had once been widely known that no god or beast could outrun her. Her fortunes had changed since then, but she'd adapted—adapt or slumber. There was no other way for the ancient ones.

“Back so soon, Ace?” she asked. Her voice was cracked with age, or so it would seem to those who believed she was the kind, but slightly unhinged old lady who ran a store full of superstitious nonsense. “Business or pleasure?”

“Business.”

“Ah.” She picked up a pair of wire-framed glasses and planted them on her nose. “You get more handsome every time I see you. Almost as dashing as the Lord of Silence.”

My lips twitched. The Lord of Silence was yet another name for Osiris—Lord of Death didn't have the same poetic ring to it. “Flattery might work for Shukra, but not for me, Maf.”

She *tsked*. “So serious for one so young.”

I stopped at the counter. We weren't alone in the store—a tourist couple was browsing the aisle—so I couldn't very well press Alysclair against Maf's neck and terrify the answers out of her, but that might change the moment those window shoppers left. Maf knew it too, hence the beads of sweat glistening on her brow.

“The kid I spoke to in here a few weeks ago, I warned him off, remember?”

She pursed her lips. “Something happen to him?”

“Now why would you ask that? Unless you sold him those canopic jars after I advised you to send them back to wherever you got them from.”

“We all gotta eat.” She winced at that and blinked quickly, remembering to whom she was talking. “It’s not my fault the people with money are idiots. What did he do?”

“Summoned two demons.”

She spluttered. “Not with those jars he didn’t. They were inactive. Made sure of it myself. No magic in them.”

“Are you sure about that?” I leaned against the counter. Her red-rimmed, watery blue eyes flicked to where Alysclair was peeking over my shoulder.

“I was assured.”

“So you didn’t check yourself?”

“Look at this place. It’s full of hungry, needful little trinkets. They all chitter and tease. No, I didn’t check myself. I just put them on the shelves, like everything in here.” She puffed and huffed, apparently offended.

“Did you sell him anything else? Anything like a potent summoning spell?”

“N-no,” she stammered. “No, I wouldn’t. Never. Ace, we have an agreement. I help you, and you don’t shut me down. I wouldn’t risk that by touching anything with power. I wouldn’t.”

The browsing couple brushed by me, eyeing Alysclair.

“Cosplay,” I muttered.

They smiled, chuckled nervously, and moved on to admire a simplistic painting of Isis’s profile.

Maf wiped a hand across her forehead. Dark patches had spread under her arms and the fingers caressing her beads trembled. “I swear by Isis—”

“Swear by someone worth something.”

She recoiled as though me bad-mouthing Isis would somehow cause my curse to rub off on her. I grinned back at her.

“I swear it. By Amun-Ra, I swear it.”

*Damn.* I was hoping she'd sold the kid the papyrus spell so I could follow a paper trail to the source. My only lead had just gone cold.

"I believe you." Nobody swore on Amun-Ra's name and lied.

Her shoulders drooped, her relief almost tangible.

"But if anyone tries to sell you anything potent, I want to know about it—immediately. Not in a few days. You pick up your phone and you call me there and then."

She nodded frantically. "Of course."

"Good. Now tell me what this is?" I planted Ammit's box on the countertop and watched Maf's eyes widen and her plump lips form an *O*.

"May I?" she asked, reaching for it.

I gestured for her to go right ahead and watched her plant the box in her palm like it was made of glass.

"My, my. Such power."

I didn't reply and certainly didn't tell her I couldn't feel any power coming from that box. Someone had warded it against me personally, and that was information enough.

"Can you open it?"

She gave it a twist, but the lid didn't budge. "There may be a way, but it's sealed by expert hands. It will take time. Why don't you ask Shukra?"

"No, this is..." I wasn't sure why I didn't want Shu to know about the box. It seemed important that nobody know, and Maf was almost nobody. She could keep secrets. "This is private."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Tell me about Shukra's most recent visit."

Maf tucked the box away behind the counter and relayed Shu's visit to me, like she did every month. Shu didn't know Maf reported to me, and Shu also didn't know I was keeping a close eye on her magical practices. She thought she was slipping her on-the-side spells by me. So far, she'd sold a few spells here and there for a few hundred bucks. Love potions, prosperity

spells, and the occasional minor curse—little things. But she'd get greedy. Greed was a sin we both shared in.

When Maf finished, she added, "She bought those ingredients in the last few days."

The ingredients, including a goat's heart, were potentially dangerous in Shu's hands, but a mundane household ornament could also be turned into a wicked charm in her hands. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling I was missing something, something vital. It would come to me.

"Looks like she's preparing a blocking spell," Maf supplied carefully, watching my reaction.

"Yes, it does." A blocking spell boxed up thoughts, dreams, and memories and tucked them far away inside the subject's mind. It was a difficult spell to master. I couldn't cast it, but Shu could. "Thank you, Maf."

When I reached the door, she called out, "Rumor has it there's a price on your head."

I'd heard the same rumor.

*Godkiller*, those same whispers said.

Anubis believed I'd killed Amy. He wouldn't come after me himself, but he'd send others until someone or something caught me with my back turned.

"There always is, Maf." I shoved through the door into the shock of winter air and said again, to myself, "There always is."



SHU WAS PARTICIPATING in a loud and colorful conversation on the phone in her office when I returned. Someone was getting an earful, and for once, it wasn't me. Whoever it was should be grateful. Shu's silence was far more dangerous.

I opened my office door and froze.

There, sitting on my desk like it had every right to park its rump on my

day planner, was an all-black house cat. Not an alley cat. This one was well fed and groomed.

The tip of its tail twitched across its front paws.

“Shukra?” I called out, keeping my gaze leveled on the cat. “Shu!”

“What?” she snapped back.

“There’s a cat on my desk.”

“I didn’t put it there.”

“A *real* cat.” The cat blinked its green eyes at me.

“What do you want me to do, call animal control? The NSA?” She slammed her door closed.

“I hate cats,” I grumbled at the feline and stalked closer. It didn’t have a collar, but someone somewhere was missing a pet. Its tail twitched again, and it looked back at me, daring me to shoo it off my desk. The second I did, it would probably turn into a spitting ball of claws and fangs.

“Cat, that’s my desk.”

It lifted a paw and started grating its pink tongue across its pad.

“Leave, cat, or I’ll—” I reached for Alysclair. The cat’s eyes flickered with knowledge, like the little feline was urging me to brandish the blade.

With a small laugh, I dropped my hand. “Fine. I’m going out. You better not be here when I get back.”

But it was there when I got back, curled asleep in my chair. I would normally kick it out, but as I went to scoop up the creature, I hesitated. It wasn’t so bad. Asleep, it was harmless.

“Yah know, the death sentence for killing cats was abolished long ago. I can make it so you meet your little four-legged friends in the afterlife sooner rather than later.”

It didn’t stir. Clearly this cat didn’t have a shred of self-preservation.

I shoved the sleeping cat and chair aside and parked the guest chair behind my desk. The cat didn’t wake, and now it owned my chair.

“I hope you like vodka,” I told it while checking my planner.

Shu had stuck a note on today's date: *Mr. Cooper called. There's a talking alligator eating his thousand-dollar koi. Be there – 2:00 p.m.*

A job—exactly what I needed. “No rest for the wicked.”

~FIN~

## WANT MORE FROM THE SOUL EATER?

I hope you enjoyed *Hidden Blade*. The sequel, *Witches' Bane* is now on sale at Pippa's website ([click here](#)). If you want to know about upcoming deals and new releases, follow Pippa on Facebook, Twitter, my Website, or sign up for my newsletter. Thank you and happy reading!

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# THE LAST NECROMANCER



## MINISTRY OF CURIOSITIES, BOOK #1

By C.J. Archer

For five years, Charlotte (Charlie) Holloway has lived as a boy in the slums. But when one theft too many gets her arrested, her only means of escape lies with a dead man. Charlie hasn't raised a spirit since she first discovered she could do so five years ago. That time, her father banished her. This time, she brings even more trouble upon herself.

People are now hunting Charlie all over London, but only one man succeeds in capturing her.

Lincoln Fitzroy is the mysterious head of a secret organization on the trail of a madman who needs a necromancer to control his newly "made" creatures. There was only one known necromancer in the world - Charlotte - but now there appears to be two. Lincoln captures the willful Charlie in the hopes the boy will lead him to Charlotte. But what happens when he discovers the boy is in fact the young woman he's been searching for all along? And will she agree to work for the man who held her against her will, and for an organization she doesn't trust?

Because Lincoln and his ministry might be just as dangerous as the

madman they're hunting.

## CHAPTER 1



LONDON, SUMMER 1889

THE OTHER PRISONERS eyed me as if I were a piece of tender meat. I was someone new to distract them from their boredom, and small enough that I couldn't stop one—let alone four—from doing what they wanted. It was only a matter of who would be the first to *enjoy* me.

"He's mine." The prisoner's tongue darted out through his tangled beard and licked what I supposed were lips, hidden beneath all that wiry black hair. "Come here, boy."

I shuffled away from him but instead of the brick wall of the cell, I smacked into a soft body. "Looks like he wants *me*, Dobby. Don't ye, lad?" Large hands clamped around my arms, and thick fingers dug into my flesh through my jacket and shirt. The man spun me round and I gaped up at the brute grinning toothlessly at me. My heart rose and dove, rose and dove, and cold sweat trickled down my spine. He was massive. He wore no jacket or waistcoat, only a shirt stained with blood, sweat and grime. The top buttons had popped open, most likely from the strain of containing his enormous chest, and a thatch of gray hair sprouted through the gap and crept up to his neck rolls. Hot, foul breath assaulted my nostrils.

I tried to turn my face away but he grasped my jaw. The wrenching

motion caused my hair to slide off my forehead and eyes, revealing more of my face than I had in a long time. A new fear spread through me, as sickening as the man I faced. Only two prisoners seemed interested in a boy, but if they realized I was a girl, the others would likely want me too.

"Anyone ever tell you you're too pretty for a boy?" My tormentor chuckled, but he didn't seem like he'd discovered my secret. "Pretty boys can get themselves into trouble."

Girls even more so. It was just my ill luck to get caught stealing an apple from the costermonger's cart outside the cemetery and wind up in the overcrowded holding cell at Highgate Police Station. The irony wasn't lost on me, but it wasn't in the least amusing. As an eighteen year-old girl, I should be separated from the men, but I'd been passing myself off as a thirteen year-old boy for so long it hadn't even occurred to me to tell the policemen. With my half-starved body, and mop of hair covering most of my face, nobody had questioned my gender or age.

The big brute jerked me forward, slamming me against his body. My nose smacked into a particularly filthy patch of his shirt and I gagged at the combined stench of sweat, vomit, excrement and gin. I wasn't too clean myself, but this fellow's odor was overpowering. Bile burned my throat but I swallowed it quickly. Showing weakness would only make it worse for me. I knew that from experience.

"Come here and keep old Badger warm."

Warm? It was summer, and the cell was hotter than a furnace with four adult men and myself crammed into a space designed for one.

"I'm next," said the bearded Dobby, closing in to get a better look at me.

"If there's anything left of him after old Badger's broken him in." Badger chuckled again and fumbled with the front of his trousers.

I closed my hands into fists and clamped down on my fear. Shouting for the constable wouldn't help. He'd told the other prisoners to "Enjoy," when he'd tossed me into the cell. It had only been a few minutes since he'd walked

off, whistling. It felt like hours. I had to fight now. It was the only way left. Not that I stood a chance against the men, but they might beat me unconscious, with any luck. It was best not to be awake while they took their liberties.

I swung my fist, but Badger was faster than he looked. He caught my wrist and sneered. "That ain't going to help you." The sneer vanished and he shoved me into the wall.

I put my hands up and managed to stop myself smashing into the whitewashed bricks, but my wrists and arms jarred from the force. I gasped in pain, but smothered the cry that welled up my throat.

"Leave the boy alone." The voice wasn't one I'd heard yet. It didn't come from outside the cell but from another prisoner to my right.

"What'd you say?" Badger snarled.

"I said leave the boy alone. He's just a child."

I turned and pressed my back into the wall. My rescuer stood in a similar position, his arms crossed over his chest. He was perhaps late twenties, with fair hair and cloudy gray eyes circled by red-rimmed lids. He wasn't nearly as tall as Badger, nor as solid, and I doubted he could defeat either Badger or Dobby in a fight. My heart sank.

"You going to make us?" Dobby asked.

The man shrugged then winced, as if the movement hurt. He sported a bruise on his cheek, and his blond hair was matted with blood. "One must try. It's the decent thing to do."

"One must try." Badger mimicked the other man's toff accent to perfection. Dobby and the fourth prisoner, lounging on the cot bed, laughed.

Dobby straightened his back, threw out his chest, and affected a feminine walk to where the man stood. The prisoner on the bed laughed even harder at the hairy beast's acting. "Oh, protect me from these brutes, sir," whimpered Dobby in a high voice. "You're my hero."

The blond man lowered his hands to his sides and curled them into fists. I

held my breath and waited for the first punch to be thrown. The man smiled instead. It held no humor.

Dobby tugged on the lapels of the blond man's jacket, pretending to straighten it, then fidgeted with the high, stiff shirt collar. The gentleman wore no tie, and his hat and gloves were also missing. The fine cut of his clothes reminded me of my father, always so perfectly groomed. Even the fellow's aristocratic bearing was very much like my father's. Whether it was also an affectation this gentleman had developed, it was difficult to tell. I wasn't as experienced with the upper members of society and their ways as I used to be.

"Finished?" the blond man drawled. I wondered why the gentleman had landed in jail and why he was defending me, a stranger. He'd get himself killed if he didn't keep quiet.

His fun spoiled by the gentleman's lack of fear, Dobby snorted and moved away. He turned back to me and licked his lips. Badger wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and eyed me with renewed interest. He reached for me, but the blond man smacked his hand away. Neither Badger nor I had noticed him approach.

Badger bared his teeth in a snarl. "You don't get to ruin Badger's fun!" He smashed his fist into the blond man's face, sending him reeling back into the bed.

The prisoner lounging there had to quickly pull up his legs or be sat on. The blond man recovered, and with a growl of rage, lunged at Badger. But he swung his fists wildly and his blows merely glanced off the bigger, meaner prisoner. Badger responded with another punch to the gentleman's jaw. Blood splattered from the blond man's mouth as he careened backward and slammed into the wall. His head smacked into the bricks, and the *crack* of his skull turned my stomach.

Dobby laughed, sending spittle flying from the slit in his beard. Badger dusted off his hands and watched as the gentleman folded in on himself and

crumpled to the floor like a ragdoll. My heart sank, and it was only then that I realized I'd let it rise in hope.

My rescuer was dead.

A sickening fear assaulted me along with the memories of that terrible night five years ago when my mother had died. I could still hear my father's accusation, still feel the sting of his belt across my back, and the icy rain he'd sent me into with the order never to return home.

Yet those awful memories could help me now. If the prisoners reacted to my strange ability as my father had... It was my only hope.

I knelt alongside the gentleman's lifeless form and placed my hands on either side of his face, as I had done to my mother after she'd breathed her last. While I'd been overset by tears then, I wasn't now, and I could see the gray pallor of death consuming his youthful face. I stroked his jaw. It was still warm and his short whiskers felt rough on my palms.

Someone behind me snickered. "You can't do nothing for him now, boy. Let old Badger comfort you, eh?"

I didn't move and he didn't rip me away from the body, thank goodness. I needed to touch it. At least, I think I did. I'd only ever done this once before. What if I couldn't repeat it? What if my connection to my mother had been the key that time, and it wouldn't work on a stranger?

I caressed his face as if we'd been the most intimate of lovers, and willed his spirit to rise. *Please speak to me. Do this for me and help me to live. I don't want to die here like this.*

I didn't want to die at all. That in itself was something of a revelation, but I had no chance to think about it further. A pale wisp rose from the body. At first it looked like a slender ribbon of smoke, then it grew larger and took on the shape of the dead man. It was still as thin as a veil of silk chiffon, but it moved as if it held solid form.

The spirit frowned at me from his floating position then settled his gaze on his own lifeless figure. He sighed. "And so it ends."

My heart ground to a halt. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

The spirit blinked at me, as if surprised that we were communicating. "Not your fault. I brought it on myself. I'd had enough of living, you see." He sighed again. "My parents said I would amount to nothing and they were right. Couldn't even get in a good punch." He nodded at Badger, who was standing behind me.

"What's he saying?" Dobby asked.

"He's talking to the dead," Badger said. "Boy's mad." He snorted and spat a glob of green mucus on the floor near my feet. "Get up, lad. It won't go well for you if I have to drag you over here."

The spirit's face twisted with disgust. "Wish I could have done something to help you, child. I haven't accomplished much in my life, but my hatred of bullies is well known. Just ask my father." He laughed at a joke I wasn't privy to. "That's something, eh? A legacy I can leave behind?"

I didn't think it was much of a legacy, but I didn't say so. He was my only friend in that cell, and I needed him. "There is one thing you can do for me before you go," I whispered.

"What's he saying?" Dobby repeated.

"I don't bloody care." Badger's hand closed around my shoulder and he wrenched me away from the body. He fumbled with the front of his trousers again. I had only seconds.

"Get back into your body," I told the spirit. I no longer kept my voice low. He needed to hear me, and it didn't matter who else did now. The die was already cast.

The spirit didn't move. "How?"

I wasn't entirely sure. When my mother had done it, she'd simply floated back down into her body when I'd asked her to. "Lie on your...self," I told him.

Badger's fingers gripped my jaw, smashing the inside of my mouth into my teeth. "Shut it," he snapped. "I don't want to hear no lunatic talk. Do ye

hear me?"

"He's soft in the head." Dobby bent to get a better look at me. If Badger hadn't been holding my jaw, I would have smashed my forehead into his nose.

"Bloody hell!" The other prisoner leapt off the bed, his eyes huge. "He's still alive!"

Badger let me go. He stumbled back and stared at the now standing body. It wasn't alive, but the spirit had re-entered it and was controlling it. Even though I knew what was happening, the sight still made my blood run cold.

The body turned to Badger. The insipid, blank eyes of the dead man were as lifeless as they had been moments ago, and I wasn't certain how the spirit could see through them.

The third prisoner crossed himself. Dobby mewled. Badger continued to stumble backward until he fell over his own feet and landed heavily on his backside.

"What...me...do?" The brittle, thin voice coming from the corpse startled me as much as it did the prisoners. It was nothing like the spirit's smooth one. It was as if he labored to get the dead vocal organs working.

"I don't know," I said.

"Jesus christ," Dobby muttered. He joined the other prisoner in the cell corner, as far away from the body and me as possible.

"You...control...me." The body bent over the cowering, sweating Badger. The brute looked like he'd pee his trousers if the dead man got any closer. "Kill?"

"Can you?" I asked. It wasn't a request but an honest question, since the gentleman hadn't been able to so much as punch Badger when he'd been alive. As the color drained from Badger's face, I realized how it must have sounded. I didn't correct myself.

"Constable!" Badger screamed. "Constable, get this madman out of here!"

Was he referring to the reanimated corpse or me? I laughed. I couldn't

help it. Perhaps I *was* mad, but seeing the cruel Badger frightened out of his wits was the most gratifying experience of my life, and I was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

Unfortunately that wasn't long. The constable's face appeared at the slit in the door. "What's all this noise about?"

"Get it out! Get it out!" Badger threw his arms over his face, like a child hiding under the sheets at night.

"Shut up in there!"

"He's gone mad," I said to the guard.

Badger kept screaming at the constable to remove "the devil," and the other prisoner joined in. Dobby slunk back against the wall, away from us. Away from the door.

The door that was now opening. "Bloody hell, don't make me come in there, you bleedin' idiot," said the constable, as he stepped into the cell. He wasn't armed, and his attention was distracted by Badger and the others. "What's got up your arse, anyway?"

"Let's get out of here," I said quietly to the corpse.

Like an automaton, the body turned stiffly toward the door. The constable took one look at those dead eyes and fell to his knees. "Devil," he muttered before launching into an earnest prayer.

I almost didn't move, so stunned was I at the similarity to my father's reaction when he'd first seen Mama's corpse rise. But a nudge from the dead man got my feet working. I slipped past the constable and out the door. The body lumbered after me with jerky, awkward steps, as if the swift movement was too difficult for its dead, uncoordinated limbs.

"Hoy there! Stop!" Another policeman ran toward us, his truncheon raised.

The body pulled back bloodless lips and hissed. The constable dropped the truncheon then took off in the opposite direction.

"Hurry," I urged the body.

"If you wish." His voice sounded stronger, not as strained, and his steps were more sure now. He seemed to have adjusted to his deceased state.

We ran along a corridor, past another two holding cells. Three more constables fell back from us with gasps and terrified mutterings. Only one challenged us, and the corpse under my command pushed him away. Easily. It seemed he was stronger, now he was dead, than when he was alive.

"You there!" shouted the constable behind the desk in the reception room. "What's—?" He stumbled back as the corpse turned vacant eyes and white face toward him.

The clang of a bell sounded from behind us, warning of a prisoner escape. Ordinarily it would signal for all available constabulary at the station to chase us, but none did. Their fear of "the devil" overrode any sense of duty.

The dead man pushed me toward the door. We ran, but he stopped before reaching freedom. I stopped too.

"Do not let them catch you, child!"

"And you?" I asked.

"When you are safe, release my spirit."

"How?"

"Speak the command. Now go!"

The desk constable approached uncertainly, his shaking hand clutching a revolver. He swallowed heavily and pointed it at the corpse.

I slipped out the door and into South Grove. The street was surprisingly empty, but then I realized any passersby would have scattered when they heard the bell. I darted into a nearby lane as a gunshot joined the cacophony.

"I release you," I said softly. "Go to your afterlife."

I never found out if my words, spoken from some distance, were enough to release the spirit from his body and send him on his way. I hoped so. He'd died for me, and I owed him whatever peace was in my power to give.

I kept running, not daring to stop or steal anything, despite my hunger. I hadn't eaten in three days, and then it had been only some strawberries. My

last experience at thieving had got me arrested. It was the one and only time I'd been caught. I prided myself on being one of the best thieves on the north side of London, but I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to trust myself again. For now, it didn't matter. I was too intent on getting as far away from the police as possible to think of food.

When I finally reached Clerkenwell, I slowed. My throat and lungs burned, my heart crashed against my ribs. But I was far from Highgate Police Station and there'd been no sign of pursuit. I took the long route to the rookery, just in case, and stopped outside the old, crumbling house with the rotten window sashes and door. I glanced up and down the lane, and seeing no one about I pulled aside the loose boards at knee height. I squeezed through the hole and let the boards flap closed behind me.

"Charlie's back!" shouted Mink, standing lookout near the trapdoor that led down to the cellar. The boy lifted his chin at me in greeting. It was as much as he ever acknowledged me. He wasn't much of a talker.

"'Bout bloody time!" came the gruff voice of Stringer, from down in Hell. That's what we called the cellar. It was an apt name for our crowded living quarters where we ate, slept and passed the time. It was cold and damp in winter, hot and airless in summer, but it kept us off the streets and out of danger.

"Thought you'd scarpered." Stringer popped his head through the trapdoor. His face and hair were dirty, and I could smell the stink of the sewers on him from where I stood near the entrance. He must have gone wandering down there again.

"I got arrested," I said.

Both Stringer and Mink blinked at me. Then Stringer roared with laughter, almost propelling himself off the ladder. "You! Fleet-foot Charlie, caught by the filth! Well, well, never thought I'd see the day. Oi, lads, listen to this—Charlie got himself arrested!"

"How'd you get out?" asked Mink in his quiet voice. He was a serious

boy, compared to the others, and watchful. He didn't join in with the annoying pranks they liked to pull, and he could read well enough too. I liked him more than the rest of the gang members, but that wasn't saying much. I'd almost asked him how he'd learned to read and where he'd lived before he found himself part of Stringer's gang, but decided against it.

I didn't know any of the children's pasts, and they didn't know mine. Nor did I get too friendly with them. It would make it easier to leave, when the time came. No goodbyes, no sorrows, no ties; that was my motto. I moved on twice a year, every year, and had done so since that wet night Mama died. I couldn't have lived as a thirteen year-old boy for over five years if I'd stayed with one gang the entire time.

"Bit of luck," was all I said to Mink. "Move it, Stringer, and let me past." I thumped his shoulder.

He descended the ladder and I followed, leaving Mink to watch the entrance.

"Charlie!" cried another boy named Finley. Mink, Stringer, Finley...they weren't real names but, like mine, they were probably near enough. "How'd they catch *you*, then? Dangle a clean pair of britches in front of ya nose?"

The eight lads lounging in the cellar fell over each other laughing. Ever since I'd mentioned wanting to steal clean clothes to replace my reeking ones, I'd been the butt of their jokes. It made a change from them teasing me for refusing to strip off so much as my shirt in front of them.

"Pigs were hiding near the costermonger's cart," I said, lying down on the rags I used as a mattress. It was cleaner than the actual mattress that had been dragged down from the upstairs bedroom before the roof caved in. Cleaner, but not free of lice. I scratched my head absently. "I think the costermonger told them to look out for me."

"Serves you bloody right for getting slack," Stringer said, kicking my bare foot. I didn't rub the spot, despite the pain. It was never a good idea to show weakness, even among boys from my own gang. Perhaps especially to

them. "And for going back there. Again."

One of the other boys snorted. "What you going there all the time for, anyway, Charlie? What's in Highgate?"

"Idiot. Don't you know nothing?" Stringer leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. In that pose, he reminded me of the gentleman in the holding cell. Both blond and slender, there was a certain bravado and defiance about them.

My heart pinched. I regretted that the man had lost his life because of me. I sent a silent word of thanks to Heaven, Hell, or wherever he'd ended up. I wouldn't forget his sacrifice, nor would I make the same mistake again and allow myself to be caught. Life was precarious for homeless children. And women.

Stringer rubbed his thumb along his smirking lower lip. "He goes to the cemetery."

I went very still. He must have followed me once. How much did he know? Did he see me visit Mama's grave? Or wander around the other headstones, imagining what the deceased had once looked like and how they'd lived? Did he know I liked to sit beneath the cedar trees and dream the day away?

Finley pulled a face. "Blimey, Charlie, that's a bit morbid, ain't it?"

"Morbid," I corrected him automatically.

Stringer's smirk turned to a sneer. "Shut your hole, Charlie. No one cares what you been doing, anyway. You got caught today. You got slow." He leaned down and poked me in the shoulder. "Never forget that." He hated when I corrected them. It always seemed to bring out the worst in him. I supposed it was because it made him feel inferior to me, when in fact he was the eldest and the leader. Well, not actually the eldest, but no one there knew it.

The boys were aged from eight to fifteen. Stringer was not only the eldest but also the biggest. He was already the size of a grown man, and there were

rumblings about him leaving the gang of children to take up with a band of more ruthless men who lived in the neighborhood. Two of the boys had even approached me to take over from him, but I'd refused. It would probably mean I'd have to fight Stringer, and there was no way I could win against him. Besides, it was coming time for me to move on again. Mink in particular was beginning to look at me like he was trying to solve a puzzle. Sometimes I wondered if he already knew that I wasn't who I said I was.

"Anything to eat?" I asked to distract Stringer.

"Some bread," he said, jerking his head at the boy nearest the board we used as a table.

The boy tossed a hunk of bread to me. I caught it. Not a crumb flaked off the hard crust. I set it aside with a sigh, not wanting to break my teeth.

The afternoon wore on. Boys came and went, some bringing food and water that I didn't touch. While I was hungry, they were hungrier. They always were. That was the problem with boys. I had at least finished my growing. Not that I had much to show for it. Sometimes I wondered if I would have been taller with a more womanly figure if I'd had plenty to eat in the last five years. I would never know now. My size helped me to blend in, so I wasn't overly disappointed.

I slept until it was my turn to watch the entrance, then slept again after Finley relieved me. It was mid-morning on a dreary day when I got the first inkling that something was amiss. The boys who returned from foraging—as we called our thieving stints—eyed me warily. They whispered behind their hands and tittered nervously.

"What is it?" I said as one boy crossed himself when he passed me. "Why is everyone staring at me like I've got two heads?"

He wouldn't answer.

"Mink? You'll tell me."

But even Mink kept his distance and wouldn't speak to me. I did overhear him tell a group of boys that it wasn't possible and the devil didn't exist, nor

did God. That earned him an eye-roll.

When Stringer returned around midday, and also gave me a wide berth and strange looks, I decided it was time to go for a walk. I wasn't getting answers. I didn't need them anyway. I knew what they'd heard. The gossip network among the gangs was more efficient than any telegraph.

I left through the hole in the wall and made my way north out of Clerkenwell. I felt no fear walking among people who were little better off than me. It was safer in the downtrodden suburb than the holding cell at the police station. My patched up clothing and shoeless feet marked me as not worth robbing, and if a man wanted to rape someone, he would wait for dark, and choose someone slower and most likely female. There were easier pickings than a small, quick youth.

I wandered for hours, not really heading anywhere. Or so I thought. When I found myself at the top of a familiar Tufnell Park street, I realized long-buried habit had taken me home.

Home. The detached red brick house with the white trim couldn't be called that anymore. Home was where you slept at night, and where people who loved you welcomed you with open arms. My father still lived there, but I doubted he would let me in if I knocked on the door. I had visited from time to time, but never ventured further than the shrubs inside the front gate behind which I hid as I waited for my father to make an appearance. Most times he didn't. I'd seen him only twice in five years, when he'd invited in a parishioner who'd come to his door. He'd welcomed *them* with smiles and a warm handshake.

I checked up and down the street and, seeing no one, opened the gate. I cringed at the squeak of hinges and quickly ducked behind the shrubbery. Spindly twigs grabbed at my hair and the patch sewn over my jacket elbow tore. The bush was in need of pruning. Mama had been the gardener, not Father. There were signs of neglect everywhere, now that I looked closer. Weeds sprouted along the flowerbeds and moss grew between the brick

pavers. The gate needed oiling and the front steps needed sweeping. I wondered if the housekeeper had kept the inside clean or if she'd let her standards lapse too, now that Mama wasn't there.

I adjusted my position to alleviate the cramping in my legs. After a few more minutes, I needed to shift my weight again. What was I doing here? Why did I need to see him? He'd made it clear that he didn't want me. "The devil's daughter," he'd called me, right before he hustled me outside into the rain.

I'd stood near this very bush, crying, hoping he'd change his mind when his temper cooled, but knowing he would not. Then, like now, I knew I would never be forgiven for making Mama's corpse come to life. I was an unholy abomination against God, according to my father. He should know, being a vicar.

I was about to get up when the gate squeaked. I peered through the shrubbery leaves to see a gentleman in a gray suit closing it. He was of medium height and slender build, with brown hair poking out from beneath his top hat. I caught only a glimpse of his face, but it was enough to know that he was about forty with a strong jaw and nose. I didn't recognize him, so if he was a parishioner, he must be new to the area.

I couldn't leave now. I might catch a glimpse of my father. Perhaps it was foolish to want to see a man who did not want to see me, yet I did. I never claimed to be anything but a fool.

The stranger knocked, and the housekeeper opened the door. The stranger introduced himself, but all I heard was "Doctor," the rest was taken by the wind. Was father ill? I was trying to decide how I felt about that when the housekeeper asked him to wait then disappeared. A moment later, *he* appeared in her place. Father.

Emotion washed through me like tidal waves, threatening to overwhelm me. First happiness at seeing him alive and healthy, then sadness that he didn't want me, and finally anger for the manner in which he had disowned

me at the age of only thirteen. I'd heard much later that he told his parishioners I'd been kidnapped. The police had even searched for me. I wondered how long a person needed to be missing for them to be declared dead. Did I even officially exist anymore?

My emotions and thoughts stopped tumbling in all directions with the next words spoken by the stranger. "I'm seeking a particular girl of eighteen years of age. I believe one lives here."

The look on my father's face probably matched mine. His mouth opened and closed, wobbling jowls that had gone pale. When he finally found his voice, it came to me clearly across the garden. "You're mistaken. There're no girls here."

He went to shut the door, but the stranger thrust his foot into the gap. I strained to hear. "Are you Mr. Anselm Holloway?"

"Kindly leave my premises," my father said.

"Not until I have answers. I believe you have a daughter, Miss Charlotte Holloway, who is eighteen."

"I told you." My father's voice had taken on that stern, commanding tone he used in his sermons, and when banishing daughters. "There are no girls living here. Kindly remove yourself from my premises, Doctor."

For one long moment I thought the stranger would force his way into the house, but he did as asked and removed his foot. My father slammed the door and the doctor walked back down the footpath. I was sure to get a better look at him this time. He was quite handsome, for a man of middle age, with the smooth face of someone who spent most of his time indoors. He wore his whiskers very short and only on the sides. The flecks of gray in them gave him an air of authority that his soft cheeks did not.

Should I announce myself to him now, or wait until I could slip away from the house undetected and catch up further along the street? I abandoned the idea altogether when I saw his eyes. They were filled with fury. Rage pulsed from him with every determined step. The muscles in his jaw twitched

and his lips peeled back from his teeth as he muttered something under his breath that I couldn't quite hear. He uncurled one fist to open the gate then slammed it shut behind him. He stalked off down the pavement, stopping a few feet away to cast a piercing glare back at my father's house. Then he continued on, around the corner, and was gone from sight.

No, I would not reveal myself to him yet. Not until I knew if he was as dangerous as he looked.

I considered how best to find out more about him as I walked back to Clerkenwell. Perhaps the housekeeper would tell me his full name if I asked. But she might alert Father to my visit. Perhaps I could return to the house tomorrow and wait again. The doctor might also return, looking for me. I could then follow him home and question his neighbors as to his nature.

But what if he caught me and was indeed up to no good? I had the horrible feeling that his searching for me was connected to the gossip my gang had been hearing that morning, and the thing I'd done in the Highgate holding cell. It might be wise to avoid him and lay low for a while. Or leave the gang altogether.

Yes. I would do it that afternoon, while there was still enough daylight. After I retrieved my few belongings, I would set off and get far away from Clerkenwell and Stringer's gang.

I pulled the loose boards back from the hole in the wall, but someone blocked the entrance from the other side. Stringer came through, followed by Finley and the others. They spilled onto the street like rats escaping a sinking ship via the porthole.

"This is him!" Stringer shouted.

I blinked at him. "Who're you talking to?"

"You need to come with us." Someone gripped my elbow, but not hard. It was easy enough to wrench free.

I spun round and backed away from the two burly men. "Don't touch me," I snapped.

One of them held up his hands. "Apologies, boy, but we need to speak to you."

"No, he needs to come with us," the other man countered with a roll of his eyes. He was a little taller than the first fellow, and a lot uglier. His features were put together like a roughly hewn cliff beneath the craggy ridge of his brow. A curved scar sliced across his cheek and pulled down the corner of one eye. His small mouth and thin lips seemed out of proportion to the rest of him.

"Right," said the first man. His handsome face was a stark contrast to his friend's. Fair hair flopped down from beneath his hat and fell into wide gray eyes that blinked at me without guile. He smiled a dazzling smile. "Come on, lad. We'll see that you get a hot meal." He sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "And a bath."

"I don't want food and a bath," I said, hoping they couldn't detect my lie. "I want to know where I'm going and why."

"Can't tell you that," said the bigger man. "Orders are to bring you back."

They seemed harmless enough, and the offer of food and a bath sounded wonderful. Too wonderful. I'd heard of street children being lured into slavery and prostitution in just such a manner. I lived by the rule that if something sounded too good to be true, it usually was. That rule had kept me safe so far, and I wasn't about to abandon it now.

"Why me?" I asked them. Had they heard what had happened in the holding cell? If so, how had they traced me here so quickly? Money must have changed hands, and a few key questions asked of the right people. The police weren't well enough connected, so these fellows weren't officials. Whoever they were, I doubted they had good intentions.

"Dunno," said the ugly one with a shrug of his heavy shoulders. "We just carry out orders."

Convenient. "What did they offer you to rat on me?" I asked Stringer.

"Enough." Stringer shoved me in the back. "Go on. Go. We don't want

you round here no more. You're trouble, Charlie, and your freak tricks will bring more people to our den if you don't bugger off. Word's out now, so you gotta go. Right, lads?"

"Right," chimed in the other boys, even Mink. I shot them all withering glares then turned back to the two newcomers. They'd taken a step closer to me and they held themselves tense, as if ready to spring. If I were going to avoid being caught, I would have to be quick.

"I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me why," I said.

The ugly one blew out an exasperated breath. "Bloody hell, stop being a stubborn little turd and just come with us."

The pretty one rolled his eyes. "What my friend is trying to say is that we mean you no harm."

"Unless you don't copperate."

"It's co-operate, idiot, and well done. You've just made the boy soil his trousers."

"I'm not afraid of you," I told him.

"You should be. Death won't be as civil as us."

Death? They meant to kill me if I didn't go with them?

Pretty held up his hands. "I didn't mean to frighten you, lad, but—"

"Bloody hell," muttered Ugly. "We ain't got time for this. Grab him and let's go. Death'll have our guts if we take too long."

"Death will come and do the job himself, like he always does when you mess up."

"Me?"

I turned and ran.

"Jesus," growled Pretty. "Get back here! It won't go well for you, that way."

Their footsteps pounded behind me, but they were slow and I managed to streak ahead. "You should've grabbed him," I heard Ugly say.

"You're not in charge here, I am."

"You bloody well are not. He is."

"He's not here!"

"Oh yeah? Who's that, then, eh?"

Just as he said it, I tripped over something thrust in my path. I landed on the pavement on my hands and knees, scraping off several layers of skin. There was no time to wallow in the pain or assess the damage. I scrambled up, only to find two strong hands clamping down on my arms, pinning them to my sides. I struggled, but it was useless. The man behind me was far stronger. I stopped struggling to lull him, but his grip didn't relax. Damn, damn and hell. I heard Ugly and Pretty approaching and knew I had to act immediately or it would be three against one.

I kicked backward, smashing my foot as hard as I could into my captor's shin, then jerked my head back hard. Unfortunately, his height worked against me and I only managed to hit ribs instead of a throat, chin or nose. The kick earned a sharp intake of breath from my abductor, but otherwise he didn't make a sound. Nor did he loosen his grip.

I was out of ideas. I was good at avoiding capture—usually—but not so good at freeing myself afterward. The panic seizing my breath and overriding my brain wasn't helping either. Should I scream? Would anyone come to my rescue if I did?

Instinct took over and I struggled again, trying to wrench myself free. But that only made his fingers dig further into my flesh with bruising strength.

"Stay still," he snarled, in a voice that welled up from the depths of his chest.

"Or what?" I was pleased that I sounded defiant. If I couldn't have my liberty, I could at least hold onto some dignity.

"Or I'll be forced to hurt you."

As if he wasn't already.

"Want me to shoot him, sir?" That was Ugly's voice.

"Idiot," said Pretty. "What'll that achieve?"

"His cooperation."

"Doubt he'll feel very *co-operative* with a bullet wound."

The grip of the man holding me changed, but before I could use the opportunity to my advantage, I was rendered immobile once more. He wrenched my arms behind my back and pinned them there.

I winced as pain shot down to my wrists and numbed my fingers. "You're hurting me!"

The man they called Sir didn't answer.

"To be fair, he did warn you," said Pretty.

Ugly snorted a laugh.

Sir shoved me forward, but I refused to walk. I wasn't going to make this easy for him.

"Move," he said, his voice surprisingly calm in my ear.

I pulled my knees up so that my feet were clear of the pavement. He didn't so much as grunt with the effort of suddenly taking all my weight. I, however, gasped as my arms screamed in agony and my left shoulder popped out of its socket. I bit my lip to stop myself crying out and tried kicking again, but it only served to put more pressure on my already burning arms and shoulders.

"Fool," Pretty muttered. He appeared in front of me and, walking backward to keep pace, went to push my hair off my face.

I jerked my head from side to side then when that didn't work, spat at him. Ugly laughed.

"Little blighter." Pretty raised a hand to strike me, but Sir's steely, "Don't," stopped him.

"Go on ahead," Sir said. "Let me know if someone comes."

Pretty glared at me then he and Ugly strode off around the corner.

"Stop resisting," Sir said to me. "Nobody wants to harm you."

"Your name Mr. Nobody, eh?" I laughed at my joke although I didn't find it funny. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me what you want

with me."

"We can't talk here."

"Then we won't be talking at all, Mr. Nobody."

He continued to carry me forward, only to stop when Ugly's face appeared around the corner. "Gang of rough looking types coming this way!"

A gang? They might be willing to help me, but it was unlikely. Most of the "rough looking types" in Clerkenwell only helped when there was something in it for them. Yet I had to try and get them on my side. I could claim Sir and his men were police. "Rough looking types" hated the constabulary. I opened my mouth to scream, but before a sound came out, Sir clamped a large hand over my mouth *and* my nose. He pulled me back against his body, one arm now bracing me around my waist, still pinning my arms, the other smothering me.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move to scratch at his hand. The harder I tried to breathe, the quicker I used up the remaining air in my lungs. My chest burned, my throat closed, and blackness crept in from the edges of my vision.

He was going to kill me and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. Fog clouded my thoughts. I felt my strength drain away. He finally let me go, but I could not have run even if I'd had my wits about me.

The darkness swallowed me. I felt my body being lifted, but I was unsure if it were by human arms or the Reaper's, come to take my soul to the afterlife. All I did know was that everything was about to change.

## CHAPTER 2



I DIDN'T NEED to open my eyes to know that I was inside a coach. It had been many years since I'd ridden in one but the rocking sensation was unmistakable, as was the subtle scent of the leather seat on which I lay. My hands and feet were tied and I lay on a bench seat, facing forward. My shoulder still hurt, but not as badly as before. It had popped back into the socket while I was unconscious. By luck or by my captors?

At least one of them was with me in the cabin. I could hear soft breathing and feel a gaze upon me. My hair still covered half my face, reaching past my nose. A small mercy.

"I wasn't expecting him to put up a fight." That was Pretty's cultured voice, coming from the seat opposite. Unless he was talking to himself, there must be another beside him.

Nobody answered.

"The lad's got some fire in his belly," Pretty went on. He paused, yet there was still no response from his companion. I suspected it was the one they called Sir then, not Ugly. Ugly was more talkative. "Do you think he'll have answers?"

"Some." Yes, definitely Sir. I recognized his rich, velvety tones.

"Do you think he knows where she is?"

She? Who was he talking about?

"Perhaps," Sir said.

Pretty grunted. "Think he'll tell us where to find her, if he does?"

"I'll see to it."

A cold lump of dread lodged in the pit of my stomach. He had no qualms rendering me unconscious to capture me, so what methods would he employ to get answers? Answers to what? I didn't know the whereabouts of any missing women—

Unless he meant me, Charlotte Holloway. If so, it seemed he hadn't connected Charlie the boy to Charlotte the missing girl. Yet. I needed to get away from him as soon as possible, before he worked it out. With my hands and feet tied, escape was not going to be easy.

The men didn't speak for some time and the silence between them felt awkward. They weren't friends then, but more likely master and servant. A good ten or fifteen minutes passed before the leather seat creaked beneath the shifting weight of one of them.

Pretty cleared his throat. "Odd that he hasn't woken up yet."

"He's awake," Sir said.

How had he known?

The leather seat creaked again and I felt warm breath on my chin. I opened my eyes, startling Pretty. "How long have you been awake?" he asked.

I didn't answer. I didn't want him knowing I'd overheard their conversation.

The man sitting beside him spoke instead. "Since we drove off."

Sir was not what I expected. He was strikingly handsome, although he seemed to want to downplay his good looks. His black wavy hair reached to his shoulders, a few errant strands spilling over one sharp cheek. No gentleman I'd ever seen kept his hair that length or in such disarray. Nor was the hair on his face the latest fashion. Instead of being styled and oiled to a sheen, it shadowed his jaw as if he'd forgotten to shave for two days. If he

didn't wear such a fine, well-fitting suit, I would not have thought him a gentleman at all. He didn't even wear a hat or gloves.

I sat up, which was not an easy task, trussed up as I was. Neither man assisted me. I shrank into the corner then remembered I was trying to look defiant and unafraid. I tilted my chin and stared into Sir's black, black eyes.

That was a mistake. He met my gaze with his own fiercely direct one, and I felt like I was being sucked into a well so endless it would take a lifetime to reach the bottom. He gave away nothing through his eyes, yet I felt he could see everything in mine. Surely he must know I was not who I claimed to be. I wanted to look away before he saw too much, but I could not. He was much too compelling.

It was only because the carriage slowed that I was released. He glanced out the window and my own gaze followed. We drove through a set of enormous iron gates spiked with spearhead finials, then along a drive. Lawn carpeted the landscape, the occasional tree or shrub interrupting the smooth surface. I craned my neck and finally caught a glimpse of our destination as we rounded a gentle bend.

I gaped at the mansion. It sat atop a low rise like a crow with wings spread out in either direction. The building was a mad collection of shapes. Tall, narrow pinnacles shot from the centers of square towers positioned between the triangular gables and rectangular chimneys. But it was the central tower that caught my attention. At almost twice the height of the rest of the house, it was an imposing entrance. Beneath the three cones at its crown was a small window, then nothing but dark stone plunging down to the large arched door. Rapunzel wouldn't look out of place in that high window, but it would take more than a lifetime for her hair to grow long enough to reach the ground.

I recoiled and suppressed a shiver. Sir watched me with those all-seeing eyes of his. His expression remained cool, detached, unreadable. It was unlikely he cared what I thought about our destination, unless he could use

that fear against me.

"Is this Bedlam?" I asked. I could well imagine the mansion was the infamous insane asylum. It looked bleak enough to house those miserable, mad people. People like me.

Pretty snorted. "An apt assessment, but no."

The coach pulled to a stop and Sir opened the door himself. No servants emerged from the house to do it for him. The cabin dipped as he stepped off, then dipped again as someone jumped down from the driver's seat.

Ugly came into view beside Sir. "How's he going to walk with his feet all bound up like that?"

"You're going to carry him," Pretty said.

Ugly looked to Sir, but he merely walked off. "Put him in the tower room," he said. "See that he's fed and bathed."

"Don't just stand there, pizzle head." Pretty signaled to Ugly. "Come get him."

Ugly grimaced, revealing two rows of broken, jagged teeth. "Why don't you do it?"

"Because I'm in charge, and the one in charge doesn't do any hard labor."

"You're not in charge, Death is." Ugly jerked his head at the retreating figure of Sir. They called him Death behind his back and Sir to his face? I wondered if he knew.

"I'm second in command, and since he's no longer here, I am in charge. Grab the little blighter and get him up to the tower room."

Ugly sighed and reached for me. I scooted along the seat into the back corner. "I'm covered in lice," I told him.

Ugly scratched his bushy sideburns. "Do I have to touch him, Seth? Couldn't we just untie him and let him walk up?"

"And risk him running off? I'd like to see you explain that to Death." Pretty—Seth—grabbed my arm and dragged me to the cabin door. Without warning, he shoved me into Ugly's waiting hands.

The big man caught me easily. "You stink."

I managed to dig my elbow into his ribs and received an *oomph* for my troubles. "Compared to your sweet smell, you mean?"

Seth chuckled. "I think I'm going to like you, lad."

"Don't get too attached to him." Ugly hoisted me under his arm and carried me toward the house like a roll of fabric. "Death'll get what he wants out of him then send him back to the sewer."

"What information is that?" I spat.

"Stop moving," Ugly said. His arm tightened around me and I thought he'd cut me in half.

"You're hurting me!" I wriggled and kicked out with my bound legs, but connected with nothing but air.

"Calm down, lad," Seth said. "Co-operate and you will not be harmed. Fight and it will not go well for you. Death doesn't like it when his orders aren't followed."

"I don't have to follow his orders. He's not my master."

"Yet he will get what he needs from you nevertheless. He's good at that."

I gulped at his ominous tone as much as the promise in his words. I imagined the man they called Death extracting my real name from me with the use of medieval torture devices. He probably kept them in the dungeon. Surely a place as grim as the one we were now entering had a dungeon, with walls so thick that no one would hear my screams.

"What you shivering for, boy?" Ugly said, hoisting me higher on his hip. "It ain't cold."

"This is uncomfortable," I told him. "Can't you put me down and let me walk?"

"No," Seth said.

"Where are we?"

"Lichfield Towers."

"Are we still in London?"

"Yes. Highgate."

I knew Highgate had some big homes, but estates of the scale of this one weren't common. I could picture only two that I knew of, both behind high fences and rows of trees. Now that I thought about it, the front gate had looked familiar. We weren't too far from the cemetery.

Knowing my location buoyed me somewhat. If I did escape, finding my way back to Clerkenwell wouldn't be too difficult. The first thing I'd do when I returned to our basement Hell would be gather my few belongings and find a new place to live, somewhere where nobody knew me. Somewhere far away from Stringer and his gang.

I got to see very little of my surroundings, facing downward as I was. The floor tiles in the entrance hall were mostly covered by a crimson Oriental rug and the walls were paneled in dark wood. Ugly carried me up a grand staircase, his footfalls deadened by a carpet runner. Despite being daytime, the lack of windows meant it was dark in the stairwell without the chandelier lit. We continued up and up, Seth following behind us. We passed many doors, all closed, until we finally reached what must have been the highest room in the central tower.

Seth slipped past us and pushed open the door. The room was larger than I expected, with more furniture than I'd seen in one place for a long time. Still, it was bare compared to my childhood room in Tufnell Park. It contained only a small bed, a dresser, table and chair. There were no knickknacks on the table or dresser, no pictures adorning the deep red walls, and the bedspread was plain gray. Yet I loved the room. Once Ugly and Seth left, I would be alone inside four walls for the first time in an age. It was a luxury I'd feared never to experience again.

Not that I would experience it for long this time. If I could tie together the sheets and blankets, I wouldn't need Rapunzel's hair. I could simply attach one end to the bed and climb out the window. I glanced at the window and bit my lip. Perhaps not. It was a long way down.

Ugly dropped me onto the bed. I bounced on the mattress and had to suppress a smile before they saw it. The mattress was *soft*.

"How're we supposed to bathe him up here?" Ugly said.

"I don't need a bath."

"Smelled yourself lately?"

Seth looked me over and I made sure to keep my face dipped so that my hair hid it. "You stink worse than Gus."

"Oi!" Gus protested. "I ain't that bad."

"Besides, our orders are to get you bathed."

My face flushed and I was glad my hair covered it. My filth was a foolish thing to be ashamed of, but I couldn't help it. My mother had been a stickler for cleanliness, scrubbing my skin with carbolic soap and my fingernails with a slice of lemon every day. She would have a fit if she saw the grime that had been deeply ingrained into my nails and skin now.

"Fetch a washstand and bowl of water," Ugly—Gus—said.

"It won't be enough," Seth said. "The water will be black before he's even half clean."

"Take him to the bathroom and fill up the tub."

"The bathroom's two levels down. Besides, Death didn't tell us to take him to the *bathroom*. He said to bring him here."

"Then what'll we do?"

"A jug of water and a bowl will do me well enough," I said, sitting up. "There's no need to bother with a bath."

Seth jerked his head at Gus. "You get it. I'll strip those rags off him."

"No!"

They both blinked at my vehemence. "Why not?" Gus asked. "You ain't got nothing we ain't seen before. Only smaller." He chuckled as his gaze focused on my crotch.

"You'll be perfectly safe with us," Seth said, somewhat soothingly. "Neither of us care what you look like."

They would if they knew I looked like a girl. "I've got scars. I don't like folk seeing them."

"Me too." Gus began to unbutton his jacket. "I'll show you mine first. Ain't no reason to hide scars. Shows you're a fighter."

"Or careless, in your case." Seth's eyes gleamed with humor. I almost found myself smiling along with him.

"Weren't my fault the water got spilled." Gus didn't continue to unbutton his jacket, nor did he do them up again.

"No, but it was your fault there was still hot water in the pot. You were supposed to empty it."

Gus gave Seth a rude hand gesture. Seth ignored him and bent to untie me. "Guard the door," he told Gus.

Gus did. He was a solid man, a wall of brawn that I would never get past without a distraction.

"Don't think about running off," Seth said. "Death will get you before you even leave the house."

I tilted my chin. "How will he know I've escaped?"

"He'll know. He knows everything. That's how we found you."

"Death's a machine," Gus chimed in. "And like God, too. A god-machine. Don't push him or he'll come down on you like a ton of bibles."

"He probably knows you just said that," Seth said with a wink at me.

Gus swallowed heavily and glanced around the ceiling, as if looking for the god-machine himself up there.

With my hands and ankles finally free, I felt more human. I stood and walked around the room, checking the drawers in the dresser—they were empty—and looking out the window. Definitely too far to climb down.

"Go get the water," Seth said. "I'll fetch him something to eat."

Gus narrowed his eyes at me. "He'll escape."

Seth grinned and pulled a key out of his waistcoat pocket. "Now, why would he want to leave this comfortable room and return to the sewers

anyway?"

"I didn't live in the sewers," I growled at him.

"You lived in a cramped, dark cellar that stank like a sewer. You're better off here, lad. Don't forget it."

"Do I have my freedom here?" I snapped. "Can I come and go as I please? No? Doesn't seem like I'm better off."

Seth's mouth flattened into a sympathetic grimace. Gus shook his head and opened the door. The two of them filed out and quickly shut it again. The lock tumbled and I was left alone.

I suddenly felt weary to the bone. I stared at the bed, so soft and inviting. The pillow was plump too, like a cloud. But it was too clean for the likes of me. I didn't want to get any lice on it. Same with the chair. It was upholstered in nice brocade fabric patterned with gray and crimson flowers.

I stood by the window instead and looked out upon the garden and lawn. Large trees rimmed the edge of the property, and beyond that I could see buildings in one direction and parkland in another. It was a lovely vista, and one I could have happily stared at, yet my stomach wouldn't let me enjoy the view. It churned with worry. The last time I'd been locked away had been the morning before and men had tried to rape me in the police cell. While I didn't think Death and his men had that in store for me, their reasons for abducting me couldn't be good. Nothing associated with my reanimation of dead bodies had turned out to be good, on the two occasions I'd done it. The first time I had been thrown out of my house by my father, and the second time, scary people came looking for me. First the doctor, then Death.

I sank down onto the floor and drew my knees up to my chest. I had a sickening feeling that I wouldn't be going anywhere for a long time.



DEATH VISITED me after I'd washed and eaten. Seth and Gus allowed me to

bathe in private when I asked to be left alone. Still, I didn't undress entirely, nor did I put on the clean clothes provided for me. For one thing, the trousers and shirt were too big. For another, I didn't want to get comfortable at Lichfield Towers. If I succumbed to the comforts, I might never want to leave. And I *had* to leave. Death had something in store for me, the re-animator of corpses. Something I suspected I wanted no part of.

He stood with his back to the closed door, arms folded across his chest. He'd dispensed with jacket, tie and waistcoat, and the informality made him seem less like a gentleman and more like a wastrel. Indeed, his dark, disheveled looks wouldn't have been out of place on a carnival gypsy.

"What's your name?" he asked me.

I scowled at him from my position by the window. I'd not yet sat down on the chair, since I hadn't changed out of my filthy clothing, and I stood with my arms crossed over my chest too.

"They called you Charlie."

I wished I'd gone by a name that wasn't so close to Charlotte. Fortunately, Death didn't seem to notice the similarity. Perhaps I'd been mistaken, and he wasn't looking for me—Charlotte Holloway—after all, but another girl that he thought I knew.

"My name is Lincoln Fitzroy," he went on.

"I thought it was Death." I didn't care if my retort got Seth and Gus into trouble. They were nothing to me.

One corner of Fitzroy's mouth twitched in what would have been a smile on anyone else. On him, it was probably just a twitch. His face didn't lighten in any other way, but remained stern. I wondered if the man ever smiled or laughed. I doubted it.

"Are you going to kill me, Mr. Death?"

"That would be foolish, since I want answers from you."

"And if I refuse to answer? Will you kill me then?"

"Have I given any indication that I would?"

"You nearly killed me when you kidnapped me."

"You were not in danger."

"I fainted from lack of air! How could you have known I wouldn't die?"

"Ladies faint all the time and do not die."

I recoiled. Did he suspect? I dipped my head to ensure my face remained covered by my hair. "I am not a lady."

"Clearly." He came toward me and regarded me levelly. "I know how long a person your size can be deprived of air before death takes him."

"How do you know? Trial and error?"

He lifted a hand. I ducked out of his reach and put my arms up to shield my face.

"I only want to get a better look at your face," he said.

That was precisely why I'd darted away, but I realized my action could have been mistaken for fear that he'd hit me. "This ain't right," I told him. "You can't keep me here."

"Who will stop me?" He shrugged one shoulder. "Nobody will look for you. Your friends gave you up for a few coins. You have no family, no one to worry about you. For all the world cares, you might as well not exist, Charlie Whoever You Are."

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. He was right, but hearing it put so baldly stung. I was truly alone. Not a single soul cared whether I lived or died.

Except me. Sometimes, I wasn't even sure why I did care. It wasn't as if I was adding value to society. Even the blond man whose spirit had saved me in the cell had left behind a reputation for defending the weak from bullies. The only impression I would leave behind would be my freakish way of communicating with the dead.

"Tell me how you did it," Fitzroy said.

"I don't know what you're on about, and I don't want to know. Let me go. I don't want to be here."

His gaze flicked to the clothes still folded on the bed and the food I'd left largely untouched. I'd nibbled at the bread and cheese, but the butterflies fluttering in my stomach wouldn't let me eat more. "Is there something else you desire?"

"My freedom."

He waited, as if he expected me to add something of a material nature that he could command Seth or Gus to deliver to my room. "I will grant you your freedom when you tell me how you became a necromancer."

Necromancer. Was that the name for me? It was quite an improvement over devil's daughter. "I don't know nothing about necromancing." I clenched my jaw, folded my arms and sat on the floor.

After a moment, he crouched by my side. I'd not heard his approach. The man was light on his feet. Even more surprising was that he had no smell. No hint of any soap or hair oil, no body odor, nothing. It was the oddest thing, and more unnerving than his quiet step.

"There is another who can bring the dead back to life," he said. "A young woman of eighteen. Are you related to her?"

"I don't know no women, and I ain't related to nobody." I hugged my knees and pressed my forehead against them. "I don't know anything about bringing dead bodies back to life, neither."

Another long pause then, "Where are you from?"

I didn't answer.

"How long have you lived on the street?"

I hugged my knees tighter. He didn't go on and when I glanced up, I saw that he'd moved away. He watched me from the window, his arms once more crossed. The window was on the opposite side of the room to the door—the door that he'd left unlocked.

"He saved you, didn't he?" Fitzroy didn't pose it as a question. "The prisoners were going to hurt you, but the spirit frightened them off by re-entering his body. At your command."

If he knew that much already, what else did he know?

"How did you do it?"

I snorted. "You've got the wrong boy."

"No."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do." He said it with the utmost conviction that I knew I could never get him to doubt himself. "Is it something you've always been able to do?"

"You're a tosspot."

He grunted. "I expect a gutter dweller to come up with something more offensive than that."

"A fucking tosspot."

"Better. Now answer my question." He leaned a hip and shoulder against the wall and glanced out the window. A small frown connected his brows.

His distraction gave me the opportunity I needed. I sprang up and sprinted for the door.

But he reached it first. His palm slammed against the wood at my head height, the sound reverberating around the tower room. I watched him through the curtain of my hair, searching for signs that he would use that hand on me. His only movement was a small tightening of his lips.

"I have tried asking nicely," he said in a voice that was much too calm. "I have fed you and clothed you, provided a soft bed for you."

"I need none of that." It was a bold thing to say, considering the man's nickname was Death, but while I was the person with answers, he wouldn't kill me. That didn't mean he wouldn't hurt me.

He straightened to his full height—an impressive size. Not as tall or broad as Gus, but big nevertheless. It would be easy for him to beat me senseless or break my bones.

I shrank away from him, regretting my impulsive actions and words. It might be wiser to bite my tongue in future.

"Then what do you need?" he said.

I glanced at the door.

"You will be worse off out there than in here."

I shrugged a shoulder.

His black brows drew together and his gaze drilled into me. "Who is out there for you? Who do you want to see again?"

*My father.*

I edged away from him and sat on the floor again, my back to the wall. I pulled up my knees and curled into the tightest, smallest ball possible. He watched me from beneath that severe brow. His anger seemed to have dissolved somewhat, but I still didn't trust him. He was too quick and too hard to read. He could haul me up by my shirt in a heartbeat and thrash the answers he sought out of me.

A knock on the door made me jerk. "Mr. Fitzroy, sir," said Seth from the other side. "Lord Gillingham is here to see you."

A lord? A real live *lord* was under the same roof as me? I suddenly wanted to look out the window and catch a glimpse of this lord's carriage and horses. I'd wager it was magnificent and the animals fine.

"Tell him I'm unavailable," Fitzroy said.

"Er..." Seth cleared his throat. "He already knows you're in here talking to the boy. Gus told him, not me."

I would not have known Fitzroy was irritated if it weren't for the curling of his right hand into a fist. His face remained unchanged from its glowering severity. Without a word, he opened the door and left. The lock clicked into place, and I was once more a prisoner and alone.

I expelled a long breath and got up to look out the window. A gleaming black coach pulled by two grays was indeed waiting down below. I unlatched the window and pulled up the sash.

"You there!" My loud whisper didn't so much as cause the horses' ears to twitch. "You there!" I called.

The driver glanced around, but seeing no one, shook his head.

"Up here!"

He tilted his head back and touched the brim of his hat in acknowledgment.

"Help me! I am being held prisoner. Tell the—" Not the police. They wanted me over the theft and escape. "You must help me get out!"

The driver merely stared up at me. Then, with a shake of his head, he turned back to the horses. My heart sank. It was hopeless. He probably thought me a mischievous child, having a lark. It would be impossible to convince him otherwise from such a distance.

With a sigh, I picked up the wedge of cheese and bit off the corner. It tasted delicious, not like my usual fare of stale crumbs that even the rats turned their noses up at. I devoured the rest, shoveling it in, unable to eat fast enough.

Then I promptly threw up in the corner. What a waste. I should have opened the window and deposited the contents of my guts on the front steps. That notion made me smile.

The lock clicked in the door. Fitzroy must have finished his business with Lord Gillingham already and come to question me again. I steeled myself and took courage in the fact that he'd not yet hit me.

But instead of my captor, another man entered. I guessed him to be about forty, with rust-colored hair starting high on his forehead and a short beard of a redder hue. He cut a fine form in a dark suit, with shoes polished to a high sheen and a gold watch chain hanging from his waistcoat pocket. He clutched a walking stick in one hand, and I caught a glimpse of the tiger shaped head as he adjusted his grip. It wasn't his clothing that told me he was Lord Gillingham, however, but his bearing. His body was ramrod straight, his mouth turned down in disapproval, and his head tilted back so that he looked down his nose at me, even though he wasn't very tall. Fitzroy may be a gentleman, but this man was a cut above—and he knew it.

"Close the door," he said over his shoulder to Gus.

Gus and Seth, standing in the hallway outside the room, frowned at one another, then Gus closed the door. I was alone with the stranger.

I debated whether I should bow to Lord Gillingham, nod, or take his hand. I was still trying to remember the proper etiquette for when a boy met a lord—and whether I wanted to conform—when he spoke.

"You are the child." He sounded as if his mouth were full of strawberries that he didn't want to spill. It was quite ridiculous. I had to press my lips together to suppress a laugh.

"Don't see no other in here, do you?" I said.

"My lord."

"Name's Charlie, but 'my lord' will do just as well." I winked, warming to my bit of fun. Mimicking and mocking the upper classes had always been a popular pastime in the slums, no matter if it were Stringer's gang or any of the others I'd lived with over the years.

Gillingham's wide nostrils flared and his pale blue eyes flashed. "Do not play the fool with me."

"Yes, my lord." Perhaps riling him wasn't a good idea when he could prove an ally. I knelt on the carpet and clutched my hands together. "Please, my lord, will you help me? The man named Fitzroy has kidnapped me and is keeping me prisoner here. Against my will," I added when he gave no sign of concern or surprise.

He stalked around the room, pinching his nose when he spotted my sick, then came back to stand in front of me. "He tells me you have not yet answered any of his questions."

I went to stand, but he poked his walking stick into my shoulder. "Stay."

"I am not a dog," I spat.

His top lip curled up. "No. A dog would do as his master bid and be thankful for what he's been given. People like you are fit only for picking up the shit of dogs."

Charming fellow, although hearing "shit" said in his toff accent was quite

amusing. Stringer and the others would laugh if I mimicked this conversation for them.

"Where is the girl?" he asked.

"I already told Mr. Fitzroy, I don't know no girls, I ain't got no relatives, and I don't know what happened in no prison cell. My answers ain't changed."

"Not yet."

"Huh?"

His top lip curled again and he circled me slowly. He didn't lean on his stick, and I wondered why he carried it. It was part of his nobleman's image, I supposed, like the accent and sneer. "Fitzroy is too lenient this time," he said quietly, as if speaking to himself. "I do not pretend to understand why, when a good beating ought to produce answers. He rarely shows mercy, so why start now?"

I gulped. "Where is Mr. Fitzroy?"

"I will ask the questions. Where are you from? Who are your parents?"

I swiveled to keep him in my sights.

His face turned pink then a mottled red, and his lips quivered. "Answer me!"

I clenched my jaw and held the man's gaze with my own. I would not let him intimidate me. He might be a lord, but he wasn't my master. "Buckingham Palace, and her majesty the queen. I call her Mum."

The walking stick smacked across my back. I arched forward and gasped as hot pain bloomed. I gathered my nerves and steadied my breathing to control the agony. If I let it rule me, I would give in, and I didn't want to give in to this man. I went to stand, but he shoved me so hard with his boot that I fell onto my side. I scrambled away, but he followed me, stick raised. Glacial eyes pinned me to the carpet as thoroughly as his boot did.

"I'll ask again," he snarled. "Where are you from and who are your parents?"

I hesitated, trying to think of the ramifications if I told him the truth about my Tufnell Park home and Father. But I couldn't think. The fierce pumping of blood through my veins and the knot of anxiety in my stomach were playing havoc with my mind.

He raised the stick again and I braced myself. It cracked across my shoulder with bruising force. He raised it again and I scampered further, only to hit the wall. Gillingham stalked toward me like a hunter tracking his prey. With a gleam in his eye, he brought the cane down on me again. And again. And again.

## CHAPTER 3



I ENDURED EACH BLOW, managing to protect my face, but my left arm, shoulder, side and leg took the full force of his strikes.

And then they suddenly stopped.

"What the blazes are you doing, Fitzroy?"

I peeked through my fingers to see Fitzroy holding the stick and glaring at Gillingham like he wanted to smash him with it. I hadn't heard him enter. Over by the door, Gus and Seth stared like simpletons at the lord and their master, their lips apart, their eyes wide.

I wiped my tears and snot on my sleeve to remove the evidence of my fear and pain. But I couldn't stop the shaking.

"Don't touch him," Fitzroy said in a low voice that I had to strain to hear.

Gillingham tugged on his jacket lapels and tilted his chin even further. "The ministry hasn't become what it is today without laying a corrective hand or two on little rats like him."

"He is a child." Fitzroy spoke through a jaw so tight that it barely moved.

Gillingham wrinkled his nose at me. "Children are capable of duplicitous thoughts and behavior, just as adults are. Children like that one are vermin, not fit for the comforts you offered him. Of course he won't tell you anything useful. Look at that." He nodded at the clothes still folded on the bed, untouched. "He doesn't want to help himself. Filthy creatures like him are a

scab on a decent, God-fearing society. He even threw up the food you provided, the ungrateful little wretch."

The angles on Fitzroy's face sharpened. His eyes narrowed to pinpoints. The air in the room stretched thin, taut. I held my breath, waiting for his temper to explode. "I am in charge of the ministry now, and I say how we treat our informants." Fitzroy's voice was cool and ominously quiet.

Either Gillingham didn't fear his temper, or he wasn't terribly observant, because he didn't back out of the room as I would have done if I were him. He straightened and squared his shoulders. "You are only in charge because the committee put you there. And the committee do as *I* say, Fitzroy."

"No."

"No?" Gillingham spluttered a humorless laugh. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you need to get out of Lichfield Towers before I turn your stick on you."

Gillingham did take a step back then. His gaze flicked from the stick to Fitzroy's menacing face, where it settled with renewed determination. "You get above yourself again, *Fitzroy*. Do not forget who I am, and do not forget what I know. I can crush you."

"Seth," Fitzroy said.

Seth stood to attention. "Yes, sir?"

"See that Lord Gillingham finds his way safely to his coach."

"Certainly, sir." Seth didn't bat an eyelid at the tense exchange, but Gus, just behind him, gawped openly as Gillingham and Fitzroy glared daggers at one another.

Seth cleared his throat. "My lord, the, er, stairs are this way."

Gillingham pushed past the men without a backward glance at me. "The committee will hear of this!" His heavy footsteps echoed for some time until they muted into nothing.

The tension in the bedroom relaxed somewhat, but a sense of

awkwardness lingered. Or perhaps it was me who felt awkward, as all eyes focused on me now. I wished they would ignore me. I preferred to go undetected, blending in with the other boys when I could, or simply vanishing altogether when I could not. This attention was far too unnerving.

"He forgot his stick," Gus said with a nod at the cane still in Fitzroy's hand. "Not that he needed it. Bloody toff walked out of here without a limp."

Fitzroy had been watching me from beneath lowered lids, but now he grasped the stick with both hands and snapped it over his knee. He opened the window and threw both pieces out.

Someone below cursed loudly. I hoped it was Gillingham.

Fitzroy shut the window. "Help him out of his shirt."

"Don't come near me," I snarled at Gus and Seth.

Seth frowned, but Gus approached. He reached for the top button on my shirt. I slapped his hand away.

"I'm only trying to help!"

"Don't come near me," I said again.

"I ain't going to hurt you, Half Pint," Gus said. "Just get your shirt off and let us look at your sores." He reached for me again and this time I grabbed his hand and bit it.

He yelped and went to slap me. I jerked away and he made no connection. It was just an empty threat.

"Leave him," Fitzroy said.

"I weren't going to hit him," Gus grumbled. "Just scare him into doing as he's told."

"Fetch clean water, a salve and bandages."

Seth hurried out of the room. Gus regarded me with hands on hips. "Saying we get him to take his own shirt off, do you think he'll let you tend his wounds, sir? I wish Lady Harcourt were here," he added before Fitzroy answered. "She'd know how to get the lad to trust us."

A lady? That was all I needed—another bloody toff. I'd only met one, but

that had proved to be enough for me to thoroughly dislike the lot of them. "I can tend my own wounds," I said before one of them got ideas that they would do it.

"You cannot *see* all your wounds," Fitzroy said.

"I don't need to."

Fitzroy's eyes narrowed. "Help him stand."

Gus came forward, but I put my hand up. "I don't need help."

To prove my point, I got to my knees. Pain spiked through my body and made my head spin. I put a hand to the wall and concentrated on controlling my breathing. Everything hurt, but I couldn't let the men know, or Fitzroy would insist on inspecting my wounds.

The breathing helped and although the pain didn't lessen, I could endure it. I got to my feet and raised my brows in triumph at Fitzroy.

"Sit on the bed," was all he said.

I eyed the bed. "I have lice."

Gus pulled a face and scratched his head.

"That's why you were given clean clothes," Fitzroy said. "Remove your rags and throw them in the fireplace. We'll shave your head. Gus—"

"No!" I inched away from both men. "I'll change into them clothes myself when you're not looking. And you're not touching my hair." I'd had beautiful hair as a child. Long golden curls had reached down to my lower back. Now it was above my shoulders, with a long fringe, and it was light brown. Shaving it off meant losing a little bit more of the real me, as well as losing the veil it provided.

"Why d'you care?" Gus said with a shrug. "It's just hair."

"Can you walk?" Fitzroy asked. I nodded. "Then come with me. Gus, fetch salt from the pantry. Lots of it. And kerosene."

"Cook won't like me taking his salt, sir."

Fitzroy picked up the pile of fresh clothes from the bed then stood by the door. Gus slumped out and I followed at a slower pace that still made me

wince as I put pressure on my leg. At least no bones had been broken, but it damn well hurt. Gus trotted down the stairs ahead of us.

"What's the salt for?" I asked Fitzroy.

"Your bath."

"But that'll hurt!"

"And heal."

I stopped and folded my arms, but that only made the bruises down my left side ache more. "I'm not having no salt bath."

"Then you can succumb to either Gus or Seth rubbing salve into your wounds."

"It's just some bruises. Salt won't do much for them."

"There's blood on your back and shoulder."

I tugged the shirt at my shoulder to get a better look at it. There wasn't a lot of blood, but even small cuts could fester.

"You have a choice," Fitzroy said. "A salt bath or Gus will play doctor." He continued down the stairs without watching to see if I followed. "You cannot reach the cuts yourself."

With a sigh, I trailed after him. He was right, and my wounds needed tending, but I couldn't let anyone see my body. "And the kerosene? I ain't putting that on my sores."

"For the lice."

It was what my mother had used on my hair the one time I'd picked up head lice. "I'll need a narrow toothed comb too."

I followed Fitzroy down two flights of stairs and along a corridor. We passed no one, and I heard no sounds of life coming from elsewhere in the house. Gus had mentioned a cook, and the absent Lady Harcourt perhaps lived there, but what about other servants? A house on the scale of Lichfield Towers ought to have footmen and maids, a housekeeper and butler. Perhaps their duties were done for the day and they were downstairs in the service area with the cook. I didn't know the routine of grand households.

In the bathroom, Fitzroy opened the taps and the cast iron tub began to fill with hot and cold water. My father's house didn't have indoor plumbing, and the ease with which the bath was drawn amazed me. I dipped my hand in and suppressed a smile. The water felt wonderfully warm.

Seth arrived with the salve, then Gus brought in a bag of salt and a bottle of kerosene. He added the entire bag to the bathtub as Seth poured the kerosene into the washbasin and added some water. He pulled a comb out of his jacket pocket and placed it on the washstand.

Fitzroy ushered them out. "You will not be disturbed. A guard will remain outside and that window needs a key to unlock it. We are also two floors up with no means of climbing down. There is no escape." With his unspoken warning hanging in the air, he left.

I slid the lock home and stared at the door, half expecting someone to bang on it and order me to open up. Nobody did. Seth and Gus's voices rumbled in conversation as they quietly discussed Gillingham's behavior and Fitzroy's cold ire. I understood that to mean Fitzroy had left.

I washed the hair on my head and nether regions first. The diluted kerosene burned my skin, but I knew it ought to kill any of the crawlies. I didn't rush combing my hair, even though I wanted to climb into the bath. My mother had told me the lice would return if the eggs weren't completely removed. It wasn't easy to de-lice my own hair, even with the mirror, but I was as thorough as possible. I tried not to think about being around lice-infested bedding and children again after I escaped Lichfield. At least I would be itch-free for a few days.

Finally I peeled off my clothes and stepped into the bath. The salt bit into the cuts, but the thought of being clean again was so alluring that I bore down on the pain and plunged in. I gasped as my body burned. It felt like thousands of pins were being stabbed into the cuts. The urge to leap out of the bath was overwhelming, but I resisted. The salt would heal me faster, and I needed to be healed for when I returned to the filthy, germ infested streets.

After a long few minutes, the agony subsided until my cuts merely stung. I embraced it, welcoming the salt into my skin, and closed my eyes. For a long time I simply soaked. My earlier wash in the tower bedroom had taken much of the filth off, but immersing myself in the bath seemed more thorough. I could *feel* years of dirt leaching out of me. I used the exotic smelling soap on my skin and hair until the odor of salt and kerosene no longer filled my nostrils, and then I washed myself again with it.

Earlier, I'd thought bathing would make me too comfortable at Lichfield Towers, but now I wished I hadn't resisted. Surely one bath and a little food didn't mean I would give up my secrets. There was no reason I couldn't enjoy the comforts until I found a way to escape.

I remained in the bath even when the water cooled. Getting out meant returning to the tower room and being questioned by Fitzroy. While he hadn't hurt me, I didn't trust him not to snap when my refusal to answer stretched his patience too thin. I would need to watch him carefully for signs that his hard exterior was about to crack. Keeping my life and my identity safe had meant learning to read even the subtlest of cues given by those around me. Fitzroy, however, was more difficult. He seemed to have few expressions and held himself with stillness. A machine, Gus had called him. I could well see why.

The banging on the door startled me. "Oi!" Gus called. "You drowned or what?"

"Go away!"

"We can't stand round here all day. It's almost dinner time."

Was it that late already? The water was getting cold anyway so I climbed out and dried myself off. I dabbed some of the salve on the cuts I could reach, then finally dressed in the clean clothes. I left my old ones in a puddle in the corner. They were fit only for burning.

I went to adjust my long fringe over my face in front of the mirror, then paused. My skin was no longer dirty and my hair was already drying into waves. I brushed it back with my fingers and stared at the woman in the

reflection. There was no way I could fool anyone now that I was clean. My features were too fine and feminine, the plumpness of the thirteen year-old gone. I had changed so much that I hardly recognized myself.

I dipped into an awkward curtsy and smiled at an imaginary gentleman come to ask me to dance. "Why, thank you, sir," I whispered. "My hair is my crowning glory, so everyone says."

I sounded ridiculous. I looked it too with the short ends of my hair sticking out between my fingers. With a sigh, I let it fall back to cover my eyes, cheeks and nose.

"Farewell, Charlotte," I whispered, biting back tears. "It was a pleasure to see you again."

I unlocked the door and held my breath as both Seth and Gus looked me over.

Gus sniffed. "You smell better."

"The clothes are a little big," Seth said. "At least they're clean." He chuckled and ruffled my hair.

I smacked his hand away, but I was relieved that they still saw me as a boy.

"Come on, back to the tower room with you." Gus prodded one of my new bruises and I hissed in pain. "Sorry, Half Pint. Forgot."

They marched me up the stairs and led me back into the tower room. I eyed the bed, this time allowing myself to imagine what it would be like to sink into the mattress.

"Sure you don't want me to check you over, make sure nothing's broken?" Seth asked.

"I'm sure."

"Suit yourself. I'll bring you some dinner soon."

"What d'you think's wrong with him?" I heard Gus whisper to Seth as they left. "Deformed pizzle? Only one plum? Third nipple?"

I didn't hear Seth's response as he shut the door and locked it. It didn't

matter what they thought, only that they left me alone. They had, and the bed was calling me. I climbed onto it and peeled back the covers. The sheets smelled like sunshine and lavender, and were as white as snow. I lay down and my head sank into the pillow. Heaven. Nothing had ever felt so soft.

I suddenly felt exhausted. The warm bath, warm room and big bed all conspired against me. There would be no attempted escapes tonight, while my body was weary and half broken. Tonight, there would only be blissful sleep.

Tomorrow, however, was a new day.



I WOKE up to morning sunlight shooting through the crack between the closed curtains. A cold supper sat on the dressing table. I pulled the curtains aside and threw open the window. It was the sort of summer day I used to appreciate when I was a child. Father would drive us to the countryside for a picnic after church, or Mama and I would pick flowers from the garden and take them to poor parishioners along with loaves of bread. I'd forgotten how to enjoy summer since then. Probably because warm days meant the smell from the sewers became overpowering, and the rats and lice multiplied.

I ate the cold beef and carrots, but left the rest. I didn't want to throw up again and I already felt full. Someone had cleaned up the sick from the previous day and set out a clean shirt. I'd have to remember to take it with me when I left.

Seth and Gus came mid-morning. One carried books and the other paper and ink. I almost fell off my chair in my haste to touch them. I took the topmost book from the stack that Gus set down. It was a novel titled *A Study In Scarlet* by Conan Doyle.

It had been an age since I'd held a book. I used to love to read, although Father didn't allow novels at home. It seemed rather scandalous to simply

hold one. I wondered what was so wicked about *A Study In Scarlet*. I couldn't wait to find out.

But...*why* were they delivering books to me?

I returned the book to the stack and backed away. "I don't know how to read," I told the men. "I don't know why you'd bring them in here."

Gus flipped through the pages of the novel then carelessly tossed it on the bed. "Death's orders. Don't know why he thinks you'd want 'em. Wasted on you, if you ask me."

"Wasted on you, too," Seth said.

"I can read."

"Barely." Seth turned to me. "Death says you're to have whatever you want."

"I want my freedom."

"Except that."

Gus picked up a cold green bean from my plate, tilted his head back and deposited it like a worm being fed to a bird. "He thinks boys want books and writing paper," he said as he chewed. "I reckon he's forgotten what it were like, being a lad."

"Just because you have no use for these things doesn't mean Charlie doesn't want them." Seth winked at me.

I worried he'd seen my reaction to the book and knew I could read. "I don't want them," I said. "Take them away."

"Can't," Gus said. "Death said to bring 'em to you, so we did." He picked up the plate and headed for the door.

"Wait!"

Both men stopped and blinked at me.

Now that I had their attention, I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to say to them. No, that wasn't quite right. There was a great deal I wanted to say to them. I just wasn't sure where to *start*. "Where's Mr. Fitzroy?"

"Out."

Good. That was one less person I had to worry about, and going on previous experience, I could outrun Gus and Seth. "Who else is in the house?"

"Never you mind," Seth said before Gus could answer. "You'll only see us while you're in here."

"Who is Lady Harcourt?"

"Death's mistress," Gus said.

Seth slapped Gus's shoulder. "He won't like you telling the lad that."

"The boy's thirteen and been living on the street! He's probably had more girls than you. Unlike you toffs, lads like Charlie and me dipped our wicks soon as we could. Eh, Half Pint? Talk about lovers ain't going to shock you, is it?"

"I wasn't referring to educating the boy in the ways of romantic relationships. I meant Death won't like you calling Lady Harcourt his mistress."

Gus sniffed. "Because she's a toff?"

"Yes, but also because she may or may not be his lover anymore. He seems a little cooler toward her lately."

"Don't know how you know the difference. He's always showed as much warmth as an icicle to anyone, including her, far as I can tell."

"That's because you're an unobservant nitwit."

I only half listened to their bantering. I couldn't stop thinking about Fitzroy having a lover. Like Gus, I couldn't imagine their leader capable of a romantic relationship, as Seth had called it. He seemed as passionate as a stone.

"What is the ministry?" I said, cutting through their bickering.

"Save your questions for Death," Seth said.

"When will he be back?"

"Later."

"And what am I to do until then?"

He nodded at the books. "Teach yourself to read."

The men left. They continued to bicker outside, until one set of footsteps receded. The other must have remained to guard me. I didn't think it necessary, since I was locked in.

I sighed. Escaping would have to wait. Perhaps the next time they delivered provisions, I could slip past them and out through the unlocked door. Until then, I had a book to read.

I pulled the chair over to the door and set it against the wall. I stuffed the spare shirt down the front of the one I wore then sat on the chair to read. I was ready to spring up the moment the door opened.

After the first ten pages, I'd decided to take the book with me when I escaped. My reading was a little rusty, but I managed to follow the story, despite not understanding some of the more complicated words. I read several more pages before the door opened.

"Luncheon is—"

I sprang up, ducked under the tray Seth carried, and darted through the door and past Gus.

"Get him!" Seth shouted.

Gus let out a string of curses that would have made a lady blush, then lumbered down the stairs after me. My bruised left side throbbed in protest, but I outpaced the bigger, slower guard easily enough. I took the stairs two at a time, and leaped over bannister handrails to avoid the landings altogether. On the final flight, I slid down the bannister to the floor.

Momentum propelled me forward toward the front door. I hoped it was unlocked, and that I was fast enough to outrun Gus and Seth and got to the trees before them. Once there, I could hide or climb the fence. I knew how to disappear in Highgate, as long as I wasn't captured before I reached the street.

"Get back here!" Gus shouted. Two sets of footsteps pounded behind me now, but I'd outstripped them by a considerable margin.

I was almost free.

"Halt or I'll shoot."

I glanced toward the voice to see a beautiful woman aiming a small pistol at me. My heart and feet stopped dead.

I was not free.

## CHAPTER 4



"REMOVE THE BOOK," the woman commanded. "We don't want him using it as a weapon."

Gus went to snatch the book from my hand, but I refused to give it up. It was a silly thing to worry about, while a gun was pointed at my head, but the thought of permanently losing the book weighed heavily on my heart. With a click of his tongue and an almighty wrench, Gus freed it from my clutches. He tucked it under his arm, where I worried his sweaty pits would stain the cover.

"Bring him into the parlor." The woman turned her back on me. The hand that held the muff pistol dipped into the folds of her lustrous black skirts and came out empty.

Seth and Gus glanced at one another, their brows raised. "Shouldn't we take him back to the tower room, my lady?" Gus asked.

"He will be fine with me." The woman's gliding steps reminded me of a sleek, unhurried cat. Perhaps it was the tight corset that slowed her movements. Having worn the undergarment before my banishment, I knew how restrictive they could be, and going by the woman's tiny waist, she must have her laces tied very tightly indeed. It was so small it was a wonder she could hold up the top half of her body, particularly considering she possessed ripe melons rather than raspberries, as Stringer would say.

"Fetch luncheon for him," she ordered the men. "He may eat while you both guard the exit."

Gus shoved me in the back. I grunted and shot him a glare. He shrugged an apology, which surprised me. Seth returned up the stairs with my book.

Gus and I followed the woman into a small room off the entrance hall. I tried not to gawp at the pale blue and gold wallpaper, thick rug, and spindly-legged furniture that didn't look sturdy enough to hold a man the size of Gus. It was fortunate that he remained near the door.

The woman sat on the sofa and indicated I should sit on one of the cream wingback chairs. I hesitated then sprawled like I imagined a boy would. I'd never had the opportunity to sit on such a luxurious piece of furniture while pretending to be a boy, so I hoped I did it right. Usually sitting took place on floors or low walls, not chairs.

The room was lovely with so many elegant things on the mantel, the walls, and on top of and inside the glass cabinet, but my attention was fully captured by the woman. She perched gracefully on the edge of the sofa, giving her prominent bustle space behind her. Her midnight black hair was arranged in an elaborate style at the back of her head, unhindered by the little hat perched on top. I couldn't determine her age. There was no gray in her hair, no lines marring her smooth, pale skin, and yet her bearing was that of a middle-aged woman, sure of her appeal and without the arrogance of a pretty, pampered girl.

She oozed authority, from the tips of her manicured fingernails to her tilted chin. Coupled with the striking aristocratic bones of her face, her confident air would have intimidated most men; yet her appearance was softened by full lips that curved into a warm smile as she regarded me.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Fat Gut called you 'my lady,'" I said.

"Oi," Gus growled from the doorway. "I ain't fat." He sucked in his stomach and puffed out his chest.

"So I'm guessing you're Lady Harcourt," I finished. I almost added "Fitzroy's lover" just to see what her reaction would be, but held back. I didn't want to be beaten up by yet another member of the aristocracy.

"I am," she said in a lilting voice that held none of the harsh command of earlier. "Your name is Charlie, is it not?"

"T'is, my lady."

"Have they been treating you well?" she asked.

"I'm being held against my will. As if that ain't bad enough, a mad toff beat me black and blue yesterday."

The hint of a smile vanished altogether and she folded her gloved hands one over the other on her lap. "I heard that Lord Gillingham was too heavy handed. It is regrettable."

I snorted. "I'll say it is."

"Have your wounds been tended to?"

"Yes."

"Has Lincoln—Mr. Fitzroy—harmed you in any way?"

"He almost killed me when he kidnapped me." At her surprised look, I added, "I stopped breathing."

Her slender eyebrows lowered. "I dare say he knew what he was doing. He's not in the habit of hurting children, and I'm sure whatever methods he employed were necessary."

She said it as if it were perfectly normal for a man to kidnap a child and render him unconscious in the process. I was beginning to think I'd stepped into another world where such behavior was acceptable. Perhaps it *was* in the upper classes. Or perhaps Lady Harcourt was as mad and dangerous as Fitzroy and Lord Gillingham. I wasn't yet sure what to make of her.

"Do you have comforts in your room?" she asked.

I shrugged one shoulder.

"Ask Lincoln for whatever you desire and he'll do his best to give it to you." Lincoln, not Mr. Fitzroy. Interesting. She blinked wide brown eyes at

me. "Tell me about yourself, Charlie."

She was a better interrogator than Fitzroy, I'd give her that. She'd tried to disarm me by asking after my comfort, and offering friendly smiles, then asked an innocuously broad question about myself, rather than one specific to the necromancy incident.

A naive child would have fallen under her spell, but I was no longer naive or a child. "I'm thirteen. I live in Clerkenwell, with Stringer and his gang. I steal to eat and keep warm in winter. I'm good at thieving, that's why they call me Fleet-foot Charlie. I've been told I'm too skinny, but seems to me everyone in the gang is skinny. I thought my hair was dark brown until I washed it yesterday and saw it in the mirror. Turns out it's light brown. My nose has a dint on the tip, which I hate but had forgotten about until yesterday, and my eyes are blue. There ain't no more to tell."

The curve of her lips widened a little more. "What shade of blue?"

"Just blue."

"May I see?"

"No."

"I'd call your hair honey colored, not light brown." She gave a low, throaty chuckle. "We women enjoy these little distinctions."

"I don't care. It's brown."

"Why do you cover your face?"

"I'm ugly."

"Why not allow me to judge?"

I glared at her but it was difficult to know if she noticed through my hair. Fortunately, she didn't ask Gus to pin me down while she pulled the hair off my face.

Seth arrived and deposited the tray with my luncheon on the table next to me. He backed away and joined Gus near the door. I eyed the plate of salad greens, tomato and a wing of poultry.

"You speak well," Lady Harcourt went on. "You've had an education?"

"No," I lied.

"But you can read."

I shook my head. "I was stealing the book, not reading it. I thought it might be worth something."

"I see." She indicated the tray of food. "Don't let me keep you."

"I just ate breakfast." Actually breakfast had been the cold supper from the previous night, but it was more than I usually ate in two days. "I'm not hungry."

Her smile turned a little sad, but I couldn't think why. If she felt sorry for me, it was an odd time to show sympathy for my plight. She'd made sure I wasn't going to leave. If I darted for the window now, would she pull out her pistol again?

"Do you have any questions for me, Charlie?"

I knew everything I needed to know already—these people wanted me because I'd made a dead man walk. The sort of people who knew that yet showed no fear around me weren't ordinary, moral people. There was something as diabolical about them as there was about me.

"Only one question," I said. "Where is Mr. Fitzroy?"

Her rapid blinks were the only sign that my question had taken her by surprise. "He'll be back later this afternoon." It wasn't a direct answer, but I didn't ask again.

The clock on the mantel chimed one and Lady Harcourt stood. "I have an appointment. Seth, please inform Mr. Fitzroy that I'm sorry to have missed him. If he could spare a few moments to visit me, I would be most grateful."

So it seemed she didn't live at Lichfield Towers, although she treated Seth and Gus as her servants and they did her bidding without question.

"Good day, Charlie," Lady Harcourt said. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

She walked off and I saw my chance slipping away from me. I'd taken too long to act. I blamed her lovely, mesmerizing presence. "Wait!" I leapt up and ran after her.

Seth and Gus stepped between us, protecting her, but she didn't seem as worried by my approach as them. "What is it, Charlie? Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"I...I'd like to kiss your hand, m'lady." It seemed like such a ridiculous thing to request that I blushed. I hoped it made me look innocent and endearing.

It must have worked because she ordered the men to move aside. She extended her gloved hand and I stepped forward, close enough that I brushed against her full skirts. I took the hand and pecked it. The lace of her glove felt scratchy against my lips and her exotic floral scent filled my nostrils. I breathed deeply, committing the smell to memory. I didn't know the names of the different scents that made up her perfume, but I vowed that one day I would learn them.

"Thank you, m'lady," I said, stepping back. "You are very kind and lovely. I wish you only good things."

She laughed softly. "You are quite the flatterer. Be sure to use such sweet words on your lady love."

I dipped my head in a bow, my hands at my back, and watched as she left. Both Gus and Seth's gazes followed her, even though they didn't escort her, and I used their distraction to quickly tuck the little pistol into the waistband of my trousers. I adjusted my shirt to hide it and prayed Lady Harcourt didn't notice it missing from her skirt pocket until she was far from Lichfield Towers.

"Upstairs again with you, Half Pint," Gus said cheerfully.

I walked ahead of them out of the parlor. As we passed the front door, I heard the wheels of a carriage roll away and breathed a sigh.

"You like our Lady Harcourt, eh?" Gus chuckled as we headed up the stairs. "She ain't for the likes of you. Not even if you were ten years older."

"Is she married?" I didn't know why I wanted to know more about the woman. It wasn't like I would see her again. But I found her intriguing. I

supposed it was because I'd never met anyone like her before, and it was unlikely I ever would again.

"Widowed," Seth said. "Her husband was Lord Harcourt, from a very ancient and noble line. He was much older than her, and some say she married him for his money and title."

"But you don't?"

"There's never been a whiff of scandal associated with her."

"Why would there be?" Gus said. "She knew which side her bread were buttered on. She'd be a fool to give it all up for a bit of priggging."

Seth rolled his eyes. "Don't be so vulgar, particularly when speaking about Lady Harcourt. She's a true lady, in every sense of the word."

"Except by birth."

"She wasn't noble born?" I asked.

"Nah," Gus said. "School master's daughter. Caught the eye of old Lord Harcourt and got him to the church quick, before his grown children knew what was happening."

"They never said a word against her, though," Seth protested.

"That we know."

"By all accounts, they liked her instantly. One can see why."

"One can see why," Gus mimicked. "One is in love with her, isn't one?"

I saw Seth punch Gus in the shoulder out of the corner of my eye. "You can't know what his family thought of her," I said.

Seth squared his shoulders. "I can and I do. My mother moves in the same circles as the Harcourts." He sighed. "Or used to."

Gus groaned. "Seth's been dying for you to ask about him. Likes to make sure even the prisoners know he's from toff stock."

"There have been other prisoners besides me?"

"Nah. Matter of speech. You're our first."

"That explains why you're not very good jailors," I muttered.

I expected a thump on my arm for my insolence, but Gus only snorted a

laugh. Seth didn't seem to have heard me. Although I was curious about his background, and why his circumstances had become so reduced that he'd wound up working as a thug for Fitzroy, I decided not to ask. It was better not to get too friendly with my captors, since I might have to hurt them.

I entered the tower room with a loud sigh, although I was pleased to see *A Study In Scarlet* on the dressing table near the other books. It wouldn't hurt to while away the afternoon reading it. I couldn't use the pistol and attempt an escape with both Seth and Gus in the room. The barrel was single shot. I would have to wait until there was only one of them.

"Don't think about running off this time," Gus warned. "Death ain't going to be happy when he hears of it."

I shrugged. "I don't care."

"You should. He's dangerous when he's in a rage."

"I'm sure he is, but it's not me he'll be angry with. As a prisoner, my duty is to escape. As my jailors, it's your duty to keep me in here. Which one of us failed?"

Gus swallowed. "What d'you think he'll do to us?" he said to Seth.

Seth gave him a smug smile and patted his shoulder. "He won't do anything to me. *I* was holding the tray and didn't have my hands free. You were the one supposedly on guard."

"That ain't fair."

"Life isn't fair. If it were, I'd be spending my evenings deflowering virgins instead of cleaning up the sick of a gutter snipe."

"Ha! You couldn't deflower a flower."

"That doesn't make sense. And I'll have you know, the ladies fell over themselves to get to me when I used to attend balls."

"You had money and a good name, then," Gus said, striding for the door. "Course they're going to throw themselves at you. Weren't nothing to do with that ugly face of yours."

Seth looked offended, and I couldn't blame him. He wasn't ugly in the

least. He trailed after Gus. "I'll have you know I had an indecent encounter with a lady three nights ago. And no, I didn't pay her a penny. She gave herself freely to me."

"Gave you the French disease for free, more like." Gus's chuckles faded as he closed the door.

Finally I was alone again. I settled on the bed with the book and removed the pistol from the waistband at my back. I checked the barrel to see if it was loaded—it was—then slid it beneath the pillow beside me. I tried not to think about it and concentrated on the book instead, but it wasn't easy. I'd never shot anyone before.

Despite the apprehension curdling in the pit of my stomach, the afternoon didn't drag. The book was riveting, and I found myself reading as quickly as possible.

The clicking of the key in the lock startled me. How much time had passed? I took note of my page then closed the book and slipped my hand beneath the pillow. The metal of the pistol felt cool in my fingers. My pulse quickened.

Death walked in. His assessing gaze took in the book and my relaxed repose. "You met Lady Harcourt." He did not mention my attempted escape.

"She's very nice."

Behind him, Seth and Gus crowded in the doorway.

"I'm hungry," I said.

"I'll fetch you something from the kitchen." Seth trotted off.

"My chamber pot needs emptying," I told Gus.

He screwed up his nose. "Should've offered to get the food." He slid the pan out from beneath the bed and left the room in much less of a hurry than Gus. I was alone with Fitzroy. With Death.

He moved toward the bed, his long, easy strides bringing him close to me much faster than I anticipated. With my heart in my throat, I pulled the pistol out from under the pillow, aimed at his shoulder and fired.

Next thing I knew, he was sitting on top of my thighs, pinning my wrists to the headboard. I bucked but couldn't dislodge him. I went to butt my forehead into his nose, but he dodged the blow. I hawked up a glob of saliva, but before I could spit it into his face, he'd shifted his weight, lifted me, and threw me face down onto the mattress. He resettled his weight on my legs and pressed a hand into my back. He took the pistol off me. Just like that, I was rendered immobile and defenseless. It had been far too easy for him.

"Lady Harcourt will be pleased to have this returned," he drawled.

A grunt was all I could manage.

Footsteps pounded along the corridor and stopped at the door. Gus and Seth's faces peeped around the corner and, seeing their leader in control, they entered the room.

"We heard a gunshot," Gus said, his eyes huge.

"Sir!" Seth cried. "You're bleeding!"

I'd shot him? He'd not shown any signs of pain or even a little discomfort, nor were his movements hindered. He'd attacked me so fast that I'd not seen him coming. I tried to look back at him to see how badly he was hurt, but the angle was too awkward and he pressed his knee into my lower back, locking me in position.

I sucked air through my teeth as the bruises inflicted by Lord Gillingham flared with pain.

"You should tend to it," Seth went on.

"It's nothing." Fitzroy let me go and climbed off the bed. A patch of blood bloomed on his shoulder, but it was hardly a significant amount. "Go." He spoke to the men but didn't take his gaze off me. His eyes were like two pools of black ice.

Gus and Seth exchanged glances then left the room again. They shut the door.

I scooted back up the bed, as far away from him as possible. When it came, his retaliation would be swift and brutal. I braced myself.

"Your hands shook."

I blinked slowly. "Wh-what d'you mean?"

He balanced the weapon on the flat of his palm. "You didn't hesitate and your gaze was focused, but your hands shook. If they'd been steady the bullet would have hit my throat."

I hadn't been aiming for his throat, but his shoulder. My aim had been better than he thought, but not good enough. The bullet must be lodged somewhere in the wall. "You moved. If I didn't hesitate, how did you know I was going to shoot?"

"I can't give away all my secrets."

All? So far, he'd given away nothing. "So I am to remain your prisoner. I have tried escaping, twice today, and yet here I am. What will you do to me?"

Despite his bleeding shoulder, he remained standing. Perhaps he thought sitting was a sign of weakness. "I will not *do* anything to you, child."

I was beginning to hate it when he called me that. Nobody called me "child" anymore. Not since I was a thirteen year-old girl. "Then you will let me go?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I will wait."

"For what? For Hell to freeze over? Because that's when I'll give you answers, and not before."

"I'm a patient man, Charlie, but the situation requires some urgency. The lives of British citizens are in danger, perhaps the life of the queen herself."

I snorted. "You think that ridiculous fairytale will have me telling you anything?"

"I thought you said you had nothing more to tell me."

Damn. "I don't. You're wasting your time and mine."

"Have an appointment to keep?"

I gave him a withering glare. His expression didn't change from his usual

bland one.

"I returned to Clerkenwell today," he said. "I spoke to your friends."

"They're not my friends."

After a moment he said, "I'm glad you realize that. They were quick to tell me what I wanted to know."

"You gave them money."

"Not much."

I folded the book in my arms against my chest. "And what did they tell you?"

"They told me where they think you came from before they met you mere months ago."

"How can they know where I came from?"

Again he hesitated, as if weighing up how much to tell me. "Your accent and a few words you used were more common in the Whitehall area."

"I don't have no accent." So I'd thought. Yet he'd been correct. I'd lived in Whitehall before Clerkenwell.

"I traveled to Whitehall and asked around. A boy matching your description lived there for six months or so. They thought he'd come from Finsbury. Tomorrow I'll send Gus and Seth there to find out about a child who kept his brown hair over his face to hide it." He took a step toward me and lowered his voice. "I *will* find out where you came from, Charlie, and I when I do, I'll discover how it is you can bring the dead back to life."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. I couldn't look away. His gaze held me, pinning me as thoroughly as his body had done moments ago on the bed.

"Here you go," Seth said, carrying a plate of food in. Gus entered behind him.

Fitzroy stepped back and marched out the door. "Follow me. Bring the boy and his books. I see he's already in possession of the spare shirt."

I was too stunned to do anything but follow meekly. Fitzroy had not only

dodged the bullet intended for him, but he'd learned more about my past than I'd have liked. And his methods were going to lead him to discover the truth. My only hope was that the further back in time he went, the slower his investigation would become. Gangs broke up, and children died or moved on. And then, of course, he would hit a wall altogether. He would be asking about a boy with hair covering his face, not a girl. My secrets were safe until I chose to reveal them.

*If* I chose to do so. I didn't believe his silly story about the queen's life being in danger. I certainly didn't want to reanimate the dead for him or his cause, no matter what it was. On the other hand, Lady Harcourt was his ally, in whatever scheme they had in mind, and surely such a fine noblewoman wouldn't want me to do anything wrong.

"Where are we taking him, sir?" Seth's question might as well have fallen on deaf ears. Fitzroy strode ahead, heading down two flights of stairs then swiftly along the corridor that housed the bathroom.

Gus prodded me in the back with the clean chamber pot he still held and I had to trot to keep up with Fitzroy. Finally we reached the end of the long corridor and stopped at a door.

"He's to stay in here until I give further word," Fitzroy said, opening the door.

Seth gasped. "But these are *your* chambers?"

I was as confused as he and Gus. Why did Fitzroy want me in there instead of the tower room?

"It's larger and more comfortable for two."

"Two, sir? Are you going to remain here?"

"He seems to be able to outwit you both too easily. I'll guard him, from now on."

Seth shuffled his feet and Gus's cheeks colored. I wondered if they would be in more trouble later or if that was the extent of it.

I hugged the book to my chest. He was right. I could trick Seth and Gus,

but Fitzroy was too clever to fall for my ruses. On the other hand, he was only one man, and even he needed to sleep. He was *not* a machine.

He stepped aside and motioned me through the door. I entered and took in my surroundings. It was a large room with a sofa and leather armchairs at one end gathered around a fireplace, and a solid desk at the other. Paintings of country scenes hung on the dark green papered walls. A large freestanding iron candelabra was tucked into the far corner beside a bookshelf that took up almost the entire wall. It reached to the ceiling, and a ladder leaned against it. I stared at it in wonder, amazed at so many books under one roof. I hadn't realized Seth and Gus had left until the door clicked closed.

Fitzroy locked it with a key that he tucked into his waistcoat pocket. "We sleep in there." He indicated a closed door.

"We?" I said on a breath.

"I'll have a trundle brought up for you. Unless you prefer the bed. It doesn't matter to me."

I blinked at him. "I...I am to be held prisoner in here now? With you?"

"I know it's not ideal, but you're too quick-witted for them."

"You were present when I sent them away to shoot you. You fell for my ruse too."

The corner of his mouth twitched, and I suspected he'd known that I was sending Gus and Seth away in order to escape. I suddenly realized how difficult it would be to get out of Lichfield Towers. He may be only one man, but he was efficient, clever and ruthless. I had no doubt he played jailor better than his men, and even better than those at Highgate Police Station. My escape attempts would need to become more sophisticated.

I sat on the armchair near the window and opened my book. Instead of reading, I thought of ways to outwit Death himself.

## CHAPTER 5



"YOU ARE QUITE THE LITTLE THIEF." Lady Harcourt's wink softened her accusation, but the sting of her words pricked me nevertheless. Or perhaps that was my guilt. I felt horrid that I'd dragged her into my scheme. She'd already received a sharp glare from Fitzroy as he'd handed the pistol back to her.

She checked the barrel then placed the gun inside her reticule. The evening gown she wore probably didn't have pockets. It was an exquisite outfit of mourning black satin and lace, with gold beads arranged in leaves on the bodice and down the length of skirt in two panels. A black silk ribbon choker set off the white of her throat and the lustrous sheen of the pearl at the center. It was difficult to tear my gaze away from the gown and her jewelry, but I managed it. It wouldn't do to show too much interest in feminine things.

"The pocket in your skirt wasn't deep," I told her as she sat on a chair in the parlor. Fitzroy and I remained standing, he with his hands casually at his sides, me with mine behind my back. "It's too easy to steal things from shallow pockets."

"I'll have it deepened. Thank you for your advice, Charlie." She bestowed a smile on me that had me blushing. It was more than I deserved. "I see the bullet is missing."

"It's in the wall of the tower room."

Her eyebrows arched. "Was anyone injured?"

"Only Mr. Fitzroy."

She leapt up from the chair. "Lincoln!" She crossed the floor to him, sweeping past me as if I weren't there. I could have easily snatched the reticule from her and she wouldn't have noticed in her agitated state. "Where? Where are you hurt?"

"I am unharmed, Julia." Fitzroy looked uncomfortable as she searched his face in earnest.

"I asked where?" she said with quiet steel.

His lips thinned. "The left shoulder. A graze only. It doesn't hurt."

"Of course it must." She clicked her tongue. "It's typical of you to downplay your injuries. You are fallible, Lincoln, even though you like to think you are not."

Several beats passed, during which they stared at one another in a kind of silent battle of wills. It was almost as if words were exchanged between them and yet none passed their lips. I wasn't sure who'd won, but Lady Harcourt was the first to break the silence.

"May I see your shoulder?"

"There's no point. I've already had it seen to."

"Nevertheless, I would like to assess it for myself."

He turned away from her to tug the bell pull. Her back straightened in offense. "Lincoln, stop being such a child and let me see it."

"I am not the one acting like a child, Julia. We have company."

"Your point?"

"I suggest you don't ignore him. He has been eyeing off your reticule."

She swung round to face me. I could see her temper flaring, but I didn't think she was angry with me. Fitzroy was being terribly rude toward her. It was one thing to speak abrasively to someone who'd ended their prior liaison—surely *she* must have been the one to end it—but it was quite another to call a lady a child. I wouldn't have stood for it if I were her.

"I won't steal from you again," I said quickly. "Mr. Fitzroy is cruel to blame me."

Her face softened. "He is, isn't he?"

Fitzroy didn't seem to care that I'd called him cruel. No doubt he'd been labeled worse.

Gus arrived, sporting crumbs down the front of his waistcoat. "Boy giving you trouble, sir? Want me to take him away?"

"No. How long until dinner?"

"It's just about ready. Might as well go and sit down. Save me coming back to call you." He trudged off as I heard Lady Harcourt quietly lament the lack of proper servants.

"Shall we?" Fitzroy offered her his arm.

She took it and bestowed a too-sweet smile on him. "Hungry, my dear? Or do you wish to get rid of me?"

"If I wanted to be rid of you, I wouldn't be dining with you."

Her smile faltered and she allowed him to lead her out.

"Come, Charlie," he said. "You need to eat too."

I trailed behind, somewhat stupefied by the invitation to dinner. It seemed silly to worry that I wasn't dressed for the occasion, since it was just the three of us, but they were a beautiful and elegant couple in their eveningwear, and I was disheveled by comparison. The dining room wasn't meant for the likes of me either. It was sized for large parties, with the long mahogany table seating twenty, although it was only set for three tonight. The chandelier suspended above it blazed, catching the facets of the crystal glasses and the diamond earrings dangling from Lady Harcourt's ears. I hunched my shoulders and kept my head low, not wanting them to change their minds and send the scruffy gutter rat from the room.

We sat and Fitzroy poured the wine himself. There was no sign of footmen or a butler, and moments later, Seth and Gus brought in the food. I stared at the platters piled with roast beef and poultry, lobster salad and

vegetables. There was so much of it!

"You must serve yourself," Seth whispered in my ear. "Be sure to use the utensils provided and not your hands."

"I am not a Barbarian."

Behind him, Gus snorted a laugh. "Sewer rats are refined fellows now, eh?"

"Cut up his food," Fitzroy told the men, "then remove his knife."

After Seth finished cutting my food, Lady Harcourt arched her brows at Fitzroy, who dismissed the men with a nod. She served herself, placing only a minute portion of each dish on her plate. No wonder her waist was so tiny. I may eat just as little, but only because I wasn't used to so much food and I didn't want to throw it all up later. For one thing, it would be a waste, and for another, Fitzroy's rugs looked expensive.

"You could have returned the pistol to me tomorrow," Lady Harcourt said, passing the peas to Fitzroy. "Why the invitation to dinner?"

"I want you to tell the boy what it is we do here at Lichfield Towers, and why we need him."

"You haven't informed him yet?"

"I tried. He doesn't believe me."

She laughed until her eyes watered. "Why am I not surprised? Lincoln, you aren't very good when it comes to convincing people."

"I had some success in Paris," he said mildly.

"And nobody is more surprised than me. Ordinarily people run from you when you become intense. Which, I might add, is all the time."

I held my breath. I wasn't sure if she were teasing him or accusing him. Nor was I sure how he would take it. He didn't seem like the sort of man just anyone could tease. The longer I spent in their company, the more certain I became that Gus and Seth were right. Fitzroy and Lady Harcourt had been lovers. It wasn't clear if they still were.

"Well, now I know why I was invited to dinner," she said with a smile for

Fitzroy. "I thought there had to be another reason."

He said nothing, and I wondered if it was true and he didn't particularly desire her company. It was strange that he could be so cool toward her, whereas her emotions had seemed in danger of boiling over ever since her arrival. I was beginning to think I'd been wrong and *he* had been the one to end their relationship.

"I explained about the queen's life being in danger," Fitzroy said. "Charlie didn't believe me."

"I see. Well then, after we finish the main course, I'll tell him what he needs to know."

After a few minutes, in which the only sounds were that of chewing, Lady Harcourt asked me some questions. They were innocuous enough, and I answered in a way that gave nothing away. I wanted to know more about her too, but refrained. Boys like me didn't ask impertinent questions of ladies like her, and I was afraid the only questions I could think of were impertinent.

"The boy is positively a chatterbox compared to you, Lincoln," she said as Gus cleared away the dishes.

It was true that he'd not spoken the entire time, but he'd not been addressed either. He took her teasing well enough, by showing no emotion whatsoever.

"Dessert, sir?" Seth asked. "Cook tells me he's made jellies and a trifle."

Jelly! I hadn't had jelly in an age.

I caught Lady Harcourt smiling gently at me out of the corner of my eye and quickly schooled my features. I didn't want to seem as if I could be bought with a bowl of jelly.

"Thank you, Seth," Fitzroy said. Before the two men left, he asked Lady Harcourt to begin.

She dabbed her mouth with the napkin then folded it up and set it on the table. I found myself wishing she would hurry up. I wanted to hear the story from her lips.

"Has Lincoln mentioned the ministry and its role?" she asked me.

"Not really."

She shook her head at him but he merely sat in his seat at the top of the table and waited. "He is the head of the Ministry of Curiosities. It's a government organization but operates somewhat outside the official boundaries of parliament. Lincoln makes all the day to day decisions, but the ministry is overseen by a committee. The committee decides what curiosities require investigation, but always on Lincoln's advice. He is the heart and soul of this organization. The brains, too."

Her praise of him surprised me after her teasing. If Fitzroy was embarrassed or pleased, he didn't show it.

"The committee also provide the necessary funds," she went on. "I am on the committee, as is Lord Gillingham, whom you've met."

"What are 'curiosities?'"

"Unexplained events. Phenomena that seem to happen for no *Earthly* rhyme or reason."

"Like ghosts? Angels?"

"Do you believe in ghosts and angels?"

I shrugged one shoulder.

"You are correct. But not only ghosts and angels. Raising the dead is another phenomena that most people would consider an impossibility. The ministry, however, thinks these curiosities—and more—are entirely possible. We seek to understand them better, but also to make sure they cannot harm us. It began as a group of like-minded individuals, with an interest in the supernatural, but has recently been given a more official role. The ministry investigates situations that the police and Home Office cannot get involved in because of their public role. The Ministry of Curiosities is more secretive."

Seth and Gus re-entered the room, both carrying a tray. Seth set his down and I couldn't take my eyes off the wobbling jelly.

"The nature of the crimes we investigate must be kept quiet or the public

would panic," Lady Harcourt went on. Clearly it didn't matter what Seth and Gus overheard.

"Then why tell me?" I asked.

"Because we trust that you won't speak of the ministry outside these walls."

"Nobody would believe you anyway," Gus said. "They'll put you in an asylum."

Seth jabbed him in the ribs with his elbow.

"The queen and prime minister approve of the ministry?" I asked.

"They would if they knew we existed," Lady Harcourt said.

Gus grunted. "Either that or burn us at the stake for believing in all this magic talk."

"The ministry's existence has been kept secret from them for their own good," Lady Harcourt went on. "Governments come and go. The committee members are involved for life. We all have prominent positions, either at court or in parliament. Our sole purpose is to serve the British Empire and keep queen and country safe—from paranormal forces, rather than military ones."

"Think of us as the sword of the empire," Seth said, puffing out his chest. "And Mr. Fitzroy is the pointy end."

Fitzroy sat listening without saying a word. I'd felt him watching me the entire time, and I wished I knew how to react. I wasn't sure whether to show surprise or fear, or whether I should pretend they were all mad.

"Why him?" I asked. "Why is he the leader?" He was, after all, young for such responsibility. I imagined someone of Gillingham's advanced years would be more suited to a leadership role.

"He was chosen at birth," Lady Harcourt said.

"Chosen at *birth*?"

"His entire life has been dedicated to becoming the ministry's leader. His education and training were specifically designed to make him the best. There

is no one better suited to the position." She shrugged thin, bare shoulders. "No one more capable."

Clearly she *hadn't* ended the relationship then. I needed no further proof than her effusive admiration and the stony expression on his face.

Chosen. Best. Capable. It all sounded so cold and calculating, yet I supposed it was no different to many gentlemen born into the nobility, raised knowing he would take over from their fathers one day. Even so, it sounded like a dull life. The old me, the dutiful daughter, probably wouldn't have thought so, but the new me did. The thought of being destined to be someone since the day I was born, and never having the opportunity to deviate from that path, sounded like a prison sentence.

"Was your father the ministry's leader before you?" I asked him. Although Lady Harcourt had told me the story, it didn't seem right to ask her the question. "Is that why you were chosen?"

"No."

I waited for further explanation but none came. Yet the air in the room tightened. It took me a moment to realize that the other three people there had gone quite still. Had they also been waiting for an answer? Or did they already know it, and I'd stumbled onto a sensitive topic?

"You are investigating paranormal curiosities," I said to him. "And you want the necromancer girl to help you. Does that mean *you* are paranormal, sir?"

For a long moment I thought I'd overstepped the line; that I'd gone too far. He simply stared at me, unblinking. What was he waiting for? "No," he eventually said.

"But you got out of the bullet's way. How, if not with an unnatural speed?"

"I'm observant and quite quick."

Quite! He was also the master of understatement.

"No one in the ministry or on the committee has any true paranormal

abilities," Lady Harcourt said. "You're our first such employee."

"I'm not working for you." I kept my tone light, but my tight jaw made it sound harsh.

"Why not?"

*Because I can't trust you. I can't trust anyone.* "I am not a necromancer."

Lady Harcourt opened her mouth to speak, but Fitzroy leaned forward and she closed it again. She seemed anxious to hear what he had to say. We all were. "We thought there was only one in the world," he said. "But it seems there are two. You and the girl."

"I am not a necromancer. How many times do I have to tell you?" I pushed my chair back and stood.

Seth and Gus crowded round me, waiting for an order from their master to grab me and remove me from the room.

"Sit down," Fitzroy snapped.

"You have not eaten your jelly." Lady Harcourt indicated the bowl that Seth had set before me. She smiled. "Stay with us. There's more you need to know."

I picked up my spoon, wishing it were a knife I could throw at Fitzroy. I sat again. "If I must."

She scooped out some jelly but didn't eat it. It wobbled in her spoon as she regarded me. "Someone wishes to use your—a necromancer's—power to harm the queen."

"Who?"

"We don't know. Mr. Fitzroy intercepted a letter from someone in Paris we had been watching. It only bore the man's—or woman's—initials and was addressed to an abandoned house, however we think the letter reached him."

"It did," Fitzroy intoned. "I made sure of it."

"The letter mentioned that a particular girl he'd been seeking—"

"The necromancer?" I asked.

She nodded. "The necromancer he'd been searching so long for had been

traced to the house of a London vicar."

I shoveled jelly into my mouth, but it tasted like ashes and was difficult to swallow. I forced it down with a gulp as I tried to digest the news too. The London vicar was my father. "There must be dozens of vicars in London."

"There are. We have not been able to pinpoint which one the letter referred to. We hope he hasn't, either."

He had. It must be the doctor I'd seen leaving Father's house. I was even more glad that I'd not revealed myself to him now. "What does he want with this necromancer girl?"

"To use her power to reanimate his...creations."

I paused, the full spoon at my mouth. "Creations?"

Her already pale face grew paler. She glanced at Fitzroy and he took over the explanation. "He takes pieces off different corpses and binds them together to make new, more superior ones. All they lack is a spirit that will bring them to life and do his bidding."

My stomach rolled. Bile and jelly rose to my throat. "Why would he do such a thing?"

"To build himself an elite force," Lady Harcourt said. "He takes the long, powerful legs of a fast runner, for example; the strong arms of a laborer or pugilist; the heart and lungs of a good swimmer. And the brain of an intelligent man, or one with knowledge he seeks to use to his advantage."

What kind of monster wanted to do such a thing? The very notion was sickening, but to actually cut up bodies and sew pieces of them together to form a new man... His surgery must be covered in blood and gore...his arms and body too. The very notion was unfathomable.

"Charlie?" Lady Harcourt rose and came round the table. She placed her cool hand on the back of my neck. "You've gone quite ashen."

"It's no wonder," Seth said quietly.

Gus murmured his agreement. "Makes my belly ache, too."

Fitzroy poured me more wine and handed me the glass. He watched as I

drank. "Have you ever heard of such a man?"

"Why would I?"

"Street children hear all sorts of things. Perhaps the body of a homeless man has inexplicably disappeared, or someone saw a fellow acting mysteriously near the cemetery. You spend a lot of time at Highgate Cemetery."

So he'd learned that about me too. "I haven't seen or heard anything. If the man looks like a regular gentleman, he could be anyone."

It *must* have been the doctor I'd seen at Father's house. Only a man with medical knowledge could piece bodies back together. But I didn't know his name. I didn't know where he lived. I couldn't help Fitzroy and Lady Harcourt find him, even if I'd wanted to.

Fitzroy returned to his seat, but Lady Harcourt remained at my side, stroking my hair. "My spies told me what happened at the police station," he said. "Word gets around quickly, particularly when something sensational occurs. I suspect this man's spies also informed him. He will be looking for you now."

"You've got it wrong, Mr. Fitzroy. It weren't me that did that."

"We will keep you safe, here, away from him. He can't get you while you are under my protection."

I snorted. "You don't even know what he looks like." Lady Harcourt's hand drew too close to my fringe and I pulled away. "I ain't a necromancer. I can't help you."

She returned to her chair. "Not even for a soft bed, food and clean clothes?"

"I ain't the necromancer," I said again. I hadn't spent five years surviving on the street, doing everything possible to hide my identity and keep safe, to throw it away for a queen who meant nothing to me. "I wish I could help you but I can't. Seems to me you need the girl. Better find her before he does."

"We will. Now that we know there are two of you—"

I slammed my palms down on the table, sending the jelly into a jiggling frenzy. "I ain't a necromancer!" I pushed up from the chair, but my passage was blocked by Gus and Seth. Arms crossed, scowls on their faces, they presented an impassible wall. There would be no distracting them tonight. Besides, I had no doubt if I did that Fitzroy would catch me.

"I think that's enough for tonight," Lady Harcourt said. "A good rest is in order. Take him to his room."

"Sir?" Seth asked.

Fitzroy nodded. "I'll follow shortly."

"Lincoln?" Lady Harcourt arched her perfectly drawn eyebrows at him. "Why do you need to go too?"

"I've decided he is less likely to escape from me. I've moved him into my rooms."

"Your rooms? Permanently?"

"Yes."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

A little color infused her cheeks and for one awful moment I thought she knew. She must have seen through my disguise and known I wasn't a boy, and that allowing me to stay in his rooms would be inappropriate. "Who will trace his origins tomorrow if you are watching him?"

I let out a long breath.

"Seth and Gus will be given full instructions."

"Is it wise to give them such an important task?"

Gus's mouth flattened, and he looked as if he wanted to challenge her. Seth merely flushed and stared down at his boots.

"They're capable enough, and they need the practice. Besides, I have a better idea of where they should concentrate on their search now." This last he said to me, and somewhat smugly, if I wasn't mistaken.

Lady Harcourt frowned. "I still don't think—"

"I have decided."

She bristled and glared at him. He glared back at her, their silent battle of wills once more making the air in the room feel tense and tight.

"Send for my carriage," she said to Seth.

He seemed relieved to be dismissed and disappeared from the room. Lady Harcourt marched out of the dining room and into the hall. She gathered her hat and gloves, and Fitzroy helped her on with her coat. They didn't speak. Neither his hands nor his gaze lingered at her bare shoulders or neck. It was as if he didn't even notice the silky white skin, or care that she had moved closer to him than mere friends ought. There was nothing of the lover about the way he treated her. I wasn't surprised. I couldn't imagine him consumed with passion for her—or for anyone, for that matter.

Seth returned and the carriage wheels soon crunched on the gravel outside. He opened the front door for her and bowed. Lady Harcourt offered him her hand and he kissed it. Gus didn't receive the same privilege and he didn't look like he expected to.

"Walk me out, Lincoln," she said in a mild voice.

Fitzroy's gaze slid to me.

"I won't try to escape," I told him.

"Take him to the library and wait for me there." He followed Lady Harcourt outside.

Gus nodded at a door leading off from the entrance. "Library's in there."

Seth led the way and Gus followed behind me. I thought there'd been a great many books in Fitzroy's rooms, but the library held triple. Bookshelves reached to the ceiling on all the walls, leaving some gaps between them for lamps, windows and framed pictures. A circular iron chandelier, sporting dozens of candles, plunged from the ceiling rose, stopping just above the round table. Seth lit some in candlesticks and handed one to Gus.

"Over here," I told them. "I want to see the books."

"We ain't at your beck and call," Gus growled.

I ignored him and strolled around the room, brushing my fingers along the spines of the leather bound tomes, breathing their earthy scent into my lungs.

"Don't think about throwing them," Seth said, trailing behind me with a candle.

I paused at the window. Fitzroy and Lady Harcourt stood at the carriage door, talking. Or, rather, arguing, if her expression was anything to go by. His back was to me, but in the light cast by the moon and the coach lamps, her face looked stern, her body rigid.

"What do you think they're arguing about?" I asked.

Seth peered over my shoulder. "It's hard to say. You, perhaps, and Death's decision to keep you close. His decision to give Gus and me more responsibility."

"Or his decision not to take her to his bed," Gus said, coming up behind me on my other side and watching through the window too.

"You think it was his choice to end their...liaison?" I asked.

"Maybe."

Lady Harcourt spun round and climbed into the coach, ignoring Fitzroy's outstretched hand. He pulled it back as she slammed the door closed.

"If it were," Seth said, as the coach drove off, "he probably didn't end it the way a gentleman should."

"Why do you say that?"

"You may not have noticed, but he's not good with people."

I snorted. "I noticed."

"I'm not sure he knows how to treat a lady properly. I certainly don't think he understands the fair sex."

"That don't stop Lady H from throwing herself at him," Gus said. "Other women, too."

Seth rounded on him. "Lady Harcourt does not *throw* herself at anyone. She's much too—" He broke off when Fitzroy appeared at the door.

"Upstairs," Fitzroy said, turning away. "Now."

Gus and Seth gripped one arm each and led me out of the library. We followed Fitzroy up the stairs and along the corridor, then they shoved me into the room after him and shut the door. He locked it and pocketed the key. I swallowed hard as Fitzroy faced me. It was one thing to pretend to be a boy in his presence during the day, but now I had to spend an entire night with a man who made my blood alternately run hot and cold. A man whose gaze seemed to see everything.

## CHAPTER 6



SOMEONE HAD SET up a truckle bed in the master bedroom suite, much too close to the main bed for my liking. I usually slept as far away from the boys in our den as possible, while remaining close enough for safety. It wasn't as close as this.

I didn't complain. I didn't want Fitzroy's suspicions raised. But there were some things that needed to be made clear from the beginning. Best to get them out now.

"You have to leave when I use the chamber pot," I told him.

He shot me a flinty glare from the clothes stand, where he stood removing his dinner jacket. I suspected that meant he agreed.

"And when I wash and change."

"As you wish." He hung the jacket on the stand and began unbuttoning his waistcoat.

I didn't look away, but I didn't stare either. Neither would be the sort of thing a boy would do. Besides, I'd seen men before. Or, more specifically, boys and youths. While I never undressed in front of them, they were not so inhibited. They even pissed in front of me, and Stringer had once bedded a whore where the entire gang could see. I was no stranger to a man's parts or their function. Fitzroy's nakedness wouldn't concern me.

"You have the run of these rooms," he told me, bowtie in hand. "The

book is on my desk, spare candles and matches are in the top drawer. Don't burn the house down."

I blinked. Had he just told a joke? His mouth didn't twitch, so I suspected he was serious and did indeed suspect that I would try and start a fire.

I left him to his undressing, somewhat disappointed that I wouldn't get to see if the magnificent face was accompanied by a magnificent figure, and found the book. There was no point pretending I couldn't read anymore, so I tried to think of a reasonable explanation for my education as I searched in the top drawer for the matches.

As my hand closed around the box, a thought struck me. My father used to keep a small knife inside his middle desk drawer. I felt all around, but there seemed to be none in the top drawer. I tried the others, and still nothing. I sat on the chair and checked the desk surface and inside an unlocked coffer. It contained only papers. I groped beneath the desk and my fingers found a small, narrow shelf at the right. It contained one item—a knife.

I slipped it from the shelf and pressed it to my thigh. I stood and carried the book and knife to the other side of the room where I lounged on the sofa. As interesting as the book was, I didn't even read one sentence as I waited for Fitzroy to emerge from the bedroom.

He seemed to take forever, and when he finally came out, barefoot and dressed in loose white trousers and an Oriental style shirt, I was already having second thoughts. Not about using the knife, but about my ability to succeed. He was stronger and faster than me. In a close combat situation, I would lose. I had to throw it at him when his back was turned, or not bother.

The thought of knifing someone in the back didn't sit well. Even more so because Fitzroy had not harmed me, except to save himself. I slid the knife beneath my thigh then openly watched him.

He stood in the open space between the two different sections of the room and began jumping up and down on the spot, drawing his knees up high to chest. It was such an odd thing to do that I couldn't tear my gaze away. Then

suddenly he dropped into a squat, spun round on the ball of one foot, and lashed out with the other at an imaginary foe. I set the book aside and continued to watch as he performed more maneuvers, sometimes kicking, sometimes thrusting with closed fist or open hand. His face was set with concentration and he did not once glance at me. He wasn't wearing trousers and a shirt, I realized, or not any that I'd seen before. The clothes were loose, the fabric flowing, ensuring his limbs weren't hindered.

After several minutes of repeating the moves, he opened a casket on the bookshelf and removed an object. Or was it two? It appeared to be two handles as long as his hands with the end of one connected by a chain to the end of the other. He returned to the clearing and began his moves again, this time incorporating the contraption by flicking it out and back, up and down. Blows from the metal device would cause a lot of damage to exposed flesh. It was something to remember, as was the place where he kept it.

I continued to watch, fascinated by his smoothness and speed. He exercised for an hour, not once stopping or looking my way. It didn't seem to bother him that he had an audience. Perhaps he liked it. When he finally finished, after almost two hours, his face was a little flushed and the hair at his temple damp, but he otherwise seemed unflustered. I would have been flat on the floor panting.

Without a word, he padded back to the casket and placed the weapon inside, then returned to the bedroom. He re-emerged after ten minutes wearing nothing but a towel around his hips and carrying another that he used to dry his hair.

His lack of attention to me allowed me to take in the sight of his chest and shoulders, the left one with a bandage covering it where I'd shot him. The youths in the gangs I'd been in had never had bodies like that. Fitzroy's shoulders were broad, with bulges of muscle rippling down his arms and across his chest. The sprinkle of dark chest hair tapered off before reaching his ridged stomach. From a distance, it was difficult to tell if it was curly like

the hair on his head. I found myself wanting to find out.

Not really aware of what I was doing, I untucked my feet from beneath me and set them on the floor. He looked up and a small furrow connected his brows. I swallowed and reopened my book. I hoped my fringe covered the blush burning my face. Beneath my thigh, the knife point dug into me. I'd forgotten about it. I probably should have used his inattention during exercise to throw it at him.

Fool. Foolish *girl*. Surely he must know my secret now. Surely he could *see* my interest in him. No boy would stare like that. Good lord, I hoped I hadn't drooled. I wiped the corner of my mouth on my shoulder, just to be sure.

"It's late," he said, tossing the towel he'd used on his hair over the back of one of the chairs. He dragged his damp, tousled locks off his face, and my heart kicked in my chest at the way it somehow made him more handsome.

"And?" I prompted.

"Aren't you tired?"

"Aren't you?"

"I don't need much sleep." He sat at his desk. Wasn't he going to dress? His semi-nakedness was a distraction.

I rearranged myself on the sofa so that I faced away from him. "Nor do I." It was the truth. Staying awake and alert was just one way I'd kept alive and safe for years.

He emitted a soft sound, but I wasn't sure if it was in humor or derision. I refused to glance at him, and instead slumped down into the sofa, placing my head on the armrest and stretching my legs out. I held the book close, to see the words in the poor light, and I was soon lost in the story, swept into the world of Sherlock Holmes and his puzzling mystery.

Some time later, Fitzroy deposited a candelabra on the table behind my head. My breath caught as I waited for him to say something, do something. When nothing happened, I turned my head. He was once again at his desk.

He still only wore the towel and he seemed lost in the paperwork spread out before him.

I fell asleep at some point and awoke in the morning in the same position, the book splayed across my chest and Fitzroy looking down on me. The nightmare that had woken me drifted away as we regarded one another. Had I said something in my sleep? Cried out? It was difficult to tell from his blank face.

I sat up and received a sharp reminder that the knife was still under my thigh. "What do you want?" I snapped.

"Breakfast will arrive shortly." He moved away and sat at his desk. The man liked to work.

I tucked the knife up my sleeve and headed into the bedroom. With one eye on the closed door, I slipped the knife under the truckle bed's mattress, then I quickly washed and changed into the clean shirt. With my hair once more covering my face, I returned to the sitting room.

"Good morning, lad," Seth said cheerfully from the small table where he was setting down a tray. "Sleep well?"

"Well enough."

Gus moved past me into the bedroom and re-emerged a few minutes later with the bowls of washing water. "When are we going to get proper maids, sir?"

Fitzroy didn't look up from his paperwork. "When we find some that won't tattle."

"Girls who don't tattle?" Gus grunted. "Ain't no such creature."

Seth patted the chair near the table. "Sit down and eat, Charlie."

I sat and noticed that Fitzroy had his own tray laden with bacon, sausages and eggs. "I can't eat all this," I said.

"Try. You need fattening up." Seth ruffled my hair as he passed and I slapped his hand away. He chuckled and I found I couldn't be mad at him. He wasn't a bad sort, despite his participation in my kidnapping. He was only

following orders.

Gus handed me a steaming cup of tea and bent his head close to mine. "Does he snore?" he whispered.

Despite everything, I laughed. "Like a trumpet," I whispered back, keeping Fitzroy in my line of sight.

Gus grinned, revealing a patchwork of broken and crooked teeth. "I knew there had to be *something* human about him."

"Or maybe his gears get jammed when he lies down."

Gus roared with laughter. Fitzroy glanced over his shoulder, catching us both watching him. Gus choked on his laugh and turned it into a cough.

"Eat, Half Pint," he commanded. "Growing boy like you should eat every crumb."

Seth emerged from the bedroom carrying jugs and bowls. He mouthed, "What's so amusing?" at Gus, but Gus merely shrugged.

"You know what you must do," Fitzroy told them.

"Yes, sir," Seth said. "We'll head out now."

Fitzroy locked the door after they left then settled back at his desk. He read the newspaper flattened out before him and absently ate his breakfast. I ate all of the bacon on my plate. It was one of the foods I'd missed in the last five years, and I savored every bite. I didn't touch the rest. The bacon had filled me up.

"You do not eat," Fitzroy said, some time later when he approached.

"I'm not hungry."

"If you don't eat, you won't grow."

"Perhaps I like being short and thin."

"No boy likes being short and thin."

I watched him for signs that he suspected, but he was already turning away from me. He paced the room, covering the entire length quickly with his long strides. He seemed agitated or frustrated.

"I'm sure they're doing as you asked," I said.

He stopped and looked at me. Then he began pacing again. Back and forth, back and forth for an eternity, it seemed. I turned my back to him and read, but the rhythm of his footsteps distracted me. I plugged my ears with my fingers but the rhythm continued to tread through my head and it was difficult to keep the book open with my elbows.

With a sigh, I withdrew my fingers and closed the book. "Are you worried about them?"

"No." He almost sounded amused at the idea. Almost.

"Are you concerned they'll fail?"

"Somewhat."

But not enough to warrant the pacing, I thought. "Are you concerned they'll give away too much about you and the ministry?"

"They're not that incompetent."

Perhaps he was disappointed with the way the dinner with Lady Harcourt had ended the night before. Perhaps he didn't like her leaving on a sour note. Yet he'd shown no such qualms upon her departure. Curious.

He finally stopped pacing long enough to glance out the window. He looked to the bright blue sky, to left then right, and up at the sky again. Then he continued pacing.

I got up and padded barefoot to the window to see what he was looking at. There was nothing but gravel drive, garden, trees and sky. The roses were like jewels dropped on a carpet of green, and the sky was bluer than I'd seen it in an age. There must be a northerly breeze blowing the factory smog away, and most homes wouldn't light fires in summer except in the kitchen. I was so used to being surrounded by gray and brown that my eyes hurt from the dazzling sunshine and bright colors. It was a perfect day and I ached to be outside.

Now I understood Fitzroy's frustration. He didn't like being shut inside his rooms any more than I did—perhaps less so. While I was content with the books, he seemed to need to move and there simply wasn't enough space.

"Put on your shoes." His voice came from closer behind me than I realized and I jumped.

"Where are we going?"

"Outside."

I rolled my eyes at his back as I followed him into the bedroom.  
"Anywhere specific?"

"No."

A few minutes later we were walking across the lawn. I had to take twice as many steps to keep up with his long strides but I didn't mind. I liked stretching my limbs and feeling the blood pump through my veins. If I'd been a lady, we would have slowed to an amble, but I didn't want to amble. I wanted to run. I wondered what he'd do if I took off. Tackle me to the ground? Jerk me to a stop by my hair? Or race me?

I settled for the brisk walk. We didn't speak as we passed the rose garden and the lily pond, where a frog croaked a greeting. We headed toward the stand of trees at the edge of the property then abruptly changed direction and headed back toward the house. I wasn't ready to return inside, even though I was hot under my layers of shirt and jacket.

"What's around the back of the house?" I asked.

"Outbuildings, orchard, walled garden and tennis court."

"Tennis! Do you play?"

"Play?"

"Yes. Tennis. Do you play?"

"No."

"You've never challenged Seth or Gus to a game?"

"There is no time for games at Lichfield Towers."

"How dull. I'm sure the men would appreciate a little time to play games like tennis or cards."

"I've seen them play cards after dinner."

"You've never joined them?"

"Rarely."

"Is that because they don't ask or because you don't want to play?"

His only answer was to increase his speed. I had to trot to remain alongside him.

"You don't talk much," I said. If he wanted to keep a close eye on me, I might as well annoy him. It was my duty as his prisoner.

"You ask too many questions."

"Ha! That's rich coming from you. You *only* ever ask questions."

"I haven't asked you any today."

"It is only mid-morning. I expect them to come after Seth and Gus return."

"You are probably right."

I glanced sideways at him, but he kept his gaze directly ahead. He did slow down somewhat, which was just as well since I was starting to get a little breathless.

"You've almost finished the book." His attempt at starting a new conversation that had nothing to do with my background surprised me. I was growing used to his silences.

"It's a good book."

"Nor have you asked me the meaning of any of the words."

"So?"

"You're educated."

Ah, there it was. His attempt at digging into my past had begun more subtly this time, but he'd ruined it with that comment. "Very observant, Sherlock."

He said nothing.

"Sherlock is the character in the book I'm reading," I explained. "He's very observant."

"I've read it."

"Oh. So you didn't find my reference clever or amusing enough to bother

replying, or even smirking."

"I didn't say that."

"I see. You only *thought* me clever and amusing. Be careful, Mr. Fitzroy, I've heard that keeping your emotions bottled up will rot your insides."

"You have a dry sense of humor. I wasn't expecting that."

"And you, sir, have no sense of humor whatsoever."

When he didn't answer, I worried that I'd offended him. Then I told myself to stop worrying. He was my jailor; his feelings were of no concern to me. Besides, I doubted he had feelings.

"Why do Gus and Seth call you Death?"

"Because I've killed people."

My step faltered. I'd been trying to goad him again, and wasn't expecting his frankness. "How many?"

"Enough."

"Why did you kill them?"

"They talked too much."

I stopped altogether, but he continued on, not caring that he was leaving me behind. I blinked rapidly, then realized he was teasing me.

"And you call my sense of humor dry," I muttered when I caught up to him near the stables. "Yours is positively parched."

We walked past the stables and other outbuildings, then crossed the courtyard and headed up the back steps. He opened the door for me and I went inside. We were in the service area, near the kitchens if the delicious smell of baking bread was an indication.

We passed the servants' dining room, the butler and housekeeper's offices, scullery, and the bells labeled with the names of the rooms they serviced. They were eerily silent, as was the entire house, until we came to the kitchen. A large man hummed as he kneaded dough, his attention focused entirely on his work.

"Cook," Fitzroy barked.

The cook looked up and his eyes widened. He had no hair on his head or face, not even eyebrows, and the lack of it made his cleft chin and red cheeks more obvious. I couldn't be sure if he had a naturally rosy complexion or he was simply hot. The kitchen was terribly warm.

"Mr. Fitzroy, sir! I weren't expecting you." He screwed his hands into his apron to wipe them, but they still came away doughy. "You be hungry, sir?"

"No," Fitzroy said. "This is Charlie. Charlie, this is Cook."

"You don't eat much," Cook said to me.

"No."

He frowned. "Can't be the food. I'm a great cook."

"Yes, you are. I just don't get hungry."

"Growin' lad like you should be."

I shrugged. "Maybe I'm not used to eating."

Fitzroy continued along the corridor, leaving the cook and me staring at one another. The cook jerked his head in the direction Fitzroy had gone. "Don't keep him waitin'," he whispered. I was about to head off when he added, "You can't live on bacon and jelly alone, boy."

"Just put less on my tray next time and I'll eat it all."

He winked and jerked his head again. I nodded thanks and hurried after Fitzroy. He waited at the base of the service stairs and stepped aside to allow me to go ahead of him. I was very aware of him behind me as we ascended. I wasn't a curvy woman in front, but I wasn't sure what I looked like back there. Certainly not too round, or the boys in the gangs would have teased me for having a feminine arse. Yet they weren't as observant as Fitzroy, and had no reason to suspect me of being a woman. I wasn't sure if he did suspect, but I felt his gaze on my rear nevertheless.

We emerged from the service stairwell onto the second floor corridor, not far from his rooms. I wasn't ready to be cooped up again. There was still so much I hadn't seen. "May I look around the rest of the house, with you as my tour guide?"

He paused. "Are you trying to find out where I hide the weapons?"

"Of course not."

"Good. You will not be given the chance to escape and I wouldn't want your hopes to be raised falsely."

"How considerate," I sneered.

"Except for the attic, this is the highest level in the east and west wings. The tower goes two levels higher."

"I know that already."

"You've seen the bathroom." He indicated the other doors up and down the corridor. "These are bedrooms. They're unfurnished." He did not open the doors but strode past them and the main central staircase too then opened another door on the right. The room beyond was large but clearly unused. Dustsheets covered the furniture and it was just as well, as there was dust everywhere. I wrinkled my nose at the musty smell, even as I admired the large windows, the giant marble fireplace, and the multi-tiered chandelier.

"This is the drawing room," he said.

"Such a shame to see it in this state," I whispered. Imagine the conversations those walls had been privy to over the years.

We headed past the ghostly furniture and through another door on the other side. It was empty. "This is the ballroom."

"It's magnificent." It was very long, but the dark wood paneling made it feel cozy. I could imagine elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen dancing and chatting beneath the three enormous chandeliers, their jewels sparkling in the light.

"Have you ever held a ball here?"

"No."

"You should, if only to enjoy such a lovely room."

"I'll keep that in mind for when enjoying ballrooms becomes one of the ministry's primary aims."

We rejoined the corridor. It bent suddenly to the left then stopped at

another, narrow staircase. "That leads to the attic and the servants' rooms," he said.

"Is that where Gus, Seth and Cook sleep?"

"Yes."

"Are they the only servants here?"

"Yes."

"But Seth and Gus are more guards than footmen."

He didn't say anything, and I suspected it was because I hadn't posed it as a question.

"You've not thought about employing some maids or a butler? Someone discreet?"

"No." He returned back the way we came and headed down the grand stairs to the ground floor. "You've already seen the dining room, library, and the parlor, which we use instead of the drawing room for visitors."

"Do you get visitors often?"

"Only committee members."

"What about your friends and family?"

He paused on the bottom step, his back to me. "You've also seen the service areas in that direction. Adjoining the dining room is the billiard room."

"Do you play?"

"There's no table."

"What an entertaining household this is. No tennis, no billiards, and no visitors."

"You're not here to be entertained."

"True. But *I* don't live here, nor am I staying long. You, Seth and Gus, however, need *something* to do in the evenings."

He indicated I should go first up the stairs. "I told you, they play cards. Most evening they spend with Cook."

"And you? How do you spend your evenings?"

"Reading. Writing correspondence and reports. Scientific experiments. Exercising. Thinking."

I stopped and he stopped beside me. "You mean all you do is work?"

"Sometimes I sleep." He continued past me.

I laughed. "That was a joke. Wasn't it?" I trotted after him. "Tell me you at least read for pleasure. You said you've read my book, so you must."

"On occasion. And yes, I have read *your* book."

My face heated. "I didn't mean it like that."

We returned to his rooms and I picked up the book. I finished it in the afternoon and spent another hour or so watching him as he mixed liquids together in little bottles and set them over a tiny gas burner. He took copious notes in a complicated scrawl that appeared to be some kind of code. It made no sense to me, but I liked watching the experiments and trying to guess what would happen. He answered my questions when I asked them, but mostly we didn't speak. It didn't feel in the least awkward or strained, and I began to like his quiet company. It made a nice change to the constant, inane chatter of the boys.

Seth and Gus brought our meals in for an early dinner, and gave Fitzroy their report. I wasn't concerned before they began and I still wasn't concerned when they finished. They'd traced my life back some three years. The following day they planned to continue.

They were about to leave when I stopped them. "You two got any cards?" I asked. "Or dice?"

"Can't gamble with what you don't have, boy," Gus said.

"I don't want to gamble, I just want to do something other than read and watch the machine work."

Gus and Seth glanced nervously at Fitzroy.

"You may play cards," Fitzroy said, turning back to the notes Seth had handed him along with his dinner tray.

"So kind," I said, bowing.

Gus suppressed a snigger and both men left. They returned after I'd finished my meal—a small portion of game pie and a salad—and deposited a deck of cards on the table. Gus arranged three chairs around it.

"What do you know how to play?" he asked me.

"Very little." Card games had been forbidden in our house by Father, but I'd seen the boys play when they could get hold of a deck. "Teach me something."

"We'll start with Loo." As Seth dealt, I surreptitiously glanced in Fitzroy's direction. He was watching us from beneath hooded lids.

"Are you joining us?" I asked him.

He turned back to the papers on his desk. "I have work to do."

"All work and no play makes Sir a very dull fellow indeed," I whispered.

Seth grinned and Gus snorted a laugh. "You better mind he don't hear you say that," Gus whispered back.

"He won't hurt me. Not while he thinks I'm a necromancer."

"And if you're not, like you say?" Seth drawled. "What do you think he'll do then? Simply allow you to walk away so you can blab about the ministry all over London? Think again, lad."

I swallowed hard. I hadn't considered that. "I ain't seen no evidence of him being cruel."

"I didn't say he was cruel. Just that he will do whatever it takes to stop you talking."

"By bribing me?"

"Or threatening you."

"And if I don't take his threats seriously?"

Seth met my gaze over the top of his cards. "Then you take your life into your own hands."

Gus leaned forward. "You see," he whispered, "telling people about the ministry and Lichfield Towers brings danger to his door. And when Death feels like he's in danger..." He sliced a finger across his throat.

I remembered how he'd rendered me unconscious to capture me, then quickly disarmed me when I'd shot him. He hadn't hurt me on either occasion, but if he no longer needed me...would he?

I lost every round and ended the evening by telling them I was too tired to play anymore. They left, taking their cards with them. I wasn't tired, however, and started a new book. At around nine, Fitzroy removed himself to the bedroom and re-emerged wearing his loose fitting exercise clothes.

He began with the same routine of jumping on the spot, drawing his knees high, then practicing kicking and punching moves. He varied it after that by grasping the top of the open bedroom door and pulling himself up to his chin then slowly lowering himself again. I lost count of how many after fifty.

Instead of using the handles connected by a chain next, he found a walking stick from somewhere in the bedroom and used it like a sword against an imaginary opponent. His actions were sleek and smooth, yet I imagined they would be lethal if he struck anyone. His face was rigid with concentration, his eyes fixed on his invisible foe with murderous intent.

I sat transfixed by the power in his graceful moves and the seriousness with which he practiced. What would distract him? A tickle? A kiss? My nakedness?

The mischief-maker in me was tempted to try, but I remained where I was, watching. When he finally finished and returned to the bedroom, I blew out a long, measured breath. It was shaky. Blood rushed through my veins and my heart pounded. The sight of him had affected me, the way a woman should be affected by a handsome, powerful man.

But not this woman, and not that man.

I tried to concentrate on my book to calm my tingling nerves and slow my heart, but I'd read barely a few lines by the time he emerged, wearing only a towel wrapped around his hips. That chest, those shoulders and arms...it was all too much, too overwhelming, too *male*. And I was weak.

I sprang up and rushed past him, catching a whiff of the spicy scent of his soap. Whether he thought my behavior strange or not, I didn't turn around to see. I shut the door with my foot and threw myself on the trundle bed. I pounded my fist into the pillow, but it did nothing to dampen the desire coiling within me. Perhaps I ought to take up exercising too and remove my frustrations that way.

Some time later, my blood had calmed but my head was still filled with images of a naked Lincoln Fitzroy, towel drying his hair, and then a naked Fitzroy exercising. Oh Lord, this had to be punishment for my sins. My one true sin was the necromancy, the devil's work according to Father.

If I didn't get away from Lichfield Towers—from Fitzroy—I would be found out. If I were found out, I would be in danger. I'd been a fool to allow myself to succumb to the comforts. He'd deliberately lulled me with food and clothing, a soft bed, pleasant walks. It was working. All he had to do was wait for me to confess so that I could stay at Lichfield.

Stay with him.

But I hadn't lost my will to survive. It had been with me so long that it was a difficult habit to break. It overrode everything else, even my desire for comfort and for him.

I rolled onto my side and reached under the mattress. My hand closed around the knife. I drew it out and slipped it under the pillow near my head, then I closed my eyes and waited.

Some time later, Fitzroy entered. He did not carry any light and he was as silent as a mouse. He climbed into the bed, and I listened to his breathing. He didn't snore, but his breathing became more audible as he fell asleep. I continued to wait then, when I calculated that it must be the early hours of morning, I quietly got up.

With the knife in my hand, I checked the bed. He didn't stir. The bedroom door was open, but I needed the key to unlock the main door. It was dark and I was unfamiliar with the room, but I found the clothes stand where he'd

draped his waistcoat. The pocket was empty.

Where was the damned key?

I searched it again, then moved onto his trousers. Perhaps he'd put it in his jacket. But he'd not worn a jacket all day. I'd seen him put the key in his waistcoat.

"It's not there." His voice startled me, even though he'd spoken softly. I felt his chest at my back, his breath in my hair, and his fingers around my hand. I couldn't move it or my arm. I was trapped.

I should have felt afraid. He was stronger than me, faster, a skillful fighter, and I didn't trust him. Yet I felt no fear. What I did feel was a thrill skipping down my spine with abandon. His scent filled my nostrils, his touch left me tingling in the places where our bare skin connected. I tried to steady my breathing, but it was impossible. It came out labored and shuddery.

The anticipation was exquisite torture. I wanted him to touch me, to hold me, to see me as a woman. Yet being discovered terrified me. The devil's daughter was only good for doing the devil's work.

Without a word, he took the knife off me. My back suddenly felt cold and I turned around. He set the knife on his bedside table then climbed into the bed. He lay on his side, but it was too dark to see if his eyes were opened or closed.

I returned to my trundle and lay down, but I didn't sleep until after dawn when he rose and left me alone in the bedroom. I checked the bedside table, but the knife was gone.

## CHAPTER 7



FITZROY DIDN'T MENTION the knife incident the following day, but I was curious about something. "When did you realize I had it?" I asked as we ate breakfast.

"When I sat at the desk, I felt for it and noticed it missing."

Almost immediately then. "Why didn't you confront me at the time?"

He flattened the newspaper on the desk, his back to me. Clearly he didn't think me a threat. "I wanted to see what you would do."

"But what if I'd caught you by surprise, when your guard was lowered?"

"I never lower my guard."

"Not even when you're alone?"

He half turned so that he was in profile, and considered his answer before he said, "Sometimes."

"Which times?"

He turned a little further and regarded me through narrowed eyes. "You expect me to tell you?"

I grunted a laugh. "I suppose not."

He cracked the top of his boiled egg open with a spoon. "You won't catch me at such a moment, anyway."

"You're very arrogant, aren't you?"

"So I've been told."

After breakfast, he proposed another walk around the estate, and I readily agreed. The day was overcast and warm, with dark clouds gathering on the horizon. I got hot quickly. Sweat trickled down my spine and gathered in uncomfortable places. Fitzroy didn't look the least bit hot, but he only wore a shirt with no waistcoat or jacket, whereas I kept my jacket on. Taking it off would reveal too much now that my shirt was damp.

This time we stopped at the stables to see to the horses. Fitzroy rolled up his sleeves and mucked out their stalls, but I hung back. My father had not owned a horse, and while they were always present in the street, pulling carriages and carts, I'd never gone too close. Those hooves looked dangerous and the teeth large. I filled a pail with water from the trough and another with feed, but passed it to him instead of going in. I admired the way he walked behind them, without a care for the hooves, and rubbed their noses, getting close enough to have his own bitten off.

"Do you ride often?" I asked.

"When I have the opportunity," he said, closing the stall door and rejoining me.

"For pleasure?"

"Not anymore." He handed me an empty pail and I returned it to the back of the stables. "You don't like horses?"

"I like them well enough," I said. "As long as they are over there and I am over here."

"They frighten you?"

"I don't want to get too close to an animal that could crush me, kick me or bite me. What if it were startled? What if it didn't like the way I smelled? Or it liked my smell too much?"

"Unless you smell like an apple, there is little danger that a horse will eat you."

He led the way outside, and once again I had to trot to catch up to him. I passed a number of sharp and heavy looking tools that I could have grabbed

and used on him, but he didn't seem worried. Either he knew I couldn't go through with hurting him or he had faith in his ability to stop me, even with his back to me.

"Fitzroy," I said, "slow down. I wish to ask you something."

He slowed his pace. "You should refer to me as Mr. Fitzroy."

"Or I could call you Death. Or do you prefer Mr. Death?"

He walked off. "Go on."

I blew out a breath. "What will you do when you cannot trace me as far back as you wish to go?"

"You think we'll fail?"

"Yes."

"I don't fail." He didn't look like he was joking. Not that he ever seemed anything other than deadly serious.

"Everyone fails from time to time."

He said nothing, but his strides lengthened as we crossed the courtyard. We did not go the back way into the house this time, but headed toward the side. It would seem our walk wasn't yet over.

"Let's assume you fail," I said. "Let's also assume that I continue to deny that I am a necromancer, which I will because I'm not. What will you do with me?"

He stopped and a small crease settled between his brows. He didn't look at me but at the corner of the house. "Come with me." He set off again, his strides longer and faster. Keeping up meant I had to half walk and half run. When we rounded the corner of the house I saw what he'd heard—a glossy black carriage approached.

When it pulled to a stop I saw that it was a private landau, not a hansom cab, with a gold escutcheon painted on the side.

"Is it Lord Gillingham again?" I asked. Cold sweat trickled down my spine. I shivered.

"It's not his carriage, but if he's one of the party, he won't hurt you."

"How can you be certain?"

He walked forward as a footman jumped down from the rumble seat and opened the door. Lord Gillingham emerged, a new walking stick in hand. He paused on the step when he spotted us. He nodded at Fitzroy and glared at me. Fitzroy didn't respond.

"Keep moving, Gilly," came a gruff voice from inside the cabin.

Fitzroy moved forward as Gillingham stepped onto the drive, allowing the man behind him to alight. The new fellow was very tall and strongly built, with shoulders as wide as Fitzroy's. Even at his age, which I guessed to be about sixty, he looked in good health with the figure of a much younger man. His age showed on his face, however, in the deep grooves across his forehead and around his eyes, and the full gray mutton chops.

"General Eastbrooke," Fitzroy said in greeting.

The man took Fitzroy's offered hand and shook it heartily. "Dressed for the occasion, I see, Lincoln."

"I didn't know you were coming, sir."

Their hands parted, yet Fitzroy didn't offer his to Gillingham. He didn't acknowledge the lord at all, and Gillingham grew more and more agitated as he waited. With a stomp of his walking stick into the ground, he turned to me. His cold eyes drilled into me.

I sidled closer to Fitzroy. The irony wasn't lost on me that I felt safer with my captor.

"Is this the boy?" General Eastbrooke said, in a deep, blustery voice. He placed his hands at his back and approached.

I remained where I was and tilted my head up. Fitzroy didn't seem to detest this man as he did Gillingham, so I assumed the general wasn't as willfully cruel as the lord.

"It is," Fitzroy said, looking down at me. "Charlie, this is General Eastbrooke."

I crossed my arms. "Another committee member?"

Eastbrooke's thick gray brows lifted. "You're supposed to say it's nice to meet you, sir."

"But I don't know if it's nice to meet you or not." I was being deliberately irritating, but I didn't care. The more people I annoyed during my stay, the less likely they were to keep me when they realized I wouldn't help them. "You could be an arse, like him."

Gillingham raised his walking stick, but lowered it upon a glare from both Fitzroy and Eastbrooke. "I don't know why you protect him," Gillingham snapped.

"He's valuable to us," Eastbrooke said.

Fitzroy's gaze slid to the general's. Gillingham snorted. "For the time being," he muttered.

"How old is he?" Eastbrooke asked.

"Thirteen," Fitzroy said.

"Gilly tells me he's tried to escape."

"He has."

"And yet you allow him outside?"

"He needs exercise."

*I needed exercise? Ha!*

The general regarded me. "He'll try to escape again while he's free."

"Then I'll catch him."

"I'm sure that will not be a problem for you. He looks rather scrawny."

"Street urchins usually are."

"Hmmm." He paced around me, hands at his back, then came to a stop in front of me again. He thrust his chin forward. "Show your face, boy."

I backed away and kept my gaze down.

"You're going to defy me?" He clicked his tongue. "I don't think you're in any position to do that, do you?"

"I'm ugly," I said. "My ugliness embarrasses me."

Gillingham snorted, but the general simply continued to regard me with

his cool eyes, his out-thrust chin. If he ordered Fitzroy to hold me while he swept my hair back, I would not be able to resist.

"Time is running out," Eastbrooke said. "You have this necromancer, but what of the other? If the girl is found by V.F, he will succeed. We need to win her to our side first or the battle is lost."

"We'll find her through Charlie. I'm sure of it."

Hearing Fitzroy speak about his suspicions of a link made my heart stop in my chest. How much did he know, and how much was a guess? He gave nothing away.

"And how will you do that?" Gillingham sneered. "He doesn't care what we're trying to achieve. He only cares for his own skin."

"I can't blame him for that, considering how he's lived."

"You're too soft, Fitzroy. Never thought I'd hear myself say that, but there you have it."

"Enough, Gilly!" Eastbrooke snapped. I wasn't sure if a lord outranked a general but Gillingham shut his mouth. Perhaps he was as awed by Eastbrooke's military bearing and powerful frame as I was.

"Do not forget what we're trying to achieve here," Gillingham muttered to Fitzroy.

"I haven't forgotten," Fitzroy said. "It's all I think about. It's all that matters to me."

Eastbrooke nodded. "Your loyalty and dedication to achieving the ministry's goals are not in doubt." He cut a flinty glare at Gillingham.

Gillingham bowed. "You're right, and I didn't mean to imply otherwise. It's just that your methods—"

"Are not up for discussion," Fitzroy told him.

Gillingham cleared his throat. He tapped the carriage steps with his walking stick. "Shall we leave your man to his work, Eastbrooke? It's too hot to stand around out here, and it doesn't seem as if we'll get an invitation to go inside."

*His man?* What an odd thing to call Fitzroy. He didn't seem like he could be anyone's anything. I would have called him his own man. Yet Fitzroy did call him "sir," while Eastbrooke called him "Lincoln" in turn. I still wasn't sure what that implied about their relationship.

"I look forward to your report, Lincoln," Eastbrooke said. "Let's hope I don't have to wait too long." The general turned to me. "If the queen or her family suffer because of your refusal to help us find the other necromancer, you will be blamed."

"And if *I* suffer because I helped? Who will be blamed then?"

"Nobody cares about you, boy," Gillingham said from inside the cabin. "Never forget that."

"How can I, with people like you to remind me?"

Eastbrooke sighed heavily. "You ought to instill some manners into him while he's here, Lincoln. You should know how to go about doing that. I seem to recall you lacked quite a few manners when you were young." He gave a wry smile as he turned away to climb the coach steps.

Because he turned away, he didn't see the muscle in Fitzroy's jaw bunch as he ground his back teeth. I wondered what methods the general had used to instill manners in him.

The coach rolled away and we returned inside before it was out of sight. "You've known those men a long time," I said as he closed the front door.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"I'm thirty. I've known Eastbrooke since birth and met Gillingham some years later."

"He was cruel to you as a child? General Eastbrooke?"

He blinked at me, and I could have sworn he was surprised. "He never touched me."

I frowned but didn't question him further. He strode away, and I suspected he wanted the conversation to end. He suddenly stopped at the foot

of the stairs.

"I forgot to show you something yesterday, on our tour," he said.

"I would hardly call it a tour. You were the worst guide."

"I showed you every room worth seeing."

"With the blandness of an automaton. There was no vivid description, and no stories about the previous occupants or the rooms themselves."

"You didn't need a description since you could see the room for yourself, and I'm not a storyteller."

"So I see. So what room did you forget to show me?"

"The dungeon."

I gasped. "There's a dungeon under our feet?"

"The previous house on this site was medieval. When the house was removed, the dungeon was not filled in. It still has chains hanging from the walls. Would you like to see it?"

"No! What makes you think I'd want to see a dungeon?"

"Boys like gruesome things."

I strode past him up the stairs. "Not this boy. I've seen enough gruesome things in my life without needing to see more."

He followed me up in silence and together we headed back to his rooms. Once inside, he locked the door and pocketed the key in his trouser pocket.

"So what happens now?" I asked, throwing myself on the sofa. "Are you going to question me again? Has the visit from the committee members rattled you enough that you want to throw me in the dungeon and apply the thumb screws?"

"No."

"Then we have hit a wall. Your men will learn nothing of use by roaming around London, and you have learned nothing of use by roaming around the grounds with me."

"You're mistaken." He touched a teapot sitting on a tray on his desk to test its temperature then poured two cups. He handed one to me then sat on

the chair opposite. "I've learned a great deal from our conversation."

He couldn't have. I'd not said a thing about my gender, my necromancing, or my home. I'd been very careful. I sipped, watching him through my hair.

He sat back and sipped too, never taking his gaze off me. He seemed to enjoy drawing out the moment, teasing my frayed nerves to breaking point. Finally, he placed the cup in the saucer. "You're witty and observant," he said, "and educated."

"That's not very useful."

"And your accent changes when you're not thinking about it."

I lowered my cup. Had my accent changed or was he bluffing? None of the boys ever commented on the way I spoke. I was always careful to sound like one of them.

"When you feel comfortable, it becomes more refined. It's a north London accent, middle class, perhaps originating not far from here. You only resort to gutter language when you think it will make an impact and drive home the disguise you've built for yourself. When you're having a conversation with me alone, it changes. My guess is that you haven't lived on the street all your life, but came from a good home before your circumstances changed."

A good home. That's what everyone called middle class households like mine. A good home inhabited by a good man who'd sadly lost his cherished daughter the same night his wife died. Yes, that summed it up nicely.

Fitzroy watched me, and I watched him in return; my heart had sunk to my stomach. So he'd been kind to me only to get me to relax in his presence and extract information from me. I should have known and been more alert. I should not have lowered my defenses for a moment. I should not have allowed myself to be coaxed into submission like a dog.

I tossed the cup and its contents on the beautiful thick rug and marched toward the bedroom. I slammed the door and looked around for something to throw. I picked up the bowl of water from the washstand but lowered it again.

I'd been around boys for so long I'd forgotten how not to behave like

them.

With a sigh, I lay on the truckle bed. After an hour or so, Fitzroy entered. He didn't speak; he just set my book down on the bedside table and left again.

I warred with myself. I wanted to read, but he was so smug—so arrogant—that I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of letting him know that he'd understood my needs. It felt like letting him win.

When I could stand the boredom no longer, however, I retrieved the book and flipped to the page I had read up to. My temper was only harming me, not him, after all. With that in mind, I returned to the parlor and passed by his desk, where he sat conducting his scientific experiments. I would have preferred to watch him but I was determined not to show any interest.

"There's cake," he said without looking up.

A slice had been set down on the table near my cup, which had been retrieved from the floor. It was empty and the rug damp where I'd spilled the tea. I padded back to his desk and the teapot and refilled my cup. I had the sudden urge to spill it over his experiments and ruin them.

As if he knew what I was thinking, his hand darted out and caught my wrist. The brown liquid in the dish in his other hand didn't so much as splash a drop over the side.

"I wasn't going to do it," I said.

He paused then let me go. I returned to the sofa and continued reading from where I'd left off. It was another mystery book. Perhaps that was the only type of fiction he read.

Fitzroy was packing up his experiments when there was a knock at the door. "Sir!" called Seth. "We have news."

They couldn't have found out about me. Surely not. I tucked my legs up beneath me and gripped the book harder.

Fitzroy let Seth and Gus in. Their hair was damp with sweat, and dust smudged their clothing, hands and faces. Their gazes flew to me.

I swallowed heavily.

Fitzroy waited patiently for them to begin. I didn't know how he could remain so calm and not pester them to speak. I was coiled tight and felt sick to my stomach. I pretended to read.

"We did as you said, and asked some questions of the little gutter snipes," Gus said. "Cost us a bleeding fortune."

"But we found out much," Seth went on. "Something very curious is going on, sir."

I felt their gazes on me again and glanced up. I closed the book. There was no point trying to fool anyone.

"Curious how?" Fitzroy asked. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Although the men looked exhausted, he didn't offer them a seat or refreshments.

"We traced him from district to district, just as you told us to," Seth said. "He was remembered, and it wasn't hard. In fact, it was too easy. They recognized him from our description immediately."

"We found out where he were three years ago, then four and five," Gus said, staring at me. He had an odd expression on his face. It took me a moment to realize he was wary, perhaps even scared.

"It was then that we understood why it had been so easy to trace him," Seth said. "He was always the same as the way we described him—a young lad of thirteen with a pointed chin and with brown hair hanging over his face, only staying for six months or so then moving on. A lad who never told anyone where he was from. Exactly the same, sir. He never aged."

They weren't the smartest fellows. Fitzroy wouldn't have needed to go back all five years to realize something was amiss. He was looking at me now too, but it wasn't clear what he thought of my supposed agelessness.

"Is it magic?" Gus whispered, still staring at me.

I wasn't clear if he was addressing me so I refrained from answering.

"Perhaps he's actually an elderly man," Seth suggested.

I smiled. They couldn't be further from the truth.

"You said you traced him as far back as five years ago," Fitzroy said. "No further?"

"We hit a dead end, sir," Seth said. "Five years ago, he just seemed to suddenly appear from nowhere. The gang he joined doesn't know where he came from before that. The trail went cold in Tufnell Park. We're sorry, sir."

I was giddy with relief and gripped the book harder to anchor myself. My cheeks warmed again, and I hadn't realized I'd gone cold until that moment.

Fitzroy dismissed his men.

Seth and Gus left, their gazes upon me as they backed out of the room. The poor men looked terribly confused, although less worried since I hadn't shriveled them with my "magic."

Fitzroy came to my side and calmly squatted down. His face was only inches from mine, but I didn't dip my head. I watched him through the strands of my hair, daring him to see the woman behind the veil. Did he realize what Seth and Gus's findings meant? The man's pitch black eyes gave nothing away.

"Tell me your secret, Charlie." His deep voice rumbled from his chest and vibrated over my skin. The undercurrent raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

"Or what?"

"Or I will need to employ more...drastic measures."

I huffed out a humorless laugh, flipping out the hair at my nose. "I have nearly starved to death, almost frozen to death, been beaten to near death, left to rot in jail with men who wanted to do things to me that made me want to die. Unless you plan on killing me, your drastic measures will be a gift by comparison."

I stood, and he stood too, blocking me. He towered above me, and I was more aware of the difference in our sizes than ever. But he didn't touch me. He simply eyed the book clutched in my arms then walked to his desk.

Did he mean to deny me the books? Perhaps other entertainments too, or

even his company? I would regret that most of all—and I wished I wouldn't.

"Boring me to death is something new, at least."



I SLEPT FITFULLY THAT NIGHT. My nightmares kept waking me. I wondered if I'd made any sounds and woken Fitzroy too. The devil in me hoped so.

He was gone before I got out of bed in the morning. When I tried the door to see if he'd forgotten to lock it, Gus spoke from the corridor outside.

"Don't try escaping, lad. You won't trick me today."

"Where's Death?" I asked.

"Out."

"How long will he be?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On how quick he'll be."

Breakfast must have been sitting on the tray for some time. The bacon was cold and the toast limp. I nibbled the bacon before returning to the bedroom and washing.

I read all morning. Fitzroy had not removed the books, thank goodness, and he'd even left the newspaper. I read it too, for variety. His threat of "drastic measures" had come to nothing, it seemed. So much for my fears.

Gus and Seth took turns at bringing in tea and then luncheon, and finally dinner arrived as dusk settled on the horizon. Fitzroy was still out, they said. His long absence stretched my nerves, and I couldn't concentrate on reading anymore. I knocked on the door.

"I want to go for a walk," I told whoever was on the other side.

"No," Gus called back. "You're not allowed out today. Death's orders."

I sighed. "Come inside and play cards with me then."

"Can't do that neither. Death said we're only to come in to bring you

food."

"So I can't even have a bath in the bathroom?"

"Why do you want another bath? You had one two days ago."

I kicked the door. "I hate you!"

"Because you can't have a bath?" He grunted. "Don't see how that's my fault."

"What about warm water? Can I have some delivered to the bedroom?"

"S'pose so."

I heard his heavy footsteps disappear, but they returned almost immediately. Seth mustn't be too far away.

Several minutes later, Seth delivered a jug of hot water. I added it to the cold water in the basin and dipped my fingers in. Perfect. Perhaps I'd wash my hair again. It still smelled faintly of kerosene.

"Civilization agrees with you," Seth said with a nod at the water.

"What do you mean?"

"You were filthy when you first came here, and now you want baths all the time, and warm water for washing. There were no baths or warm water where you came from. It'll be hard to give it up and go back to that life."

Yes, it would be hard. I'd settled into the easy life at Lichfield Towers much too readily, and the thought of walking away from it was becoming less and less appealing with every passing day.

What would happen if I gave in and told Fitzroy everything? Would it really be so bad?

Seth left and the lock on the main door clicked. I shut the bedroom door too, just to be safe, and removed my clothes. I washed my body first and dried off with the towel, then tipped my head forward into the basin and rinsed my hair. I closed my eyes as water cascaded down my neck, over my ears, my face. Its warmth was heavenly. I sighed.

"You lied to me." The familiar, deep voice sent my heart plunging to my toes. I opened my eyes to see Fitzroy standing beside me, his fists clenched

into tight balls at his sides. From the angle of my position, I could not see his face, yet I knew he could see me. All of me. There was no hiding my nakedness now, or my womanliness.

## CHAPTER 8



SLOWLY, slowly, I straightened, turning away from him and covering my chest and nether regions as I did so. Nobody had seen me naked since I was a little girl, and my humiliation was absolute. My face and neck burned. My heart smashed into my ribs. I wanted to run. I wanted to curl into a ball and hide under the blankets. Hot tears stung my eyes and my lower lip wobbled. I bit it hard.

A towel came around my shoulders. I grasped the edges and pulled it tight around my body. It provided enough modesty to allow me to turn around and meet Fitzroy's gaze. A gaze that quickly flew to my face. Had he been staring at my legs? If so, there was no heat in *his* cheeks, nor his eyes. They grew blacker as they drilled into me.

"You should have told me," he snarled.

"Should I?" I shot back. "You kidnapped me, held me prisoner, and want my necromancy magic for reasons I can't yet fathom, and yet I should have trusted you enough to tell you my greatest secret?" The moment I'd said it, I regretted it. I'd just admitted to being a necromancer.

It probably didn't matter now. He showed no surprise. I suspected he'd discovered more than my gender today.

He lowered his head but continued to watch me through those midnight black eyes of his. His chest and shoulders heaved with his deep breaths, and

his jaw was set like iron. His unbound hair tumbled forward. He couldn't have looked more like the devil if he'd worn horns and carried a pitchfork.

I tossed my head, flicking my wet hair back. I no longer needed to hide behind it. His eyes roamed over my face, slowly taking in the parts of me he'd not seen until now. I felt my blood heat again and I prayed I could control the blush. Fortunately, his gaze met mine once more, and his fury returned. Indeed, he seemed angrier than ever.

As was I. He may have discovered my gender, but he hadn't switched to acting the gentleman. He hadn't left me alone to dress. Did he expect me to do it in front of him? I couldn't guess what he wanted. All I knew was that he was furious with me.

"Are you mad at me because you didn't realize sooner?" I smiled, but it was all teeth and no humor. "The clever Lincoln Fitzroy failed to notice that I was a girl. How disappointed in yourself you must be."

He shifted his weight, and the movement had me stepping back, away from him, out of his reach. I'd said too much. He would surely force me to stop talking somehow.

Yet he didn't come closer. To my surprise, the fury in his gaze dampened a little. His body was still rigid, however, and his hands balled into fists.

"You're right. I should have noticed. But to be fair, you were very good, Charlie. Or should I say, Charlotte."

I jerked my head to the side. Being called by that name brought back memories; some good, some horrible and sad. But it also felt wrong. I wasn't Charlotte anymore. She was gone. "My name is Charlie and that's what you will call me."

"I'm not angry because I didn't see what you truly were," he said. "I'm angry because you lied to me about it."

"Of course I bloody lied! Do you know what it's like for girls living on the streets? It has been...difficult as a boy. As a girl..." I shook my head. I couldn't finish the sentence. I didn't want to think about the horrors that

would have befallen me if people had known I was a girl—and a virgin from a good family at that.

His fingers uncurled at his sides. He crossed his arms. "You think I would have taken advantage of you?"

"I don't know. You did kidnap me and were rather rough in the process."

"That's because I thought you were a boy."

"You think it's acceptable to be rough while kidnapping a boy?"

"I kept you in *here*. In my private chambers."

"What was so improper about that? You didn't see anything until today. And you already knew I was a woman when you marched in here," I added with a sniff. "If impropriety bothered you, you would have knocked first."

"I could have hurt you. You resisted me in the street, you tried to escape and kill me in the process. I could have hurt you at any of those times to stop you." He lowered his face to mine. "I do not like to hurt women."

"So my lie upsets your moral code? Ha! Forgive me for thinking you a hypocrite, Mr. *Death*."

His lips tightened. His nostrils flared. I feared I'd gone too far, but it would seem his moral code was strong—at least where the harming of women was concerned.

"You didn't hurt me much," I told him. "Even though you probably wanted to, after I shot you." As soon as I said it, I wished I hadn't. I didn't want to soften. I wanted to remain mad at him for walking in on me. Anger was better than humiliation. I still felt sick, knowing that he'd seen everything. He couldn't fail to measure me against Lady Harcourt and other beautiful women he must have bedded. My body was skeletal compared to her lushness. How he must find the comparison amusing.

"Get dressed." He stalked to the door, his strides long and purposeful. "This conversation isn't finished."

I glared at the closed door, anger and humiliation swirling inside me because of that man. That insufferable *bully*. I hated him. Hated his smugness

and arrogance, hated the way he stomped over my pride. I was caught between wanting to slap his cheek and never seeing him again. One would satisfy the furious woman in me, the other the embarrassed one. I would both slap him and leave if I thought I had a chance of success. But I wasn't fast enough to hit him and he'd proven too difficult to escape from so far.

I took my time dressing. I sat on the bed for an age, the towel wrapped around me, and thought of all the tricks and horrid things he'd done to me in the last few days to fuel my anger and dampen the embarrassment. But there were so few instances. He'd even shown kindness, on occasion. Whenever I thought of those times, and how I'd wanted more of them, I felt even sicker at what he'd seen and what he must think of me now.

The best way to remain angry was to face him, so I dressed. Instead of dragging my damp hair over my face, I decided to sweep it back. Let him look me in the eyes as he gloated.

He was sipping whiskey by the unlit fireplace when I entered his sitting room from the bedroom. He paused, the glass at his lips. A beat passed. Two. I gave him a defiant glare and he downed the remaining contents.

He crossed to the sideboard and poured another. A bottle of wine was open on a tray and a glass sat with it. Either Seth or Gus must have brought it up, along with the selection of cheeses. I wondered if they knew about my being a woman yet. I wondered what their reactions would be.

Fitzroy held out the wine glass to me. "If I give you this, will you throw it in my face?"

"Let's find out, shall we?" I accepted the glass. My fingers brushed against his and something inside me jolted at the touch. Despite everything, I had a strong urge to linger.

He let go of the glass and indicated I should sit on the sofa. He occupied one of the armchairs, looking every bit a king on his throne. I lowered myself to the sofa, but no longer felt sure how to sit. Legs slightly apart like a boy didn't seem appropriate, nor did lounging. But without a woman's bustle to

get in the way, I didn't need to perch. I sat back and kept my knees together. It felt far too prim and unnatural.

"I didn't know you were in a state of undress," he said. "I apologize for walking in on you."

"And for not turning around and walking out again immediately? You could have left, Fitzroy, yet you didn't. Did you enjoy witnessing my humiliation? Will you enjoy telling Seth and Gus what I look like without clothes?"

His glare turned chilly. "Is that what you think of me?"

I sipped my wine.

After a moment, he finished the rest of his whiskey and set the glass down on the table beside him. "Remind me to thank Lady Harcourt when next I see her."

"What has she to do with anything?"

"It was she who told me you might be a girl."

"You already knew before today?"

"Suspected."

"Then why continue to allow me in your room? Not that I cared," I added quickly, "but you are the one who seemed upset by it."

"I wasn't sure I agreed with her suspicion. I thought spending more time with you would help me decide one way or another, although she was very much against it. It didn't help, by the way. Your disguise was impeccable. I did realize you were educated and from a well-off family, but not that you were female."

"What gave me away to Lady Harcourt?"

"You took an interest in her clothes and not the woman inside them. She claims the way you looked at her was that of one woman appraising another out of curiosity, not desire."

"She thinks every male looks at her with desire?"

"She is a desirable woman."

I took a long sip of my wine. Lady Harcourt was everything I would never be. There was no point wishing it could be otherwise, but his words stung nevertheless.

"She confided her suspicions to me the night she returned for dinner," he said. "I didn't believe her until last night. When Seth and Gus returned with the tale of the ageless boy, it began to make sense. As a thirteen year-old girl, you had done most of your growing, although perhaps your lack of nourishing food has kept you on the small side. Thirteen year-old boys still have some growing to go, but *you* never changed. That's why you had to move on every few months. With Lady Harcourt's suspicions in mind, I returned to Tufnell Park today to follow a different line of inquiry to Seth and Gus. I asked about a *girl* who arrived in their midst five years ago. There was one who stood out, but she appeared only briefly. The boys remembered her as being a miserable, frightened thing with beautiful golden brown hair. That hair and her pretty face—and innocence—made her a target for every whore's minder in the district. When you suddenly disappeared, they assumed you'd been taken and put to work. Or died."

"Clearly I didn't die." I hated how my voice sounded weak. I cleared my throat and sipped my wine.

He picked up his glass, but seeing it empty, set it down again. He didn't let it go, and the fingers gripping it turned white. "How did you escape?"

"The man who caught me planned on selling me to the highest bidder, that first night. He dragged me into every gambling den and disreputable tavern in the north of the city, making sure everyone got a good look. Men, including so-called gentlemen, placed bids on me. Some bought my abductor drinks. By midnight, he was so drunk he couldn't stand. I slipped away while he was pissing in an alley behind a tavern. He was too slow and slipped over in his attempt to come after me. When I was far enough away, I hid until morning. I didn't know where I was, but the area was poor. At around dawn, a door to one of the nearby houses opened and a woman emerged with some

clothes to hang out to dry. When she returned inside, I stole some boys' clothing from the line. I peeped through the window into her kitchen and waited until she left, then I snuck in and stole a knife. I cut my hair and sold it to a man who paid me a shilling for it. I bought a loaf of bread, but instead of eating it, I found a gang of boys living nearby. I offered it to them in exchange for joining them. They thought I'd stolen it, and since they were always looking for good thieves, they included me immediately. None of them ever thought I was anything other than a boy."

"It's been hard for you," he said quietly.

"Not as hard as it has been for some." Or as hard as it could have been, if I hadn't disguised myself. "What I told you does not leave this room. You do not tell Seth or Gus, Lady Harcourt or any of the other committee members. Do you understand?"

"I won't betray your trust."

I wasn't sure whether to believe him, but I had no choice. "So you know that I'm a woman," I said. "What else?"

He drew in a long, measured breath. "After I learned about the girl with the golden hair in Tufnell Park, I changed tactic. I visited the local police station and asked about any girls that had been reported missing five years ago."

"They didn't think that odd?"

"Probably. I claimed I was a private enquiry agent, employed to find missing girls by a good Samaritan."

I snorted. "Only an idiot would fall for that."

"They fell for it."

"Just proves the constabulary are dolts."

"The detective inspector remembered a local girl going missing from her home at about that time. Her name was Charlotte Holloway and her father was a vicar."

"And you just happened to be searching for a girl who was known to live

with a vicar, and my name just happened to be Charlie, so similar to Charlotte. Were you surprised that I was *that* necromancer?"

"Not by then. When I realized you were a girl, I suspected you must be the necromancer I sought."

"It would seem I am the last necromancer after all." I raised my glass in salute and drained it. "And you have me in your clutches. You have succeeded in keeping me away from the man who wants to use me against the queen, so all is well. There is no other necromancer for him to find, now. If I promise not to fall into *his* clutches, will you let me go?"

"No."

I rubbed my forehead. I wasn't used to the wine and felt dizzy from drinking it so quickly. "Why did I suspect you would say that?"

"Go to bed, Charlie. You're tired. We'll discuss this further in the morning."

I dropped my hand and thumped it on the sofa arm. "I may be three years away from reaching the age of majority, but I am an adult in every other way. Do not treat me like a child, now that you know I am not one."

"I won't. But the truth is, I am in a difficult position. This is a household full of men and you are a young woman."

"Then let me go."

"I can't. I cannot risk you being caught by him. Legally and morally, I should return you to your father. You belong there, but I—"

"I do not *belong* in his house," I snapped. "Not if he doesn't want me."

His eyes widened. "You did not run away?"

"No. He threw me out."

I had the great satisfaction of seeing him shocked. At least, I think he was shocked. His lips parted ever so slightly, but shut again almost immediately. Then they flattened. "I assumed he beat you," he said quietly, "and that you'd had enough. I wouldn't have returned you to him if that were the case."

"And now, when you know that he didn't beat me, that he simply doesn't

want me?"

"It seems I still won't be returning you." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. It was almost a casual position, except he seemed as tightly coiled as ever. Was he expecting me to try and escape, even now? "The detective said you disappeared the night your mother died. Did you raise her spirit? Did your father see? Is that why he...?"

"Thought me abhorrent? Yes. She died. I held her in my arms and begged for her to come back and not leave me. To my utter surprise, the smoky thing that looked like her saw me. It lay on her body, and the body came to life. I was so shocked that I let her go. Father was shocked too. Horrified, in fact. He got down on his knees and prayed and cried. My mother's spirit spoke through her body and asked me to release her. She said it wasn't what she wanted. That she was sorry, and she needed to go. So I said some words to the effect that I release her. The spirit drifted away and the body collapsed, dead once more. My father stopped praying and turned on me. He never hit me, but he called me things. What I'd done was unnatural, against God, and all things holy, he said. He ordered me to leave and hustled me out the door. I haven't set foot inside the house since, nor have I spoken to him."

Fitzroy was silent for a long time. His finger brushed against his top lip as he watched me. It was unnerving. I was just about to tell him to stop staring when he said, "Now that we know you are the only necromancer, we can proceed."

"What do you mean?"

"When I assumed you were a second necromancer, I was only concerned with getting to the girl before he did, the man with the initials V.F. But now I know you are she, it's time to flush him out."

I gasped. "You mean to use me as bait!"

"Incentive."

"You are going to use an eighteen year-old woman as bait to catch a monster!"

"You prefer I use a thirteen year-old boy?"

"This is not a joke!"

"I am not joking."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was as heartless as the man he was trying to catch. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised; Seth and Gus had warned me he was an unfeeling wretch.

"You will be safe," he said.

"You cannot guarantee that."

His jaw worked, and I wondered if I'd insulted his manliness by bringing his ability to keep a woman safe into question. Well, good. He could not guarantee such a thing, and it was arrogance to even think he could.

"I won't help you, Fitzroy, and you can't make me." I crossed my arms over my chest in a somewhat petty show of defiance.

"I understand your fear, Charlie."

"Do you? You're a necromancer wanted by a madman, are you?" I grunted. "Don't pretend to sympathize. You don't have a sympathetic bone in your body."

He snatched his glass off the table and stalked over to the sideboard. He poured himself another glass of whiskey but didn't drink it. Instead, he set it aside, very deliberately, and prowled back to me.

I swallowed heavily. *He can't force you, Charlie. He can't make you do anything you don't want to.*

Except he could. He was strong enough and, dare I say it, ruthless enough to do anything. I wondered how far he would go to get his own way.

I dug my fingernails into the armrest. "I won't work for you, but I won't give myself up to him, either."

"That's not enough."

"It has to be. I'm not offering more. Put me back on the street if you want. I don't care. I'll be safer there than if I parade myself in front of him."

His eyes narrowed and I wondered if he suspected that I'd seen the fellow.

I'd yet to tell him anything about the doctor who'd visited Father. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to. He might see that as my agreement to help.

"You refuse, knowing that the queen's life may be in danger?"

"I care nothing for a queen who doesn't lift a finger to help the children starving on her city's streets."

He crossed his arms and regarded me down that straight, handsome nose of his. "I'm offering you a roof, food, clothing and comforts. It may be summer now, but winter is always around the corner."

"I've survived winters before."

"How many more years can you pass yourself off as a boy? It won't last forever."

"I know that. I'll adjust when the time comes."

"It's a lonely life, moving on every few months, never allowing yourself to have friends. Do you want to be alone forever?"

I leveled my gaze with his and tried very hard not to let him see that he'd rattled me. "Perhaps I'll offer myself to a kind man. One willing to protect me in exchange for keeping his bed warm."

He leaned forward and rested one hand on top of mine on the chair arm, trapping it. He drew so close to my face that I could have kissed him. The traitorous feminine part of me wanted to do it. The other part of me wanted to smash his nose with my forehead.

"I can protect you," he said, voice velvety thick and soft.

In that moment, with his dark eyes boring into mine, his breath on my cheek, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to stay with him. I wanted to offer myself to him and keep *his* bed warm, and I would do it without the offer of protection, too.

He suddenly let my hand go, releasing me. "You don't have to do anything in exchange except lure V.F. into the open."

My breathing sounded loud in my ears, so I concentrated on steadying it before he saw how much his presence affected me. "I want nothing to do with

a scheme that puts me in danger. And don't tell me you'll protect me," I added as he opened his mouth to speak. "Because why would you? What do you care if I am alive or dead? You don't need me or my necromancy, beyond it being a lure. In fact, my presence causes you problems. With me around, I am a danger for all sorts of madmen—not just this one."

He sat down again and stretched out his long legs. His shoes almost touched my bare feet on the rug. "You're right," he said eventually. "Bad people will always want you, when they learn what you can do. All the more reason for you to remain here, under my protection. I can't send you back to your father, so it seems you are under my care now, whether we like it or not. It's my duty to see that you are safe, and I take my duty very seriously."

Duty, safe...they were just words; easily spoken and easily discarded once I'd done what he wanted me to do. "Forgive me if I don't put any faith in you doing your *duty*," I spat.

"I am not your father, Charlie," he growled. "If I promise to protect you, I will."

I pushed myself up from the sofa and strode to the bedroom door. "I've had enough talking. We're getting nowhere. I suggest you look for other options, Fitzroy, because I am not going to help you."

Before I knew what was happening, he'd grabbed my arm and spun me round. He loomed above me, his face set hard as granite, his eyes two black pits that went on forever. "You don't seem to understand, Charlie. There are no other options. Let me make two things very clear to you—you will help me, and I will keep you safe." He released me, but the heat of his fingers remained on my arm.

He strode to his desk, leaving me standing in the bedroom doorway with my insides in knots and my heart beating in my throat. With an almighty heave of breath, I turned and slammed the bedroom door closed behind me. I threw myself on the truckle bed and pulled my knees up to my chest.

"I hate you!" I shouted at the door.

He didn't answer.

## CHAPTER 9



"YOU HAVE TO WEAR IT." Lady Harcourt held the corset open like a trap that she would close around me as soon as I was near enough. "All ladies must wear corsets."

"I'm no lady." I stood with hands on hips and kept a wary eye on her. I could dodge her, if need be. "And I am not wearing a corset. I wore them when I was younger and discovered how unsuitable they are for someone like me."

She sighed and her shoulders lost some of their tension. "I understand, Charlie. I do. But you are not living on the street anymore. You don't need to run and hide like a lost boy. You can be yourself."

I wasn't sure who that was but I didn't say so. She seemed intent on turning me into a respectable woman. She had arrived after breakfast, summoned by Fitzroy, and hustled me into the bedroom where she proceeded to lay some women's clothing out for me on the large bed. I'd refused to change into the items, but she'd threatened to order Seth and Gus to hold me down while she stripped me. She'd been so unruffled about it that I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. I'd decided I could make a concession on most of the clothing. The corset, however, seemed a step too far.

"I'm not concerned about running and hiding," I told her. "I am concerned about breathing."

"I won't lace it too tight."

Could I believe a woman whose own corset had deformed her waist to an unnaturally tiny size?

She lowered the device and took my hand in hers. "You cannot parade yourself near the men without a corset. It's indecent."

"It wasn't a problem before."

"They didn't know you were a girl before. Now that they do, I'm afraid they will be...looking for evidence of your femininity."

I snorted. "They'll have to look very hard. My femininity is not very noticeable, even without a corset."

"My dear, we both know what men think of women who don't wear proper underwear." Her voice took on a sympathetic hush and the color rose to her cheeks. Had Fitzroy told her what had happened to me when I first found myself on the streets? Even though he'd promised not to? Or was her statement merely a general one? "I'm sure you've seen how the prostitutes dress."

"Some of them wear those contraptions."

"Loosely."

"What will you do if I continue to refuse?"

"I'll instruct Mr. Fitzroy to deliver you to my house this afternoon, where you will be safe from the roaming gazes of Seth and Gus."

The notion brought an inexplicable swell of disappointment to my chest. I'd fought tooth and nail to get free, and yet I wasn't prepared to leave Lichfield Towers for a residence I knew nothing about, with a woman who would make me wear corsets and act like a lady.

I snatched the corset off her and put it on over the new chemise. I turned my back to her and gasped as she pulled hard on the laces. "You said you wouldn't do it tight!"

"This isn't tight." She pulled again, jerking my entire body toward her. "Hold onto the bedpost."

I grumbled as she finished the lacing, then stood like a ridiculous statue with a straight back. I tried to draw in a deep breath, only to find my chest wouldn't expand enough. "This is torture."

"It gives you a fine shape." She smiled. "You almost look respectable. Now, the petticoats."

She helped me slip two petticoats over my drawers, then a black cotton gown over the top. The outfit was a spare one that had been used by a previous servant girl in her household. It was a little large, but not a bad fit. I'd hoped for something prettier when she'd announced that she would be outfitting me in women's clothing upon her arrival. If I had to wear a dress again, I'd prefer it to be something with a bustle in a brighter color. The servant's garb was drab.

I laced up the boots, but she wouldn't let me out of the bedroom until she'd fixed my hair. There was little she could do, with it being so short, but she managed to make it a little more feminine with the strategic placement of a few pins at the front and a bonnet positioned toward the back.

I admired her handiwork in the dressing table mirror and had to admit she'd done a fine job. I looked like a woman, albeit a somewhat gaunt one with owlish eyes.

"They'll wonder how they ever mistook you for a boy." Lady Harcourt touched a finger under my chin and turned my head this way and that to inspect me from all angles. "You're quite pretty, with that sweet oval face and those big blue eyes." She let me go with a sigh. "You will have to come home with me after all."

"No! I'm remaining here. Or I leave altogether," I added.

She blinked. Was she offended? "Why don't you want to live with me? My house is larger than this. I have many servants, some of them girls of your age. You'll be bound to find a friend among them."

"I do not wish to be your servant, Lady Harcourt. As kind as you have been to me, I prefer it here."

"But there are only men here!"

"Men are only large boys, and I'm used to boys."

She spluttered a laugh. "I'm afraid you can't stay. I cannot, in all conscience, leave you here. Besides, Fitzroy won't know what to do with you, now that you're a girl. He has almost admitted as much to me."

I stormed past her and opened the bedroom door. Fitzroy looked up from his desk and his eyes widened. He took in my dress and hair with a cool, sweeping gaze that finally settled on my face.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, looking past me to Lady Harcourt. Despite his casual stance and words, his mouth was set firm and his eyes were hard. From the little I'd seen of him that morning, he was still furious with me for refusing to help. Well, I was furious too, and I wasn't giving in.

"I am not going to live with her," I said, hands on hips. "Either you keep me here as your prisoner, or you let me go."

"She cannot stay here." Lady Harcourt came to stand beside me. She was taller than me, but I liked to think I presented a fiercer façade.

"If you make me go with her, I will find a way to escape," I said. "It'll be easier in a big household with more servants. Besides, won't they grow suspicious about the girl locked away in a room?"

Fitzroy lifted a brow then nodded. "I agree."

"She cannot stay here, Lincoln." Lady Harcourt's tone turned crisp. "Look at her!"

What was that supposed to mean? "This was a pointless exercise." I went to remove the bonnet and veil, but Fitzroy grasped my hand. I glared at him.

He glared back. "Leave it on."

"Why?" I spat. "I am not going to help you, which means you are going to keep me here indefinitely, locked away where no one can see me. Or you will let me go. What does it matter how I dress?"

"The ministry is not a charity," Fitzroy said in a voice that sent a chill skittering across my skin. "And I am not a kind person. You will do as I say

and help us."

"Or?"

"There is no 'or.'"

"Ha!"

Lady Harcourt bustled past me and laid a hand on his arm. She searched his face, her brow deeply furrowed. "Lincoln? What are you going to do?"

He met my gaze over the top of her head. It was masked; unreadable. He pulled away from her and strode to the door. "In here," he growled at Seth and Gus.

The two guards stopped dead just inside the doorway. Neither could take their eyes off me. Their warm, lingering gazes brought heat to my cheeks and I wished I could hide beneath my hair again.

"Stop staring," I snapped. "Haven't you seen a girl before?"

"Um, I, um, didn't know you was so pretty." Gus no longer looked at me but at his feet; most of his words were mumbled into his chest.

Seth cleared his throat and sketched a short bow. "That dress is very fetching on you, Charlie. Er, Charlotte. *Miss Charlotte.*"

"It's a servant's dress and plain black," I said. "It is the least fetching outfit imaginable. And you can continue to call me Charlie. Or better yet, don't speak to me at all."

Seth's face fell, and I regretted my harsh manner. It wasn't his fault that I was in this predicament. It was entirely Fitzroy's.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Lady Harcourt raising her brows at him. *See*, she mouthed.

"Prepare the carriage," Fitzroy ordered his men.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked as Gus and Seth left.

"Out." To Lady Harcourt, he said, "Does she have gloves?"

"I'll fetch them." She disappeared into the bedroom.

"I am not going anywhere with you," I told Fitzroy.

He said nothing, which worried me. I'd found he was far more dangerous

when he didn't speak.

Lady Harcourt returned and handed me a pair of black gloves. "It's warm out and you won't require a coat." When I neither put on the gloves nor moved, she lifted her brows at Fitzroy. "Now what?"

Fitzroy put out his hand. I hesitated then placed the gloves on his palm. "What are you—?"

He picked me up and slung me over his shoulder. One arm clamped across my kicking legs like a steel barrier, the other still clutched the gloves.

"Let me go!" I tried to straighten, but the corset not only made breathing difficult, it limited my movement. I squirmed instead, intent on not making it easy for him, but it made little difference. Besides, I was very aware that my bottom was close to his face. I might not be much of a lady, or want to be one, but wriggling my rear end in his face was not something I could bring myself to do. I stilled.

He carried me out of the room. Lady Harcourt followed behind us, her steps short and quick.

"Put me down!" I shouted.

"Don't bother screaming," he said as he descended the stairs. "Cook, Seth and Gus won't help you."

I called him every crude name I could think of, loudly, and pounded his back with my fists. Nothing made him stop, but at least he would sport bruises for a week. Not only did he not stop, he didn't slow down. Indeed, his pace quickened, and his steps became jauntier as we reached the next flight of stairs. It made for a very uncomfortable ride.

"You're deliberately being rough now," I snapped.

"This is my natural way of descending stairs."

"It is not. You've got the smoothest stride of anyone I've seen. It's why you're able to sneak up on people." I tried to twist to get a better look at him, but it was impossible. I could only see the back of his head. His unruly black hair was tied up with a leather strip. Perhaps if I pulled it...

Lady Harcourt clicked her tongue. "I'll need to fix her hair in the carriage."

"You're not coming with us," he said.

"I must! She needs a chaperone!"

He reached the base of the staircase and turned toward her as she stopped alongside us. I suspected he was bestowing one of his chilling glares on her because she stepped away.

"It's a mistake, Lincoln," she said as he carried me outside. I took that to mean she'd given in.

We had to wait a few minutes for the carriage to be brought around. When it stopped, and Seth opened the door, Fitzroy dislodged me from his shoulder onto the bench seat. I bounced and hit my arm against the other side. Before I'd recovered my balance, he'd climbed after me and shut the door.

The coach took off with a jerk. I lunged for the door, but Fitzroy was too quick. He barred it with his arm.

"You're a prick." I sank into the corner and pushed the hairpins that had come loose back in place.

"It's not too late to change your mind," he said. "Help me willingly and you can live at Lichfield Towers under my protection."

I snorted. "You cannot guarantee my safety once he learns what I am. He'll not stop until he catches me."

"Then I'll have to stop him *before* he catches you."

"How?"

"By killing him."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and tore my gaze away from his icy one to stare out the window. We left the Lichfield Towers estate, and drove past Highgate Wood, onto streets lined with shops and taverns. People went about their business, blissfully unaware that a necromancer was in their midst.

"And what will happen to me if you stop him?" I asked. "What will you

do with the inconvenient necromancer?"

"I don't know yet. Perhaps I'll employ you as a maid."

"I don't want to be anyone's maid."

"The work won't be too hard."

"I'm not afraid of hard work. I don't want a master. I haven't had one in years, and that's the way I like it."

"Every woman has a master."

"Lady Harcourt doesn't."

"That's different. She's a widow, and a wealthy one at that."

I said nothing as we passed by the Highgate Cemetery gates. The breeze rustled the leaves and it began to rain. A small dog scampered away from the curb, afraid of the horses thundering hooves and the carriage's clattering wheels. Its brown fur was bedraggled and knotted, its eyes weepy as it watched us pass. Sadness welled inside me at the pathetic creature.

"You're taking me to Tufnell Park," I said. "To my father."

He didn't answer.

We continued through Tufnell Park, going nowhere near Father's house. I frowned at Fitzroy, but he stared out the window, his gaze intent yet unseeing. A muscle pulsed in his throat above his collar. It would seem his thoughts had distracted him. Perhaps I should try escaping again.

I waited for the coach to slow, but by the time it did, Fitzroy was once more alert. The time for leaping from the coach had passed.

"This is Whitechapel," I said, looking around.

I'd lived there twice before, including when the Ripper had been doing his worst, but not in this street. It was a narrow lane, paved with uneven stones made slick with slops and rain. There were no shops or taverns, only crumbling, crooked buildings divided into rooms. I knew from experience that those rooms were crammed with as many people that could fit into them as possible. Barefoot children watched us, their hollow faces reminding me of my own. A group of them approached the horses and coach, but Gus's hiss

sent them scurrying back.

A woman with a crying baby clamped to her hip emerged from one of the buildings. She put out a hand and mouthed *please*. Seth tossed her a coin. That only drew out more women, and some men too.

Seth opened the door and held his hand out. It took me a moment to realize he was offering to assist me down, as a gentleman would a lady. I glanced at Fitzroy, expecting him to grab my arm and pin me to the seat.

"You wished to leave," was all he said. "So leave."

"You're letting me go? Just like that?"

"It's what you want."

I watched him through narrowed eyes. "I don't trust you. You're up to something."

"Go," he said heavily. "Let's see how long you last here without my protection."

Ah. Now I understood. He was proving a point, or trying to. I laughed without humor. "This is my home," I said, nodding at the grimy faces, the filthy gutter. "I know how to survive out here. I've been doing it for years."

"Not as a woman, and a respectable, pretty one at that."

One of the men hawked a glob of spit onto the stones. The child on the woman's hip cried harder. Fitzroy was right. Although it was daylight, and women and children crowded near, it wouldn't be long before I found myself alone at night. Dressed as a woman, I would be vulnerable, a target.

"Your lack of hair might save you," he went on. "But it also means you have nothing to sell. Aside from the obvious, of course."

I lashed out, but he caught both my wrists before I connected. He drew me closer, so that I was almost sitting on his lap. His eyes were as black up close as they were from a distance.

"Reconsider." His deep, rumbling voice almost hypnotized me into saying yes.

"No. You won't leave me here. I'm too valuable to you, and you're too

cock-sure to consider failure. You won't leave me," I said again.

He let me go, shoving me back onto the seat as he did so. "Get out."

I flattened my hands down my skirts and called his bluff. I climbed out, refusing Seth's offered hand. Fitzroy closed the door himself and remained inside. Seth climbed up onto the driver's seat beside Gus and the coach pulled away.

I was free. I smiled at the retreating coach, still unable to believe that I'd won. Surely it was a trick. It must be. And yet they were out of sight already, around the corner.

A child of about six came up to me and tugged on my sleeve. "Coin, miss? We be starving."

"I haven't got any money," I told her, loud enough so that they could all hear. If they thought I had money, I wouldn't get far before I was robbed.

I walked away, ignoring the stares and the occasional tug on my skirt. With no money, my options were limited. I could sell the bonnet, and perhaps the gown after I stole some boys' clothes. I'd keep the boots. They were sturdy and only a little worn. They would last some time. I smiled as I walked along the miserable streets of Whitechapel. Fitzroy had under-estimated me.

I spent the rest of the day wandering, thinking about where next to live. I couldn't return to Stringer and the others, and Fitzroy's investigation meant I was too obvious in my previous haunts now. It might be time to leave London altogether. But where to go? How close was the nearest city?

By the time evening fell, I was starving. My stomach protested, even though I'd eaten one good meal already at breakfast. And despite being summer, it was cold. I had no shawl or coat and I'd left the gloves in the coach. I'd become too used to the good life at Lichfield Towers. I'd known that would happen. I could kick myself for accepting Fitzroy's hospitality.

As darkness descended, I settled under a railway bridge. It stank of urine but it was empty of other residents. Because of the rain, no one had hung out clothes to dry, but I hadn't given up hope. There was always the morning. I

just had to get through the night unnoticed.

I drew my knees up and settled my chin on them. If Fitzroy changed his mind and returned to the place where he left me, he'd find me gone. Should I make my way back so that I was easy to find? He would have to apologize before I agreed to return.

The more I thought about it, the surer I became that he would return. Lady Harcourt would send him back when she discovered what he'd done. She and the other committee members wouldn't let him just leave me here. She was much too kind, and they needed me.

But he'd made it clear that he was the leader. They did as he said. And he was a determined man, not one to back down. I hardly knew him, but I knew that. If he'd decided to throw me into the pond, then he would certainly not fish me out again at someone else's suggestion.

It would seem I'd overestimated my worth to them. To him. I was nothing, after all. A well of sadness I hadn't experienced for a long time opened inside me.

"Who're you?" came a harsh voice from behind me. "What're you doin' on my patch?"

I spun round and flattened myself against the bridge supports. There was just enough light from the single gas lamp to see by and I saw a very large man looming over me. He looked like a bear with his black shaggy beard, long hair, and big hands.

"I'm going," I said, deepening my voice. I'd already removed the pins from my hair to cover my face again, but I was still dressed in women's clothing. "I didn't know this was your place."

"Halt there." He lumbered toward me and I edged away. "I said halt!"

I turned to flee, but he lunged. He had a surprisingly long reach and was fleet of foot than he looked. He caught my elbow and jerked me round to face him.

"Please, let me go, sir. I mean you no harm or disrespect."

"What's a girl like you doing out here all alone, eh?" He glanced around, as if expecting to see my menfolk nearby.

"I'm not alone," I said quickly. "My father and two brothers will be here soon. They're dock workers and carry big knives."

"The docks ain't near here. And I got a big weapon too." He grinned, revealing teeth as black as his beard. He groped his trousers at his crotch and licked his lips beneath his moustache. "Show me ya face, girl. I wanna see it while I fuck you."

I pushed at him, but he was too strong, too big. He laughed at my pathetic attempts. I kicked his shin and he yowled.

"You little bitch!" He hooked a leg behind my knees, making them buckle. I crashed to the ground, hitting my hip and head against the bricks of the bridge support. I scrabbled and hit out, but could get no strength behind my punches with the damned corset constricting movement and breathing. He pinned my arms above my head with one of his massive hands and swept my hair back with his other.

"Ain't you're a prize. Got lucky tonight, didn't I? Eh? First some coin, now a tasty little tart."

I tried to kick him again, but he lay half on top of me, pinning me. He pulled my skirts above my knees and his fat fingers rubbed my thigh through my drawers. I tasted bile and blood and realized I'd been biting my lip to stop from crying out. Screaming would only draw more men my way. A pack of them would be worse than just this one.

"Where's that little peach of yours, eh?" His hot breath stank. I choked down the bile in my throat and wished I hadn't. Throwing up over him might get him off me.

But I doubted it. The light caught the determined gleam in his eyes, the glisten of saliva on his beard.

I shut my eyes and willed myself to be calm, to empty my head and think of nothing. To not feel. But it was impossible. I felt every pinch of his dirty

fingernails on my inner thighs, every scratch of his beard on my throat, every tear that slid down my cheek. It was hopeless. All I could do now was endure. Endure and survive.

And try not to regret my decision to leave Lichfield Towers and Lincoln Fitzroy.

## CHAPTER 10



THE WEIGHT of the body pressed down on me, grinding my bony hip and shoulder into the greasy ground. He tried to kiss my mouth, and I did the only thing I was capable of doing in that position. I bit his cheek. My teeth sank into flesh. I gagged as the tang of blood filled my mouth. The brute reared back, screaming and clutching his face. But he didn't get off me. He raised his massive paw to strike me.

Then suddenly he was gone, ripped off me by someone dressed in a dark hood. The newcomer punched my assailant in the stomach then shoved him away. My attacker crumpled like a doll and lay entirely still except for the blood oozing from the wound in his stomach.

He hadn't been punched, he'd been stabbed. And he was dead.

The wisp of smoky haze rising from the body told me that. It formed the man's shape, right down to the abundance of whiskers and broad hands. It was the man's spirit, yet I hadn't touched the body in order to see it. Either that had been the situation all along, or my power had grown stronger.

The spirit didn't look at me but at his murderer. He bared his teeth. "Damn you! You tricked me!" The smoky essence thinned and floated past me as if on a breeze. I leaned away from him, but he didn't touch me.

I blinked and he was gone. Only the body remained, and my rescuer. Or the man I had to fight off next.

He pushed his hood back and I gasped. "Fitzroy!" I choked on the name, relief bringing fresh tears and tightening my throat.

He crouched at my side and helped me to sit. The corset made it difficult to do on my own. He stroked my hair off my face and checked me over by the miserly light of the streetlamp. His touch was entirely clinical.

"Are you harmed?" His voice quavered ever so slightly.

I had some bruises on my thighs, but I wouldn't tell him about those. I couldn't anyway. Speaking had suddenly become the most difficult thing to do. I simply shook my head and fought hard to not let my tears overwhelm me.

But when his face softened and he picked me up, it all became too much. I pressed my cheek to his chest and sobbed. It was pathetic but cathartic too. My fear flowed away along with my tears until there was nothing left but a sense of wellbeing. It was wrong to feel grateful to be in the arms of my captor, yet I couldn't bring myself to hate him. My relief was too great, the strength of his arms too comforting. He was keeping me safe, just like he'd promised.

He did not set me down. We walked for some time through the dark streets, not speaking. His arms didn't loosen around me. If anything, they seemed to tighten. I couldn't see his face, tucked under his chin as I was, but I could hear his heartbeat. It had been erratic at first, but was now steady.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked. We seemed to have left the slums. The houses we walked past were larger, the streets emptier. It was late.

"Home."

*I don't have a home.* I closed my eyes and listened to his heartbeat again. The rhythm lulled me and chased away the memory of that brute's fingers, his stench and my fear. I felt more like myself again, with a clearer head and a sense of dignity that had been absent since I'd realized what he'd intended to do.

"You can put me down now," I told Fitzroy. "I won't run off." I needed to

stand on my own two feet again, no matter how much I liked being in his arms. That was entirely the problem—I liked it too much.

He didn't respond immediately, but walked several more paces before finally setting me on my feet. We were between streetlamps so I couldn't make out anything more than his silhouette.

"It's not far," he said and set off again.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked. He shortened his strides so that I could keep up easily.

"I followed you."

I frowned. "You've been watching me?"

"Yes."

"All day? Ever since dropping me off in Whitechapel?"

"Yes."

His words slowly, slowly sank in. My God. I'd been right when I thought he was trying to make a point. Only I hadn't expected him to go so far as to leave me behind. When he had, I'd assumed I'd gotten him wrong and he'd decided to let me go after all. But this...this was beyond comprehension.

I stopped. He stopped too and his gaze met mine. "You never had any intention of setting me free," I murmured. I shook my head, over and over, no longer certain of this man. He'd been so kind as he picked me up—only because he felt guilty at leaving me there dressed as a woman with no weapons or money.

I went to punch him in the chest where my tears dampened his coat, but he caught my fist.

"I needed you to help me," he said. "I needed you to see that you're better off at Lichfield."

I backed away from him, but was stopped by the low brick fence of the church behind me. "That is a horrible thing to do to a woman. To anyone!"

"Your stubbornness only makes *you* suffer, Charlie."

"I am not doing it from stubbornness. I'm trying to stay alive."

"And look how that worked out."

I pressed my lips together and crossed my arms. I could try running away, but he would catch me. Or he might let me leave entirely, and I would once again be vulnerable and alone, and I was so tired of feeling that way.

"You may be alive out here," he said, "but it's not a good life. You know that."

"Stop pretending to know what I think. And anyway, how can I trust you after that little test?"

"I give you my word. It's all I have to offer, but I hope you know me well enough to believe me."

"Ha!"

"You have to trust me, Charlie. The alternative is...that."

Tears burned my eyes again as the memory of that brute came crashing back. It had been as bad as my first night alone, taken by the man who'd tried to sell me to the highest bidder. Worse, perhaps, because now I was aware of what could happen. Five years ago, I'd been naive.

I sniffed and inclined my head in a nod. "Congratulations. You win. I give in." I marched off in the same direction we'd been heading.

He quickly caught up and we walked side by side in silence. I'd hoped for an apology but none came. At least he didn't gloat.

"Your heart is made of ice," I hissed at him.

"It was for your own good."

"If I were you, I'd keep quiet. Say the wrong thing and I might change my mind, and you are not very good at saying the right thing, in my opinion."

Mercifully, he remained silent. It was too dark to see what he thought of my snippy response, and I was too tired to care.

We strode through the Lichfield Towers gate and I sighed, not out of frustration, but contentment. I was moments away from food and a soft bed. I wanted a bath too, to wash away the grit of the street, the stink of that man. Lights blazed from every window in the house, even from the tallest room in

the central tower. I wondered if I would find myself back up there, or if I were to remain in Fitzroy's rooms.

The front door was thrown open before we reached it. Seth and Gus tumbled out, grins splitting their faces. Were they happy to see me again? How odd. I smiled back. To my surprise, I was glad to see them, but I wouldn't tell them that.

They both looked me over, then with satisfied nods, stepped aside to let us through.

"Good," Seth said for no apparent reason.

"Welcome back, Miss Charlotte," Gus said, tugging on his forelock as a working man would do as a lady passed.

"Call me Charlie or I'm leaving immediately."

His gulp was audible. He shot a startled glance Fitzroy's way. "I, er..."

"It was a joke." I patted the poor man's arm. He blushed brightly in response.

"Ignore him," Seth said. He offered me his arm. "Cook has some treats lined up for you—jellies, candied fruit, even ice cream. Shall I bring it up to your room?"

"Yes, thank you. That's very kind of you to organize sweets for me."

His smile faded. "It wasn't me that ordered them." His gaze flicked to Fitzroy then away.

I frowned at Fitzroy, but he was already moving off. "Draw a bath for her," he told Gus. "And show her to her new room. There's no need to set a guard on the door. We'll talk in the morning, Charlie." He took the stairs two at a time and disappeared from sight.

We three let out a collective sigh, the tension having left with him. "Was it much of an ordeal?" Seth asked me.

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Gus smacked his friend's arm. "Idiot. Leave her be."

"Go and draw the bath," Seth told him. To me he said, "We're glad you're

back, Miss— Charlie. You might not know it, but your presence has livened this place up."

I couldn't help laughing. "It must have been terribly dull beforehand."

"Aye," Gus said, casting a glance at the stairs.

I took his arm, surprising him into another blush. "Will you show me to my room now, please?"

"Right you are, ma'am. Miss. Charlie."

Seth wandered off toward the kitchens, chuckling, and I walked with Gus up the stairs. Now that I'd made the decision to stay, I felt more at ease. I would keep my promise and not try to escape.

Yet I would also try to keep my feelings in check. Fitzroy had proved he was ruthless in getting his own way; he was not to be trusted. I'd be a fool to put myself at his mercy, physically or emotionally. I'd not made the mistake of trusting someone in a long time, and I wasn't about to begin now.



LADY HARCOURT CAME to my new room the following morning. She was dressed in a steel gray gown that would look grim on anyone else, but looked elegant on her, with its slender fit, large bustle and white frills at cuff and collar.

She was followed by Fitzroy. I hadn't seen him since our return the night before. His eyes seemed a little tight as he regarded me from beneath half-lowered lashes. If he was annoyed, I doubted it could be because of me this time. I'd done exactly as he'd asked.

Lady Harcourt also seemed somewhat provoked as she greeted me with a brief smile. I suspected they'd argued about something. Me? Or perhaps Fitzroy's methods?

"It's a little warm for a fire," she said, glancing at the fireplace. She gasped when she saw what was burning in the grate. "Oh, *Charlie!* You

didn't."

"It accidentally caught fire."

"How?"

"It somehow found itself in the grate among the kindling with a flame put to it."

She gave me a withering glare. "If you didn't want to wear the corset, you could have simply left it off when you dressed this morning. There was no need to burn it."

I begged to differ. I felt a very strong need to destroy the damned thing.

Fitzroy added a scoop of coal to the fire. "How do you find your new rooms?" he asked, straightening.

"Very nice. Thank you." While the bedroom and adjoining sitting room were better than the tower chamber, they weren't as spacious as his suite. My new abode was located down the hall from his and was comfortably furnished. It was better than I expected.

"Do you have everything you need?"

"Seth delivered the books earlier."

"You ought to sew," Lady Harcourt said. "Do you remember how?"

"I think so." I'd never been very good at sewing, always rushing my stitches, frustrating my mother. Her needlepoint had been particularly fine, but she'd had far more patience than me.

"When you come to live with me, I'll see that you're given something simple to begin with."

"Live with you! But I thought I was to remain here?" I glared at Fitzroy, but he was looking at Lady Harcourt.

"Julia," he intoned. "That's not how we agreed to approach this."

Lady Harcourt sighed and swanned further into the room. The sitting room was small enough that the presence of three people filled it. Fitzroy, in particular, looked much too large for the room. He stood near me, making me very aware of the power contained within his tall frame. For the first time

since it happened, I thought of how he'd killed the man who'd accosted me beneath the bridge. Fitzroy had not given him a chance to beg forgiveness. He'd stabbed him as he would a sack of grain, and left his body there to be picked over by thieves and rats.

As glad as I'd been at the time, today I was struck by the brutality of it—the coldness. Yet, only moments later, he'd carried me gently away from the scene.

Lady Harcourt pressed a flat palm to her stomach and seemed to be gathering herself. "Very well," she said. "Charlie, I've come to ask you, once again, to live with me. Now that you have agreed to help, there is no need to lock you up."

"No, thank you. I have no desire to wear corsets and scrub your floors."

Her fingers splayed. "You don't have to be a servant. You may be my companion."

"What does a companion do?"

She shrugged. "We sit together, talk and walk together. You can pay calls with me."

"On who?"

"My friends."

It didn't sound like something I'd like to do, but I didn't want to offend her. "I prefer to remain here."

She opened her mouth to protest, but Fitzroy cut in. "Charlie has given her decision. You promised to abide by it."

"Yes, but I'm not sure she's thoroughly thought it through." Lady Harcourt turned a winning smile onto me. "What is there for a girl to do here?"

"Gamble and play cards," I told her.

She clicked her tongue.

"Drink whiskey and smoke cigars."

"Charlie, really, now you're just being stubborn."

"Apparently I make a habit of it," I said, ignoring Fitzroy as best as I could.

"She won't come to any harm here," he assured her. "You know that, Julia. Indeed, you also know that this is the safest place for her, while we try to draw V.F. out. I won't expose her to danger because you believe she needs feminine company."

It was quite the speech, and I was surprised at his vehemence. It would seem he took my safety seriously.

"Very well," she huffed. "I'll have some embroidery sent around. And you are to keep Gus and Seth on a tight leash. If anything happens to her—"

"Nothing will happen," I said. "They're not going to...compromise me under Fitzroy's nose. He'll skin them alive."

He lifted his brows at Lady Harcourt in what I suspected was triumph, but I wasn't entirely sure.

She sighed. "Then that is that. I'll retreat. I must dash anyway, but I'd like a word with Charlie alone before I go."

Fitzroy bowed then left us. Once the door was shut, Lady Harcourt picked up the fire iron and stabbed at the burnt corset. Her vigorous thrusts quickly made her breathless. I could have told her she'd be able to breathe better if she threw her own corset into the fire, but I didn't think the suggestion would be welcomed.

"Do you have your courses?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"Your monthly woman's courses."

"I...no. It stopped some time ago."

She eyed me up and down. "That can occur with underweight girls. I expect, now that you're eating, it will return. I'll have linens sent to you along with the sewing."

"Thank you, my lady. You're very kind." I meant it. She had thought of difficulties that hadn't even occurred to me. "I know you're worried about

how a girl who doesn't like to wear corsets will behave around the men, but I can assure you, I am not interested in...those sorts of activities."

She stabbed at the ruined corset again. "Not yet."

I sighed. "Fitzroy won't allow it under his roof anyway. He'll make sure the men treat me with respect."

*Stab, stab, stab.*

"And I won't tempt them." I laughed. It sounded ridiculous. "As if I could, anyway."

She stopped and placed the fire iron in the stand. "You underestimate yourself, Charlie. And I think you underestimate men, too." She lifted a finger when I opened my mouth to protest. "Men, not boys. They are not the same. Well, some are, but many are not. Now, tell me something."

"What?" I mumbled, unsure if I'd been chastised or advised.

"How did Fitzroy convince you to stay and help us?"

"He didn't tell you?"

She smiled sweetly and hooked her arm through mine. "I thought I'd ask you."

"Perhaps you ought to ask him." I extricated myself, but not before I felt her fingers tense on my arm.

I headed for the door and opened it. Fitzroy wasn't there, and nor were any of the men. It took me a moment to remember that I was no longer a prisoner. I walked down the stairs with Lady Harcourt. We found Fitzroy in the library, propped against the windowsill, a book in hand.

He looked up as we came in and closed the book. "We need to talk."

I wasn't sure if he spoke to me or Lady Harcourt and whether his announcement meant the other should leave. Lady Harcourt, however, seemed to know. She gave him her hand and he bowed over it.

"I look forward to your report," she said.

"I'll be in touch with the committee soon."

He walked her out, leaving me alone in the library. I picked up the book

he'd been reading—*A Guide To The Spirit World*. How curious. I flipped it open and began to read, but didn't get very far before he returned. Outside, Lady Harcourt's carriage rolled away.

"Tea and cake?" he asked. "Cook has been baking."

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat."

"Breakfast wasn't that long ago."

He tugged on the bell pull in the corner of the library. The house was so vast that I couldn't hear the corresponding bell ringing in the service area.

He stood by the table while we waited, hands behind his back, and nodded at the book. "You should read that. It might help you understand your necromancy."

Seth entered. "Can I get you anything, Charlie?" His smile made him even more handsome, and not for the first time I wondered why he was working for Fitzroy alongside a ruffian like Gus.

"Tea and cake." Fitzroy's gruff manner wiped Seth's smile from his face.

Once he was gone, Fitzroy indicated I should sit at the table. I did, and a moment later, as though it were an afterthought, he did too.

"Now that you've agreed to help, I want to keep you informed," he said.

"You do? Oh. Thank you. Is there more to what you've already told me?"

"Not much. I've learned that a man has been calling at all the homes of London vicars and asking after girls living in the same house. Daughters, wards, servants..."

"I'm sure that went down well. Did he know my name?"

"I don't think so, but I didn't know it at first, either. Not until I learned about the tragic disappearance of Anselm Holloway's daughter, two days ago."

"And you investigated further," I finished. "How did you learn the piece of information about the vicar? How did V.F.?"

He sat quite still, one palm flat on the polished tabletop. I thought for a

moment he would keep that secret to himself, but then he answered. "A woman we'd been watching in Paris wrote to him. Her husband had died in suspicious circumstances here in England, and she'd exiled herself to Paris to avoid the police, and us, asking uncomfortable questions."

"You think she killed her husband?"

"I think she knew the killer and was possibly present for the murder. I also believe the murderer to be the man she wrote to, this V.F. Her husband's body was cut open and the brain used to—"

"Stop!" I pressed a hand to my lurching stomach and drew in a deep breath. "So you watched this woman in Paris and waited for her to send a communication. You must have intercepted the letter."

"I did. She'd written it in code and tried to have an unsuspecting couple deliver it, since the usual postal service would be too slow and unreliable. I intercepted and decoded it. The letter claimed she'd found the girl V.F. was seeking, and that she was living with a London vicar. I don't know how she learned that. I then made sure the missive found its way to V.F.'s hands."

"Thereby putting the girl—me—in danger."

"You weren't in danger because you weren't living with a London vicar."

"You didn't know that at the time."

"And I would not have allowed V.F. to capture you."

"Forgive me for doubting your competence on this, Mr. Fitzroy, but you are only three men, if you include Gus and Seth, and there are many vicars living in London. You couldn't watch them all."

The fingers on the table splayed wide.

"Tea," Seth announced, as he entered the library with a tray. Behind him, Gus followed, carrying a second tray laden with plates and slices of cake.

They set the trays down and began to pour and pass out plates. There was enough for them too. It would seem they were to join us. The household arrangement was odd, and I still wasn't sure whether the two men were supposed to be servants, assistants, or something else. Not friends. Fitzroy

certainly didn't treat them as equals.

"You need a maid," I told Fitzroy.

"Aye," Gus muttered, as he handed me a plate.

"Or dress these two in livery."

Seth had been about to hand me a cup and saucer, but he held it back. "I am *not* wearing livery."

"We're not bloody footmen," Gus added, pulling up a chair. He sank his teeth into his slice of cake, scattering crumbs over his chest.

"Then you definitely need a maid," I said. "And footmen too. Is money a concern?"

"No," Seth said.

I arched a brow at Fitzroy, but he didn't notice. He pushed my plate closer to me. "You should eat."

"I told you, I'm not hungry."

"Eat."

"Better do as he says," Seth warned me. "He likes getting his own way."

Fitzroy shot him a flinty glare that turned Seth's face pale. He cleared his throat and sipped his tea.

I nibbled the cake to appease them. It gave me time to think anyway. It seemed I knew something Fitzroy didn't—what V.F. looked like.

"I saw him at my father's house," I said. "V.F. I assume it was he. Father called him 'doctor.'"

"Doctor?" Gus shook his head as he swept crumbs off his jacket. "If it's the same man we're after, the one who chopped Mrs. Calthorn's husband into pieces, then he don't cure people."

Fitzroy sat forward. "When was this?"

"The day you kidnapped me. I sometimes sit in the garden of my old home." I looked into my teacup, not wanting to see what they thought of my pathetic behavior. "I overheard this doctor ask if there was a girl living there—he even mentioned my name. He must have learned about me having gone

missing through neighbors or parishioners."

"Or via publicly available birth records. Either way, he'd done some research before his visit. What did he look like?"

I described the doctor as best as I could. "I would recognize him again if I saw him." *When* I saw him. I had no doubt I would be seeing him again. "I think he gave Father his name, but I didn't catch it."

Seth set down his cup in the saucer with a loud clank, and Gus stopped chewing. "Why didn't you say so?" Seth said. "Sir? Shall we go now?"

"Prepare the coach and horses," Fitzroy said.

Both men ran from the room. Their keenness unnerved me. Neither man had shown much intensity until now. It seemed I'd given them the first true clue for discovering V.F.'s identity they'd had in a long time.

"Can you learn where a man lives from his name?" I asked Fitzroy.

"Yes, particularly if he's a practicing doctor. If he's not, there are still ways." He got up and strode from the room.

I raced after him, almost tripping over my skirts in my haste. I picked them up to keep them away from my boots and caught up to him in the entrance hall as he retrieved his hat and gloves from the hallstand.

"You're going to my father's house," I said.

"Yes."

"And then on to the doctor's, as soon as you can connect his name to an address?"

"It might take some time to find the address."

"You may not need me to lure him out after all."

"Hopefully Holloway will give us the name without coercion, and V.F. will be found easily. If not, you will be required." His thumb and forefinger stroked the brim of his hat, and I suspected he was contemplating saying something else. But then he strode away toward the door, leaving me standing there by the hallstand.

"Mr. Fitzroy," I called. He paused and raised his brows at me. "Can I

come with you? To Father's house, I mean."

He lowered his hat and faced me fully. "You wish to speak with him?"

"I...I think so. Yes."

"You don't need to. I'll get the information from him in my own way, if necessary."

I suspected his way meant beating the answer out of him. While I wasn't entirely against the idea, I did want to see my father. And speak to him. It was time, and I had a lot of things to say. "If you intend to scare information out of him, I think you may need me. He won't be too frightened of a mere human, but having the devil's maid in his midst will scare the stuffing out of him. Answers too, I expect."

"Then you'd better fetch your gloves."



I RECOGNIZED the elderly women leaving my father's house with baskets over their arms. They were two of his most devoted parishioners, and a more pious pair never existed. As they passed Fitzroy and me near the front gate, I ducked my head so that I wouldn't be recognized, but I needn't have bothered. They were too intent on their conversation. I caught snippets as they walked away.

"Poor, poor man," one said.

"Will his suffering never end?"

"What has he done to deserve such a life?"

"Excuse me," I called out to them. They stopped and gave me benign smiles. Neither seemed to recognize me. "Has something happened to...Mr. Holloway?"

"The house was burgled last night, poor man," one said.

"While he was asleep upstairs!" the other chimed in with a shake of her head.

"The vicious animal gave him a solid crack on the head too. Poor man."  
I bit the inside of my lip. "Is he all right?"

"He has a headache, but he's up and about, thank the good lord. And who are you, dear?" She squinted at me. "You look a little familiar."

"I'm new to the area," I said as I turned away.

One of the women sniffed at my rudeness, then I listened as their footsteps receded. I glanced up at Fitzroy, only to see him already looking down at me.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Now more than ever." I needed to check on Father.

The door opened a mere crack upon our knock. Father's face appeared, not the housekeeper's. I'd expected to be taken into a sitting room, where we'd have to wait before seeing him. The delay would have allowed me to calm my jumpy nerves. I wasn't prepared for his skittish gaze to dart between us. It merely flicked over me, as if I didn't matter, and settled on Fitzroy.

"This is not a good time." He went to shut the door, but Fitzroy forced it open with his shoulder. My father stumbled back and we entered. "Who are you? What do you want?" He picked up a heavy book from the hallstand and held it aloft like a weapon. It was a bible.

He sported a gash on his temple. The red, angry cut crossed his frown lines. He looked much older than I remembered. His hair was grayer, the lines deeper, and his shoulders stooped. He hadn't been a young man when I was born, but he looked much older than his fifty-five years.

"Do you recognize me?" I said.

He looked at me again, and this time he actually *saw* me. And he knew. The mask of horror that descended over his face told me that. His eyes widened, his lips moved without speaking. "You," he choked out. "*You.*"

"Me. Your daughter. I've come to—"

"You're no daughter of mine! Get out! Get out of here, devil's spawn!" He threw the bible.

Fitzroy caught it before it hit me. "You had some trouble overnight," he said. "What happened?"

"Wh...what?" Father shuffled backward toward the stairs. His shaking hand reached out for the newel post.

"We won't hurt you," I told him. "We've come to ask you about the man who came looking for me a few days ago. A doctor. But first...are you all right?" I moved toward him, but he tripped over the bottom step in his haste to get away and landed on his rear.

I clasped my hands tightly in front of me, stopping myself from reaching out to help him. This man didn't want me to touch him. It was clear from the twist of his mouth and the fear in his eyes.

"Father—"

"Do not call me that," he snarled. "You are not my daughter. You don't belong here. You belong in hell! Get out!" He began a prayer as he scooted up the stairs on his behind.

I bit back tears, refusing to let this man see how much his hatred affected me. I thought I'd given up hope of a happy reunion years ago, but it seemed a flame had flickered in my breast the entire time. I'd promised myself I would never feel anything for him again, and yet here I was, about to shed tears for the pathetic man I wanted to love me.

"I am your daughter," I whispered, struggling to get the words out through my aching throat.

He laughed, a manic, high sound that grated on my ears. "You're not. You're adopted."

I fell back and reached out for something solid to hold on to; to stop myself losing my balance in the suddenly tilting world. Fitzroy's arm was there. His hand on my elbow steadied me.

"You...are not my father?"

The old man on the stairs stopped laughing and squared his shoulders. "No. How did you not see it? Your mother was pure of heart. I am the lord's

faithful servant. And you are a creature of darkness and death. The lord sent you to us, to test me. I didn't fail. I cast you out, as the devil should be cast out. I removed the ugly cancer from my house and—"

Fitzroy's fist stopped the vomit of insults. My father's head—no, *Holloway's*—snapped back. He cried out and clasped a hand over his mouth. Blood seeped through the fingers. He scrambled further up the staircase, away from us.

Fitzroy followed him, his hands closed into fists at his sides, his shoulders rigid.

"Don't!" I shouted.

Holloway had reached the top of the stairs. Fitzroy stopped, towering above him. "The man who was here calling himself Doctor. Was it he who came last night?"

Holloway closed his eyes and began praying again. "Answer him," I said. "Or he'll kill you."

Fitzroy glanced at me over his shoulder. I shrugged.

"You won't be harmed if you tell me his name," Fitzroy said. He kicked Holloway's foot.

Holloway pulled his knees up and clasped them to his chest. He opened his eyes. "Yes, it was the same man. He wanted to know where you were." He nodded at me. "I told him you'd gone to Hell."

"You probably won't be surprised to know that Hell looks very much like the slums of London." I felt numb, like I was looking down on the scene from afar. But more than that, I felt like I was speaking to a stranger, not the man I'd called Father for as long as I could remember.

"His name," Fitzroy prompted.

Holloway eyed the fists at Fitzroy's sides and swallowed. "He's a doctor. Frank something. I can't recall."

"His initials are V.F. Is it Doctor Frank?"

"I told you, I can't recall. It was an unusual name, foreign."

Fitzroy leaned over and grabbed the front of Holloway's smoking jacket. He lifted him until he was no longer sitting. "Think."

His eyes widened to the size of saucers. "Frank...Frank-in...star."

"Doctor Frankinstar?"

"Frankenstein! That's it. Doctor Frankenstein. First name Victor."

## CHAPTER 11



I TRACED the letters on the headstone with my fingernail, from top to bottom. *Loving Mother to Charlotte* read the final words, right beneath *Devoted Wife to Anselm*. She *had* been loving toward me, but she had not been my mother. I'd accepted it immediately when Holloway told me. Perhaps it was the numbness of shock, or perhaps I'd given up thinking he cared for me long ago. But now, sitting on the grass near my mother's grave, I felt like my chest had opened up and I was bleeding over the ground.

She'd loved me during her lifetime. I'd felt sure of that. And yet what if she'd lived to see me perform my necromancy as he had done? Would she have continued to love me regardless, or would she have called me names and cast me out too? A mother was supposed to love her children unconditionally, no matter what they did, but perhaps adoptive mothers didn't feel the same degree of love.

It felt so strange, sitting there, as I'd done so many times before, and yet this time I felt more alone than I ever had. I used to have her memory for warmth, the feeling that I had once been loved. But now, I wasn't entirely sure of that love. It was like mourning her loss all over again. Fighting tears, I scooped up a handful of dirt and sprinkled it over her grave.

Something moved behind me. I sprang to my feet but it was only Fitzroy, standing as still as the angel statue marking a nearby grave. I quickly turned

away and dashed my damp cheeks with the back of my hand.

"You made a noise," I told him. When he didn't answer, I added, "Just now, you made a noise as you approached. Usually I don't hear you coming."

"I know," was all he said.

"How did you know where to find me?" I hadn't told anyone where I was going upon our return to Lichfield. Seth and Gus had dropped us at the front door and then taken the horses and carriage to the stables. Fitzroy had said something about speaking to Cook. I'd wanted to visit my mother's grave, so I'd just walked out. It wasn't until I'd arrived at the cemetery that I'd wondered if he would assume I'd run away.

"I asked a grounds keeper for directions. He boasted that he knew the location of every grave. Seems he knew this one."

"I mean how did you know I'd be at the cemetery?"

"A guess."

I looked down at the headstone and the words *Loving Mother to Charlotte*. "She was ill for a long time and stipulated what she wanted on her headstone. It was completed before her death. Before I...displayed my true colors. I'm surprised he didn't have another one made. One that leaves off that line."

"Headstones are expensive."

"His won't say *Loving Father*, of that I'm quite sure." I pointed down at my feet. "He bought the plot next to hers when it became clear she wouldn't survive. Their headstones will be side by side, but they won't match now. It'll look odd."

He didn't respond, but I hadn't expected him to. I was rambling, trying to fathom what it all meant for me. A few hours ago I'd had one living relative who hated me. Now I didn't even have that. I wasn't sure if I was better or worse off. I supposed nothing had changed. I was still on my own.

"Historians will wonder about the discrepancy in years to come," Fitzroy said.

I blinked at him. What an absurd thing to say. Yet he was right. It would be confusing for anyone unfamiliar with the story. I smiled, despite myself.

"If you want to stay longer, I can wait," he said. "You shouldn't be out alone. Not while Frankenstein is after you."

"He wouldn't know where to start looking."

He arched one brow and glanced at the headstone.

"Oh. Yes, of course. I wasn't thinking." I rubbed my forehead. I felt exhausted, despite doing nothing all day. It would seem learning one was adopted was a trying experience. "I'm ready to go now." I walked away from the grave and did not look back.

"Luncheon will be ready upon our return," Fitzroy said, as we walked through the cemetery gatehouse.

"I'm not hungry."

After a moment, he said, "Cook will be offended if you don't eat."

"Cook knows I don't have a large appetite. And since when do you care if he's offended or not?"

We passed the costermonger's cart, the one I had been caught stealing from. The scruffy fellow watched me from beneath his hat, a frown on his face. Surely he didn't recognize me now. I frowned back and he quickly set about rearranging a pile of wilting lettuces.

Fitzroy and I walked back toward the house in the sunshine. It was a pleasant day, although clouds crowded on the horizon. I found it difficult to appreciate the sun, however. My mind still felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool.

"I wonder if I'm an orphan or if my parents are alive," I muttered, more to myself than him.

"If they are, it's likely they couldn't care for you. Mothers have to give up their babies all the time. Some don't want to."

"Poor, unwed mothers, you mean."

He stared straight ahead with hard eyes.

"Are your parents still living?" I asked.

After a moment, he said, "I believe so. Like you, I never knew them."

"You're adopted too?"

"No."

I frowned. How could he not know his parents but not be adopted? And yet he did know that his parents lived, so he was a step ahead of me. "Who raised you? General Eastbrooke?"

"He had a hand in my upbringing."

"Were you his ward?"

"I was nobody's ward."

Nobody's ward and nobody's child either, it seemed. Lady Harcourt had told me Fitzroy was specifically chosen to be leader of the ministry from birth. Did that mean the committee had raised him? "If I ask any more questions, will you answer them?"

"Will any of those questions be about lunch?"

"No."

"Then it's unlikely."

I sighed. "You say I'm stubborn, but you are positively obstinate."

We walked back to the house in silence, slowing down as we drew closer. Four carriages were stopped in front of the steps, two of which I recognized as belonging to Lady Harcourt and General Eastbrooke. The other two escutcheons were new to me, although I wouldn't be surprised if the one with the serpent coiled around a sword belonged to the snakelike Lord Gillingham.

"I'd hoped they wouldn't be here yet," Fitzroy said, his face dark.

"You invited them?"

"A meeting of the committee has been called. Not by me."

"You sent word about the man known as Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Not yet. I haven't had time. This meeting is in response to you agreeing to help."

"Ah. It seems you'll have a lot to discuss then. What a lark."

"You'll be present too."

I pulled a face.

"After you've eaten, of course."

I sighed. "Very well, I'll eat. If I indulge too much, however, Lord Gillingham will only have you to blame when I vomit over his shoes."

"I'll have Cook double the quantity on your plate."

We got no further than the front steps when the door burst open. "You found her!" Seth stood with hands on hips, alternately smiling and frowning at me as if he couldn't make up his mind if he were pleased or mad. "Are you all right, Charlie?"

"Fine, thank you."

Gus pushed past him, his heavy brow scrunched into a frown, his arms folded over his chest. "What'd you think you were doing, leaving without telling anyone where you were headed?"

His vehemence surprised me. "I...I'm sorry, Gus."

"Sorry! That's all you got to say for yourself?"

I shrugged.

"Be sure not to do it again or you'll find yourself locked in the tower room."

"Enough!" Fitzroy growled.

Seth smacked Gus in the shoulder. "We're not going to lock you up," he said to me.

"We been looking everywhere for you," Gus hissed at me as I passed him. "Me and Seth been out of our minds with worry."

They were worried? About me? No one had worried about my wellbeing in so long that I wasn't sure how to respond. Nor was I sure I liked being monitored, now that I was supposedly free.

I patted his cheek. "That's very sweet of you. I simply wanted to be by myself."

A growl rumbled from the depths of his chest. "Be sure to take someone

with you, next time you want to be alone."

Seth rolled his eyes and I smiled tightly. "I will."

With the two of them appeased, I thought my ordeal was over. I didn't see the four stiff, regal figures until I entered the house. They stood as one, a wall of dark austerity—three men in black suits and Lady Harcourt in her mourning crepe. Lord Gillingham was there, along with General Eastbrooke and another man aged fifty or so who was as tall and well-built as the general but considerably rougher in appearance, thanks to the scar on his temple and another slicing through his gray beard.

"There you are." Lady Harcourt broke ranks and held her hand out to me. I hesitated, then took it and allowed her to lead me to the men. "Gentlemen, may I present Miss Charlotte Holloway, daughter of Anselm Holloway. Charlotte, you know both General Eastbrooke and Lord Gillingham." Lady Harcourt waited, but I wasn't sure what for. Me to curtsy to them?

"You look better as a girl," the general said, offering a gruff nod as he gave me a thorough once over. "On the small side, but I dare say Fitzroy will fatten you up."

"Now that your lies have been exposed, I expect you've seen the error of your ways." Lord Gillingham leaned on his walking stick. If I kicked it out from under him, he would topple forward. "Do not lie to us again or there will be consequences. Is that understood?"

I stepped forward and touched my toe to his stick. I gave it a nudge so that he knew I could have done more if I'd wanted to. "Do not behave like an in-bred half-wit, or I might refuse to co-operate."

His eyeballs almost popped out of the sockets. "You can't speak to me that way!"

"Can't I? I'll try to remember that next time."

Eastbrooke placed his hand on Gillingham's shoulder as the lord's face turned an apoplectic shade of purple.

"And this is Lord Marchbank." Lady Harcourt pulled me away from

Gillingham so roughly that I stumbled and bumped into her. Her smile never even wavered as she presented me to the new man.

Another lord. I'd thought the scarred man was an old soldier, but it seemed he was just another tosspot like Gillingham. My opinion was confirmed when he didn't offer me a smile. He merely looked down his crooked nose and said in the blandest voice, "Miss Holloway."

"My lord," I said in the same bland voice.

He met my gaze with a somewhat cool one of his own, but there was no obvious animosity in his eyes as there was in Lord Gillingham's. He seemed...indifferent. Indifference was fine with me. I felt the same toward him and the other committee members.

"Let's get on with it." Lord Gillingham's walking stick click clacked on the tiles as he headed toward the parlor. When he realized nobody followed, his fingers tightened around the knob. "Well?"

"Charlie needs to eat," Fitzroy said.

"So?"

"We're not starting without her."

"She doesn't need to be present! Indeed, she *shouldn't* be present."

"We are not starting without her." Fitzroy nodded at Gus, who left us.

Gillingham marched back, proving he didn't need his stick to walk. "You fly too close to the edge, *Fitzroy*." Only his lips and jowls moved. His jaw remained clenched. "Push us too far and you *will* see how things lie. You are not indispensable."

Fitzroy turned his back to him, as if he couldn't be bothered wasting his breath on an argument, and indicated I should walk on ahead. Gillingham spluttered his protest at the insult.

"It's only lunch, Gilly," the general said quietly. "We'll wait in the parlor."

"She shouldn't be privy to ministry business." Gillingham raised his voice, insuring I could hear.

We headed to the kitchen, where Cook stood over the range, stirring

something in a pot. "Charlie," he said with a nod at me. "Hungry?"

"No, but I've been ordered to eat something."

Gus handed me a plate with lettuce, a slice of bread and a sliver of beef on it. "Sit. Eat."

"You are all so demanding." I sat and accepted the plate.

"They be staying, sir?" Cook asked Fitzroy.

"Not for lunch." Fitzroy stood by me as I ate, which would have been enough to put me off my appetite if I'd had one. "Have tea brought in."

Cook set the wooden spoon aside and handed Gus a pot. "Fill it."

Gus left with the pot just as Seth arrived. "Lord Gilly's in a fine mood today," he said. "What set him off?"

Fitzroy's gaze met mine. "Me," I said, cutting up my beef. "He seems to have something against lying, thieving necromancers. Can't think why."

"Ignore him." Seth placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I was so surprised at the intimate gesture that I pulled away. A blush infused his cheeks. "My apologies," he mumbled. "I forgot that you're a..."

"Lying, thieving necromancer?"

"Woman."

I smiled to let him know I wasn't offended. "It takes some getting used to." I wanted to tell him that his touch hadn't upset me—just that I wasn't used to it. However, there seemed no easy way of broaching the subject, so I remained silent.

I finished my light lunch, including the scoop of jelly afterward, and joined the committee members in the sitting room with Fitzroy at my side. He even remained standing by me as I sat. He must think me at risk of running off again.

"How much have you told her?" Lord Gillingham asked, before anyone had even taken a breath.

"Everything she needs to know," Fitzroy said.

"Is that wise?"

"Yes."

Lord Gillingham snorted. "I'm not sure your judgment is one we should trust."

The silence that descended was as smothering as a shroud. Lady Harcourt opened her mouth to speak after a moment, but Fitzroy got in first. His voice was as cold as ice.

"Whether you trust my judgment or not is immaterial. Charlie is an integral component in my plan, and she must be kept informed. You are not integral to any part of my plan. If you disagree with my decisions, see yourself out. My men are busy."

Gillingham's jaw dropped like an unhinged trapdoor. "I say! You dare speak to me in such a manner!"

"May we please discuss the situation?" Lady Harcourt looked distressed, and I felt a little sorry for her. These gentlemen were her peers, perhaps her friends, and Fitzroy her lover. It put her in an awkward position, particularly as the only female member of the committee. Not for the first time, I wondered how a beautiful young woman had ended up part of the body that oversaw the Ministry of Curiosities. Particularly now that I'd met the final member, another aged lord.

"See how he repays you, General!" Gillingham crossed his legs and settled into the armchair. "You should have had him disciplined more as a child."

Lady Harcourt, sitting beside me on the sofa, stiffened and pressed her gloved hand to her lips.

"That's enough, Gilly," Lord Marchbank said. "You're upsetting the ladies."

"Lady," Gillingham muttered. "There is only one present."

I sighed. This was going to be a long afternoon.

"Tell us about Charlotte Holloway, Lincoln," the general said quickly. "How did you learn the boy Charlie was, in fact, her?"

Fitzroy told them how he'd traced me back through the years, then went on to inform them that I'd seen a man visit my father. He finished by telling them the vicar had revealed the full name of the man they sought.

"Then you know where he lives!" Lord Gillingham said.

"I've not had time to investigate."

Gillingham looked as if he were about to chastise Fitzroy, but a glare from Marchbank kept him quiet.

"Good progress," said the general. "We're very pleased. Having a name at this point is more than we'd hoped for."

Seth and Gus had entered with the tray of tea things during the speech and now served cups to everyone. Seth also took one, but Gus did not. He fell back to the door, removing himself from our presence. Only Gillingham eyed him as if he didn't belong in the parlor. Seth, however, escaped his snobbery.

Lady Harcourt touched my hand. "Your assistance has already proven valuable. Thank you, Charlie, on behalf of not only the ministry, but the entire realm."

"The empire really is in danger from this man?" I asked.

"Yes, unfortunately. If he manages to reanimate an army of superior bodies, then we are all at his mercy."

"He will turn that army on the members of parliament," the general said. "That includes the three of us." He indicated the three gentlemen.

"And the court, too, would be in danger," Lady Harcourt finished. "The queen and her family are vulnerable to an attack from someone intent to do harm."

"How do you know that's his intention? You know him to be a murderer, but committing treason is another crime altogether."

"That is none of your affair," Gillingham snapped. "Leave these matters to your betters. You wouldn't understand them."

"Gillingham!" the general snapped. "You forget that we need the chit's help."

"Do we?" Gillingham drawled. "We have the man's name. Fitzroy doesn't need her to find this Frankenstein fellow. It seems to me we can dispense with her now."

"And leave her for Dr. Frankenstein to capture?"

Gillingham didn't answer. He sipped his tea calmly. I set mine down, unable to swallow it. Fitzroy, who'd not accepted tea, took a seat and addressed me.

"You recall we told you about the woman in Paris, whose letter to V.F. I intercepted," he said.

"I do. Her husband was murdered and you suspected she had a hand in it, or knew the murderer—Dr. Frankenstein, I assume."

He nodded. "Her husband's head was cut open, the brain removed."

My stomach rolled, threatening to toss my lunch onto the rug, but I willed myself not to throw up. Somehow I suspected that would work in Gillingham's favor. "Frankenstein wanted to put his brain into a body made up of parts from others?"

"Superior parts taken from athletes. But it was the brain of Mr. Calthorn that was crucial to his plan."

"Was Mr. Calthorn an intelligent man?"

"Yes, but it wasn't merely his cleverness that Frankenstein wanted. It was Calthorn's knowledge. He was England's spy master."

I gasped. "England has a spy master?"

"Not anymore," the general said. "Calthorn is yet to be replaced."

"You ought not tell her all that." Gillingham sniffed. "If this information gets into the wrong hands..."

"Calthorn is dead," Marchbank said. "All the girl knows is that England has a spy network. Our enemies already know that too. It's hardly news."

Gillingham sipped, watching me over the rim of his cup.

"Calthorn knew a great many important secrets," Lady Harcourt said, taking over the story. "After we were alerted to his murder, and the missing

brain, we began to piece everything together. We'd already heard about the missing body parts of other murder victims, all of them physically superior in one way or another. We questioned Mrs. Calthorn at the time but she could prove she was elsewhere at the time of the murder. We didn't believe that she was entirely innocent, but we couldn't pin anything on her."

"Then she went and exiled herself to Paris," the general said. "Blasted woman."

"How did she know about me?" I asked. "It seems that Frankenstein had been searching for me, and she found out enough clues to point him in the right direction. How?"

"We don't know," Fitzroy said. "Nor do we know how Frankenstein learned of your existence. It's only clear that he failed to reanimate his monstrous creation on his own and realized he needed a necromancer to perform the deed. I think he's been seeking you ever since, corresponding with his friend, Mrs. Calthorn, in Paris. The first I learned about a necromancer is from her letter. It became a race to find you before he did."

I almost blurted out that I was glad he'd got to me first, but bit my tongue. For some reason, I didn't want Gillingham to hear my gratitude. I didn't want any of them to hear it. Not even Fitzroy. I didn't even like admitting it to myself.

"Mrs. Calthorn's information was out of date," Lady Harcourt said. "You haven't lived with your father since you were thirteen."

"He's not my father." I picked up my teacup and concentrated on not looking at anyone, even though I could feel their gazes on me. "I'm adopted, or so he informed me this morning."

"Adopted!" General Eastbrooke sat forward. One of the lords gasped as Lady Harcourt's hand touched my arm. "Then who is your real father?"

"I don't know."

"Did Holloway know? Did you question him, Lincoln?"

"No," Fitzroy said.

"Why not?" Gillingham snapped. "My God, man, this is of utmost importance! If the girl inherited her ability, we need to know who he is."

"Or she," Lady Harcourt added. "Lincoln, I agree with Lord Gillingham. You need to question Mr. Holloway."

"He won't tell us anything," Fitzroy said. "Questioning him will only produce lies or total silence. His state of mind is delicate, his fear absolute."

"It's unlikely he knows anyway," Lord Marchbank said. "Orphanages don't give out that information to the adopting parents."

"We won't know if Fitzroy doesn't ask." Gillingham slammed the foot of his walking stick on the floor. "To hell with the fellow's state of mind. I don't care if your questions turn him into a blathering idiot, unable to function in society. It's an oversight on your part, Fitzroy."

"Not an oversight," Fitzroy said in a voice so quiet that Gillingham's swallow was audible. "It was a deliberate decision."

"One that I protest."

"You can protest all you like. It changes nothing."

"I command you to ask him!"

Fitzroy stood, very slowly, his hands curled into fists. Gillingham lifted his chin as Fitzroy stepped closer. "You don't command me."

"I bloody well do. We *all* do. You work for us, Fitzroy."

"I work for England. I can also stop working for England."

Gillingham snorted. "You were born to do this, Fitzroy. It's your entire life. You won't leave."

Several moments passed, in which I expected Fitzroy to either deny it or punch Gillingham in the nose. He did neither. "If you disagree with my decision, you're welcome to question the vicar yourself."

Gillingham's gaze slid away and his hands increased their rapid rubbing over the head of his stick.

"Don't wish to get your hands dirty, I see," Fitzroy said.

Gillingham's fingers flared then closed around the knob again. He pointed

his stick at me. "I wager her real parents were sewer rats, just like her. Breeding always reveals itself in the end, you know. Bad blood breeds only more bad."

Fitzroy's knuckles turned white.

"I'm famished," I said quickly, rising. "Unless I'm needed, I think I'll find something to eat in the kitchen."

Seth set down his tea. "I'll escort you. Gus?"

Gus shook his head and nodded at Fitzroy. Fitzroy, however, took a step back. It wasn't until Gillingham tugged on his tie that I realized he'd been anxious.

Lady Harcourt clasped my hand before I walked off. "Everything will be all right. You'll see."

"I'm not worried," I said with a shrug. And I wasn't. I didn't care if Fitzroy gave Gillingham a bloody nose. I just didn't want to see it.

"You ought to be," Lord Marchbank said. "Of everyone here, I'm the only one who saw the crime scene. I know what this Dr. Frankenstein is capable of."

He was right, and I should have been more concerned about the murdering doctor. He wanted me, and he seemed desperate enough to go to great lengths to get me.

"Was that necessary?" Lady Harcourt said to Lord Marchbank. "You've scared her now."

"Good. Fear will keep her safe."

He was correct there. It was a sentiment that had helped me get through five long, hard years relatively unscathed.

I hadn't decided whether I liked Lord Marchbank. He spoke less than the others, only talking when he needed to impart an important point. In that, he reminded me of Fitzroy. It was a trait that made it very difficult to read either man.

Gillingham pushed himself to his feet. "Good day, gentlemen, Lady

Harcourt. I've got business to attend to."

I stepped aside to let him pass. The other committee members also made their excuses. They, at least, addressed me in their farewells.

"Remember what I said," Lady Harcourt whispered as she took my arm. "There will be a place for you in my household, if you wish, when this is over. You won't have to live on the street anymore."

"Thank you." I decided not to go through the ritual of refusing her offer again, but I knew I could never live with her, either as a servant or her companion. Indeed, I couldn't imagine living anywhere other than Lichfield Towers.

The admission shocked me and left me speechless as the carriages rolled away. I'd only resided there less than a week, and most of that as a prisoner, and yet I felt more comfortable there than anywhere. Perhaps that had more to do with the fact that I had no home now. Not in the Tufnell Park house I'd grown up in, or any of the derelict buildings I'd lived in with the boys' gangs. Dr. Frankenstein would be looking for me in all those places. I wasn't safe there. I was only safe at Lichfield.

Seth confronted me at the foot of the stairs, arms crossed over his impressive chest, making him seem even broader. "You didn't wish to eat more, did you?"

"No. I needed to leave the parlor."

He sighed. "I thought as much."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you believed me."

"I was hopeful." He lowered his arms. "At least you ate all your lunch."

"And I promise to eat all of my dinner, as long as the plate isn't piled too high or Cook serves sprouts."

He pulled a face. "I'll boycott the sprouts too, if he does." His gaze slid to a point past my shoulder. He cleared his throat, gave me an uncertain smile, then moved away.

I turned to see Fitzroy hovering. "I'm not going to try and escape." At his

small frown, I added, "Your constant presence...you seem to think I'll run away at any moment. I won't. I gave you my word and I intend to keep it."

"I never doubted it." Still, he did not leave.

"Is there something you wished to speak to me about?"

"No." He went to walk away but stopped. "Yes. Are you comfortable here? Is there anything you require?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't resided here as a free woman for very long yet." At his blank face, I added, "I have everything I need for now. Thank you."

It was a strange, awkward conversation, which seemed to be leading onto a further question, perhaps the one I suspected he truly wanted to ask, yet he merely said, "I will be out all afternoon, searching for Dr. Frankenstein."

"Without me?"

"Your presence isn't required."

"I suppose not." I was relieved, on the whole, yet a part of me wanted to go with him. Or wanted, at least, to *be* with him.

I forced myself to walk up the stairs. I didn't like my growing feelings for someone who'd kidnapped me without qualms and held me prisoner until I'd made myself useful. I doubted *he* thought about *me* in the same way I thought about him. He'd certainly given no indication that he did. Such an imbalance of feelings between two people was never a good thing.

I read *A Guide To The Spirit World* in my small sitting room and learned more about my power in thirty minutes than I'd discovered in eighteen years. Most of it chilled me. A necromancer was different to a spirit medium, in that mediums could only speak to ghosts that had decided to remain and haunt their place of death. They could summon spirits into the living body of another through possession, but the spirit had a will of its own and a medium could not control it. A necromancer could raise a spirit that had already crossed over *and* control it—any spirit, no matter how long ago they'd died. The spirit could go anywhere in its ghostly form and not be confined to their place of death. That made necromancers much more powerful. Frighteningly

so. The only limitation was that a spirit raised by necromancy couldn't be placed into a living body, only a dead one. The book didn't specify whether the body had to be its own or could be any cadaver.

I re-read the page three times then shut the book and folded it against my chest. It seemed I'd only scratched the surface of my capabilities so far. What unnerved me was that Fitzroy already knew this information, and so, perhaps, did the others. It was no wonder he wanted to keep me away from madmen and evil ones.

I set aside the book and read a novel to lighten my mood until Gus and Seth coaxed me outside for a walk. I'd been surprised to see them, having assumed Fitzroy took them with him in his search for Frankenstein.

"If Fitzroy finds him, do you think he'll confront him alone?" I asked as we ambled through the orchard.

Seth, who'd been striding ahead, slowed to walk alongside me again. "He might."

"That's rather foolish. He ought to have you two as support."

"He don't need us," Gus said, picking off an unripe apple and throwing it at a trunk. It missed.

"Fitzroy works better alone," Seth clarified. "Especially when he's following someone."

"We ain't that bad!"

"No, but he's better. If he's following you," he said to me, "you'll never know it. A hunting cat makes more noise than Death."

I could attest to that all too well. "What do you know about him? His background, his family, where is he from?"

"Wouldn't know." Gus snapped another apple from the tree and threw it as hard as possible. It split when it hit a nearby trunk and he gave a whoop of delight.

"We know very little about him," Seth said. "Neither of us has been employed by the ministry for long."

"How did you end up working for him?"

Seth picked an apple and threw it at the same tree, but missed. Gus snorted. We'd stopped altogether, both men distracted by their sport. I thought they wouldn't answer my question, but after three misses, Seth did.

"I found myself at a loose end one evening. Death was there and offered me a job."

"Bloody liar," Gus said with a shake of his head. "Seth were gambling and drinking like there ain't no tomorrow. He had nothing left to lose, except his own person, so he staked it."

"What do you mean, 'staked it'?"

"Himself. His body."

"That's enough," Seth growled. "She's a lady. She doesn't want to hear the particulars."

"I'm no lady, and I certainly do want to hear the particulars. They're the best part."

Seth's face turned a bright crimson as he glared at Gus. Gus ignored him. "Some old, fat lord took the wager. Said his wife would like to lie with a young, handsome fellow again." He leaned closer to me, his grin splitting his face. "Only I think the old lord wanted Seth for himself. The look on his wrinkly face when Seth removed his shirt to prove—"

"I did not remove my shirt!" Seth rolled his eyes. "It's not true, Charlie. That part isn't, at least. Anyway, how would you know, Gus? You weren't there."

"You told me, you blathering idiot. That first night you arrived at Lichfield, feeling all sorry for yourself. You got rollicking drunk and tossed up your guts and your story."

"That doesn't explain how you wound up here, working for Fitzroy," I said. "So you lost to the lord at cards."

"Got soundly beaten," Seth said. "Fitzroy was there and offered to pay my debt in exchange for coming to work for him."

"The gentleman accepted?"

"Not at first, but Death offered him a large sum." Seth puffed out his chest. "He realized my worth."

"Realized how desperate you were," Gus said, pulling off another apple. "You were available at just the right time too, and had some skills he could use." He slapped his colleague on his brawny shoulder. "He ain't just a pretty face, Charlie. He can shoot straight and bare-knuckle box with the best of 'em. I saw him defeat Toothless Tom in the ring."

"Why were you fighting in a bare knuckle boxing match?" I asked Seth. "It's not the sort of thing a toff does." Attending the illegal matches was, but I'd never heard of one actually getting his hands dirty.

"I like to fight," Seth said with a shrug.

"He were desperate, and the pay were good. Everyone in the city came to see the toff in the ring. Including me, and maybe Death. That's probably where Fitzroy first saw him." Gus threw his apple, not at a trunk but into the middle distance.

Seth picked off another and threw it in the same direction. It passed Gus's. He gave his friend a smirk. Gus took that as a challenge and got another apple. He threw it hard, and it traveled so far I couldn't see where it landed.

"Ha! Beat that," he said.

Seth's next apple also disappeared from sight.

"Wait a moment." I hiked up my skirts and climbed the nearest apple tree. It felt like an age since I'd scrambled over a fence or wall. It was something I used to do several times a day. That and run, usually away from my pickpocket victim or the police.

"Charlie! What you doin' up there?" Gus cried, tilting his head back.

"Seeing who won. I think it was Seth."

"Get down before you hurt yourself," Seth called up.

"I'm not going to fall."

"If you get hurt, Death'll kill us," Gus said. "Come down now or we'll

come up and get you."

I sighed and began to descend. "I was just having some fun. Turn away so you can't see up my skirt."

Both men dutifully turned their backs. I took the opportunity to pluck two apples and drop them on their heads.

"Oi!" Gus cried, rubbing his head.

I landed on both feet beside him and grinned. He frowned, but Seth laughed. "You're unlike any girl I know," he said.

"That's because I'm not used to behaving like a girl."

"That be true," Gus muttered. "You shouldn't be climbing trees. Lady Harcourt would have a fit."

"I don't care what Lady Harcourt thinks. Or anyone, for that matter. If I want to climb a tree, I'll climb a tree. Girls should be allowed to."

"Ain't proper," Gus grumbled, striding off. "Besides, you ain't a girl, you're a woman."

I stared at his retreating back, as rigid as a plank of wood. Why had my behavior upset *him* so much?

"Don't mind him," Seth said as we followed at a slower pace. "He's still not sure what to make of you. Sometimes he thinks of you as a lad, and other times he becomes aware of your femininity and he gets embarrassed."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't know how to act around females. They scare him."

"Why do we scare him?"

"I'm not sure. Why don't you ask him?"

Perhaps I would, but another time. Gus didn't look in the mood to talk to me.

We headed back inside the house, where I spent a dull afternoon waiting for Fitzroy to return. The day stretched into the evening, and Seth, Gus and I dined in the kitchen with Cook. Afterward we played cards and I learned some new games from the men. If we'd been playing for real money instead

of dried broad beans, I would have lost a fortune. I couldn't concentrate. Every creak of the house made me glance at the door. Every chime of the long case clock in the entrance hall set my teeth on edge. When it finally chimed ten, I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Where is he?" I tossed my cards down on the table and got up.

The others watched me pace back and forth with bemused expressions. "There's no need to worry," Seth said. "He'll be fine. He always is."

"You don't know that. He could be lying injured or dead somewhere."

Gus swept the cards up in his big paw and began shuffling them. "Come sit down and stop worrying. For one thing, he don't deserve it. For another, he can take care of himself. You ain't seen what he's capable of, yet."

Cook and Seth both nodded in agreement. When I refused to sit and continued pacing, Seth got up and intercepted me. He clasped my arms and dipped his head to peer into my eyes. He was about to say something when a shadow blocked the doorway.

I gasped at the sight of Fitzroy looking as unruffled as always. "You're back!" I wrenched free of Seth's grip, but stopped myself rushing to Fitzroy like I wanted to. "Did you find him?"

"Yes." He came into the kitchen and immediately the space seemed smaller. His gaze flicked over me then settled on Seth.

Seth swallowed heavily and sat at the table again.

"I'll warm up dinner," Cook said, rising.

"And?" I asked, as Fitzroy poured himself a glass of water from a jug. "What happened after you found him?"

"I lost him."

That had everyone staring, even Cook.

Fitzroy set the glass down and regarded each of us in turn. The men returned to their tasks, but I met his gaze directly. "Go on," I said.

"I learned where he lived, but when he didn't show up there, I returned to Holloway's house."

"Father's? Why?"

"I suspected he would visit again in a desperate attempt to find you. Holloway is his only link to you. I was right. He did."

I bit my lip to stop myself voicing my fear that Frankenstein had injured the man who'd raised me. Fitzroy, however, must have understood my concern. "He realized Holloway couldn't help him and left without harming him. I followed but lost him."

The other three men exchanged glances but made no comment. I suspected that was wise. Fitzroy seemed frostier than usual. His failure probably frustrated him.

"I'm sure it wasn't easy to follow him in the dark." My attempt to mollify him earned me the full force of that icy glare. I cleared my throat and forged ahead anyway. "I'm sure you'll find him again soon."

He didn't respond. Instead, he took his dinner to his rooms. The others resumed their card game, but I yawned and said goodnight. Upstairs, I contemplated knocking on Fitzroy's door, but I had nothing to say to him and I would only embarrass myself by asking after his wellbeing.

I prepared for bed, then lay under the covers listening to the silence. An hour later, I could no longer stand it. I got up, threw a shawl around my shoulders, lit a candle, and padded along the hallway to Fitzroy's rooms. I was about to knock on the door when it opened. Fitzroy seemed as surprised to see me standing there as I was to see him dressed for going out.

"Where are you headed at this time of night?" I blurted.

His eyebrows arched and I pressed my lips together. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Out."

"But it must be almost midnight. What can you possibly— Oh." Where else did a gentleman go at such a time, but to visit his lover? Thank goodness the light from my candle flame wasn't strong enough to show my reddening face. "I was concerned for your welfare," I mumbled pathetically.

He paused. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just am. You were out for so long tonight, and now you're going out again." I lowered my candle. "Of course you must want to see her, and she you."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Lady Harcourt, I presume."

His eyes briefly flared.

"It's none of my affair who you see in the evenings, secretly or otherwise," I went on. "If it is her, however, I can think of no one more lovely. You're both interesting people and you make a handsome couple." *Ugh*, strike me down before I say something even more humiliating. I turned to go, but Fitzroy grabbed my hand, the one holding the candlestick at a slight tilt.

"You're dripping wax on the floor." He righted the candle, but didn't immediately let go. His hand remained over mine, his warmth seeping through my skin to my bones. "I am not going to see Lady Harcourt." He spoke softly, his voice a deep purr.

"Oh," I said on a breath. I angled my face to peer up at his, only to be caught in his black, fathomless gaze as thoroughly as an insect in a web. I couldn't pull myself free, no matter how much I wanted to. "Another, then."

"You're bold, Charlie." His thumb stroked my knuckles and his head dipped closer to mine. It was such a small move, yet I'd noticed it. It gave me hope and courage to ignore the voice within me shouting at me to stop.

Another voice was louder. It urged me to kiss him.

## CHAPTER 12



I REACHED up to touch Fitzroy's cheek. I didn't know what I was doing. It was like someone else lifted my hand and angled my head. I'd never flirted with anyone, never kissed a man, yet here I was behaving as if it were something I did all the time.

What must he think of me?

What did I think of myself?

I lowered my hand at the same moment he let my other go. We both took a step back. I pulled my shawl up my shoulder where it had slipped down.

"Return to bed," he said, gruffly.

Too full of swirling emotions to think of something clever to say, I simply turned and walked back to my rooms. I was about to close the door when he stopped nearby. I hadn't realized he'd followed.

"Please accept my apologies," he said with a curt bow. "That was unforgivable."

I wanted to shout at him that it wasn't, that feelings ought to be acted upon. But I didn't know if he had feelings for me. Nor did I think acting on them was the right thing to do in our situation—not when I was being honest with myself. "You have nothing to apologize for," was all I could manage.

"I do. I—" His face turned stony. "Goodnight, Charlie."

He walked off and I closed the door, still none the wiser as to where he

was headed. My jangling nerves didn't allow me to fall asleep until it was almost dawn.



WHEN I AWOKE LATE MORNING, I quickly dressed and hurried down the stairs. I found Seth and Gus in the scullery, helping Cook with chores.

"You missed breakfast," Cook said without glancing up from the pot he scrubbed.

"Can't you fry a little bacon for her?" Seth asked.

"I'll do it," I said. "Is Mr. Fitzroy here?"

"He came back two hours ago," Gus said. He sat on his haunches on the floor, scrubbing brush in hand, and rubbed his back. "He's probably sleeping."

"If he sleeps." Seth grinned and winked at me. "I'm not sure he requires any."

"You mean he's been out all night?" I looked from one to the other and received only shrugs. "Does he do that often?"

"On occasion." Seth indicated I should walk ahead of him out of the scullery. "When the need arises."

I was about to ask what he meant, but decided it was best not to ask. He might mean the sort of needs only a woman could satisfy.

He followed me into the kitchen and showed me where Cook kept the pan and bacon. I wasn't overly familiar with cooking, but Seth taught me how to add more coal to the range, although it was still hot enough for my needs. The actual cooking part was easy. He made some tea while I worked and we chatted as I ate.

By the time I finished, I'd learned about his love of all things equestrian and the details of every horse he'd ever owned. I learned nothing about himself or his family, except that they must have been wealthy to afford all

those horses. My father had not owned one.

"Good morning." Fitzroy's sudden appearance caught me by surprise. As usual, I'd not heard him approach. "Did you sleep well?"

"Abominably," I said. "I hear you didn't sleep at all."

He unwrapped the bacon I'd carefully rewrapped and placed two rashers in the pan I'd used. "I managed a little."

I was diverted from my own food by the sight of a gentleman cooking his own breakfast. I supposed in a household without servants he occasionally had to do things for himself. When he finished, he tipped the bacon onto a plate and accepted a cup of tea from Seth. He sat opposite me and ate.

"Did you find him, sir?" Seth asked.

"Yes, but I lost him again."

"Again!"

Fitzroy's sharp glare pinned Seth for a brief moment before releasing him. He continued to eat but the air in the kitchen had become chilly, despite the heat thrown out from the range.

"You were looking for Frankenstein last night." My words came out in a rush, followed by a bubble of laughter.

Fitzroy watched me from beneath lowered lashes while continuing to eat. Seth shrugged. "Where did you think he was?" he asked.

"That...never mind. So you found him again?"

"And lost him in the same spot," Fitzroy said. He sounded more bemused than angry. It was as if he couldn't fathom *how* he'd lost Frankenstein. Perhaps it had never happened before.

"The man must be a magician to get away from you twice," Seth said.

"The thought had crossed my mind."

I blinked at him. "Magic? Surely that's a joke?"

"I don't joke."

"Amen," Seth muttered as he picked up the empty pan.

"But...magic..." I shook my head. "That's something only children and

fools believe in."

"As are necromancers," Fitzroy said.

"Point taken." I finished my bacon and pushed my plate aside. "You said you lost him in the same place. Where precisely was that?"

"You think you can help?" Seth asked, taking my plate. "Best leave this to us, Charlie."

I flattened my palms on the table. "Don't treat me like a child. My knowledge of London's streets likely exceeds yours. I doubt you found yourself in too many dark, crowded lanes during your pampered life."

"You'd be surprised," he said with a harsh laugh. "My life hasn't been all that pampered of late."

I rubbed my temple and winced. "I'm sorry, Seth, I didn't mean to let my temper get the better of me."

He chucked me under the chin and smiled. "Don't fret. I deserved it."

Fitzroy shoved his plate at Seth. Seth's face fell. He took the plate and wandered out of the kitchen toward the scullery.

"Totten Lane," Fitzroy said to me. "Do you know it?"

"In Clerkenwell? Yes, I do." I frowned and chewed on my lower lip. The lane bled into a small, miserable courtyard, where several families occupied the tenements. There were buildings on all sides, and there was no other exit except through a manhole that led to the underground sewers. It was located behind a brick wall that seemed to belong to one of the buildings from a distance, but up close, it became obvious that the wall was once part of an old well that had once stood there. "I know how he disappeared."

One of his brows lifted. "Go on."

"It's easier if I show you. Shall we go now?"

I stood and he stood too. "I don't think that's wise."

"Why not? You need to find Frankenstein, and I can help you." I crossed my arms in what I hoped was a show of defiance but felt more like pettiness.

"You were afraid before, and with good reason."

"I was. I still am. But I know that helping you will mean he's caught sooner. When he's caught, I can stop being afraid."

He blinked slowly and nodded. He walked off and I had to race to catch up to him.

"Wait, sir."

He stopped in the narrow, dark service corridor and waited until I was alongside him.

"I want to help. I owe you for taking me in."

"You don't. The circumstances under which you came here...were not ideal. It should negate any gratitude you feel. It's I who should be thanking you."

"True," I said lightly.

He huffed out a breath that might or might not have been a laugh. "Thank you, Charlie, for not shooting me in the head."

I shivered at the memory of having nearly killed him. A few inches to the left and the bullet would have pierced his heart. I folded my arms against the chill.

"Charlie," he said softly. "It was a joke."

"Not a very funny one."

He sighed. "I'm unused to making jokes. I apologize. I'll hold my tongue next time."

"No! Don't do that. I prefer your unfunny jokes to none at all." I liked that he was telling jokes when he ordinarily didn't. It felt like he was trying just for me.

"You'll change your mind soon enough."

I wasn't sure if that was meant as a joke too, so I laughed anyway, just in case. "Sir," I said, peering up at him, "what will happen to me after Frankenstein is caught and this is over? I don't wish to live with Lady Harcourt, and I can't go back to the streets."

"No, you can't."

"I'd like to stay here."

"That has yet to be decided."

"Who decides? You?"

"I make all the decisions regarding the ministry and Lichfield Towers."

"Don't tell Lord Gillingham that. He seems to think you're an underling."

"Don't be afraid of Gillingham. He's an old goat in an expensive suit, nothing more."

"I don't want you to incur his wrath if I stay here."

"I can cope with Gillingham's wrath, and anyone else's censure. If I decide that you are to stay, that is."

"Don't send me away," I whispered. It was suddenly so hard to hold myself together. Mere days ago, all I'd wanted was to get away from Lichfield. But now, the thought of leaving was unbearable.

We stood so close that I could feel the heat of him. I was aware of his every breath, every shift of muscle, and my aching response to him.

"Charlie," he said on a sigh, "staying here may not be in your best interests."

"How can it not be?"

His gaze wandered over the top of my head, toward the scullery where three deep, quiet voices hummed in conversation.

"You are entirely wrong, Lincoln."

His gaze flew to mine.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong." I thrust my hand on my hip, angrier now. Good. I preferred anger to the pathetic whine I heard in my voice moments ago. "I am capable of taking care of myself, and I am also not going to succumb to teasing flattery from the men. I'd hoped you thought me better than that."

His lips parted and I was gratified to see that my words had slapped him into giving a facial expression. If I wasn't mistaken, my outburst had shocked him. Perhaps he hadn't expected me to be aware of his thoughts on the matter.

"Now, have someone prepare the horses and carriage. We're going to Clerkenwell." I picked up my skirts and sailed off down the passageway, out of the service area. I didn't turn to see if he watched or not, but if the heat in the back of my head was an indication, he couldn't take his gaze off me. I only wished I knew if I'd shocked him in a good way or bad.



WE WALKED down Totten Lane rather than take the coach. The road was narrow, being only a little wider than the width of the brougham, and turning would have been impossible. Besides, it made us too conspicuous. Although Fitzroy didn't say it, I suspected he wanted to arrive undetected. Unfortunately, the sight of four well-dressed strangers drew stares anyway.

"Should've worn disguises," Gus muttered. He and Seth seemed tense, their arms and fingers rigid as if they were ready to draw weapons at the slightest sign of trouble. Where they'd hidden their weapons, I couldn't say, but I strongly suspected they possessed a knife or two and perhaps a pistol on their person.

"Where precisely did you last see him?" I asked Fitzroy.

He walked beside me. Outwardly, he seemed calm, his body less stiff than the others, his movements as fluid as always. But when he came so close to me that our arms brushed, I sensed him clench. "In Black Water Yard." He nodded ahead where the lane ended at an archway that led through to a small courtyard.

"Our exit will be easily blocked once we enter," I said.

He looked at me and arched a brow.

I shrugged. "I remember Black Water Yard well. I was almost caught after stealing a shirt from a washing line."

He nodded gravely.

Up ahead, Seth peered back at me over his shoulder, a small smile on his

lips. "It's easy to forget that you were a thief, looking as you do now."

Gus and Seth went through the arch first, then me, and finally Lincoln. Gus and Fitzroy had to duck beneath the ancient bricks of the arch, and Seth's head skimmed it. He was hatless, as were the other men, whereas I wore the small bonnet set back on my head, my hair pinned off my face. I felt much too exposed as people stared at us, and me in particular. Did they recognize me as that boy thief of mere weeks ago?

A group of children stopped their game of tag and watched us through wary eyes. Washing strung from lines between buildings flapped overhead. It would take an age for it to dry; the sun struggled to pierce the dense air and the courtyard was filled with shadows layered upon shadows.

"That wall there is false," I said, nodding at the bricks on the far side of the courtyard. "From here it blends in with the wall of the building behind it, but if you get closer, you see that it's separate. Between the two walls is a manhole that leads down into the sewers."

"Bloody dangerous, having a manhole near where children play," Seth said.

"I don't think the authorities cared much about the slum children when they put it there. They think there are too many mouths to feed in these parts anyway. Losing a child to the sewers from time to time won't keep them awake at night."

Fitzroy eyed his surroundings before striding to the wall and disappearing behind it. He reappeared moments later. "Take her back to Lichfield."

Gus nodded. "Yes, sir. Both of us?"

Fitzroy nodded.

"Shouldn't one of them stay with you to help?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Go."

Seth placed his hand at my lower back and both men flanked me as we walked out of the courtyard. I glanced over my shoulder, but Fitzroy had already disappeared behind the wall again. Whether he was lying in wait or

going down into the sewers, I didn't know.

"We'll be out of here in a moment," Seth said, splaying his fingers wide on my back. "Miserable place."

"It's home to some," I told him, hotly. "Not everyone can live in a mansion."

His mouth opened, closed, and opened again. "I'm sorry if I offended. It wasn't my intention."

I sighed. "I know. I'm sorry too."

"Blimey." Gus stopped a few paces ahead of us. "Don't look now but there's a toff coming our way. You don't think it's—"

"It is," I muttered. "Frankenstein."

I recognized the slim man with the short whiskers in the gray suit. His gaze settled on us and he slowed, just as we did. He'd never laid eyes on me before, and he couldn't know what Charlotte Holloway looked like, yet my instincts screamed at me to run.

Seth and Gus fell into step alongside me. Did they sense my anxiety? Seth took my hand and placed it on his arm, then folded his own hand over the top, trapping me. If we were in Hyde Park, we would have looked like any other couple taking a stroll on a warm summer's day. But no well-dressed couple strolled through the filthy lanes of Clerkenwell for entertainment.

I tried not to look directly at Frankenstein as he passed, but I couldn't help myself peering through my lowered lashes. He touched the brim of his hat, but neither Seth nor Gus offered a greeting in return.

Later, I wondered if that had tipped him off.

I breathed out a long breath as he passed us by, but another caught in my throat when he called out. "Miss Holloway?"

My heart stopped dead. How did he know?

Seth shoved me behind him and I stumbled into the wall. I whipped around, gathering my skirts at the same time. But I lowered them again when I spotted Frankenstein backing up, hands above his head. My two protectors

aimed pistols at him.

"Miss Holloway," he said, eyeing the pistols. "Charlotte. I know it's you."

"You don't know me," I said.

"I saw a photograph of you at the Holloway residence. You were younger, but you haven't changed so much that you're unrecognizable."

"I'm not going with you."

"Please, listen to me before you make that decision."

Seth straightened his arm and aimed the pistol at Frankenstein's temple. "Don't speak."

"I must. Charlotte, these people have lied to you about me. They've made you afraid of me, when it is them you should fear."

"Shut your mouth!" Gus shouted.

Frankenstein swallowed heavily and directed his gaze at me. He had bright blue eyes, and where his jaw had been hard that day I'd seen him storming away from my father's house, it was now slack. He didn't appear in the least harmful, particularly as Seth and Gus were so much bigger.

"Listen to me, Charlotte. Whatever these people have told you is false. Lies. They've been seeking out my secrets for some time now, and wish to use my knowledge for their own gain."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, chin up.

"Good girl," Seth said. "Don't believe him. He's a liar and a murderer."

"I've not murdered anyone!" Frankenstein took a step toward me, but Seth and Gus blocked his path. The doctor's lips curled in frustration. "It's not murder to put suffering, dying men out of their misery. Those poor souls were terminally ill. They were in pain. They begged me to end their suffering."

"You used their body parts!" I covered my mouth and swallowed bile. It was one thing to hear of his deeds second hand, it was quite another to come face to face with such a monster. Yet he looked nothing like a monster. He looked like a normal gentleman. He was in earnest, yes, but I wasn't afraid of

him.

"Calthorn wasn't dying," Seth said.

"Calthorn was a wicked man." Frankenstein spoke to me. His entire focus was directed at me. "He hurt his wife. He beat her daily. Not on her face, where the bruises would be seen, but in the stomach and chest. She couldn't have children because of the beatings. He used the secrets he gained through his position as head of the nation's spy ring to bully and harm those weaker than himself. He was a cruel man, yet no court would have convicted him. He was above the law and he knew it. You tell me, Charlotte, if you think a man like that ought to get away with his crimes. Perhaps I acted rashly, and should not have killed him for his wife's sake, but I am not always a rational man when I'm riled. And that man did rile me."

"You took his brain!"

"I found another use for it. But that's not why I killed him." He slowly pressed his hands together above his head then lowered them. "I have begged God's forgiveness every day, and I know I will be punished for my sins in the afterlife. But while I live, I can do good here. My experiments are not to be feared. I have done England a service by creating new life. Superior life. Once the bodies have spirits, you'll see them for what they are, Charlotte. Wonderful, amazing humans who deserve to live."

I screwed up my face, unable to hide my disgust. Did he think I would believe he was doing something good for the country? For human-kind? He was mad. "They are abominations. They're not humans, they're monsters."

"They are no more an abomination than me. Or you. We are all made, one way or another. Have you yourself not been called an abomination by the very man you thought was your father?"

"He is *not* my father."

"I know." He smiled gently. His eyes shone—familiar, blue eyes.

My stomach plunged. My throat tightened and it suddenly felt too hot in the lane, the air too close. I backed away and hit the wall. I pressed myself

into the cool bricks, but couldn't take my eyes off Frankenstein.

"I'm your father, Charlotte."

"Bloody hell," Gus muttered, lowering his weapon.

Seth cocked his gun.

"Don't!" I cried. I raced up to them, but stopped short. I wasn't sure what to do or say. All I did know was that I didn't want Frankenstein to be shot.

If he was my father, I had a million questions I needed answered. But I could ask none of them. I could only stare. I took in his appearance, his slender frame and oval face, so like mine. His eyes were the same shade of blue too, although not as wide. The more I looked, the more certain I became that he spoke the truth. This man had fathered me.

He lowered his hands altogether and smiled at me. "Charlotte. That's a pretty name."

I swallowed again, but the lump in my throat was too great for me to speak. I blinked back hot tears and simply nodded like a halfwit.

"I never knew you existed until very recently," he said. "Your mother never confided in me."

"Who...?" I managed to whisper.

"A kind, gentle woman. Her name was Ellen, and I'd like to tell you all about her."

I nodded. I wanted that too.

"But you have to come with me. Together we'll find out what happened to her. Yes?"

My tears hovered on my eyelids. One blink and they would spill. I nodded.

"Charlie," Gus snapped. "Don't listen to him. He's no better than a turd."

"He only wants to lure you to his laboratory and use you to resurrect his monsters," Seth said. "Don't believe a thing he says." He jerked his head toward the entrance to the lane. "Come with us, Doctor."

Some of the residents gathered near the archway, their eyes wide as they

watched the scene play out between the toffs. Children clung to their mothers' aprons, and men murmured among themselves. None seemed too concerned about stray bullets.

Frankenstein held out his hand to me. "Come with me, Charlotte. Please. I mean you no harm. I'm your father, after all. I want to get to know you. I've always wanted a child to love, and a daughter most of all. I have the means to give you material things you desire, and the immaterial too. Those which only a parent can give."

My tears spilled down my cheeks. He said everything I'd ever wanted to hear. For five years, I'd lived in hope that Anselm Holloway would say such words to me, but that hope had been dashed when I learned of my adoption. Yet it rose again now, and bloomed like a flower in the desert, with everything Frankenstein said.

"Charlie," Seth begged, "don't fall for it."

Gus cocked his weapon. "Death never said he wanted the turd alive."

"No!" I shouted. "Don't shoot him! Please."

Frankenstein backed away toward the arch and the courtyard where the crowd milled. Seth growled low in his throat.

"Death will get him in there," Gus muttered, lowering his weapon. "There're too many witnesses here."

Too many innocent bystanders who could get hurt.

The crowd parted for Frankenstein, but he did not pass through the arch. He held out his hand to me again. "Come with me, Charlotte."

Seth raised his gun again. "She's not going anywhere with you."

Frankenstein appealed to me and stretched his hand out further. Seth took my hand in his, but I snatched it free. To Frankenstein, I said, "I...I'm not sure. I need time."

His jaw stiffened, and his lips pressed together, then his face slackened once more. "I'll see you very soon, my dear sweet daughter." He turned and disappeared into the crowd, who closed around him.

"He must be paying them." Gus swore. "Bloody fools are protecting him."

"Come on." Seth took my elbow. When I tried to pull free this time, he didn't let go. "We have to get you away from him."

I planted my feet apart and resisted. "I don't—"

A woman's scream tore through the thick, hot air. Gus and Seth let me go and ran toward the arch. I followed close at their heels, but got no further than the crowd gathered in the courtyard. The woman was no longer screaming, but her sobs echoed around the clearing. I couldn't see her, but could just make out her spluttered plea. "Don't hurt 'im, sir."

"Drop it!" Frankenstein shouted, from somewhere beyond the wall of bodies blocking my sight.

"What is it?" I asked Seth. "Can you see?"

He didn't answer but pushed through the crowd, his strong arms shoving people aside. Gus joined him, and once again I followed in their wake.

I peeked past Gus to see Frankenstein standing near the false wall, a child in front of him, his gaze dead ahead on something I couldn't see behind the wall, but I knew was Fitzroy. Frankenstein held a knife at the boy's throat. The sobbing woman must be his mother. Her menfolk held her back, but the anguish on her face made my heart ache for her.

"Now do you see what sort of character he is?" Seth growled at me.

"Drop the gun down there," Frankenstein snapped. "Do it now, or I'll slit his throat."

A hush fell over the crowd as we waited for the clank of the gun being dropped down the unseen manhole. But the only sound was the woman's uncontrollable sobs.

Frankenstein's arm tensed and the boy cried out in pain as the blade bit into his neck.

I was about to open my mouth, to scream at Fitzroy to do it, when Seth's hand clamped over it. He jerked me against his chest, blocking my view. "Quiet, Charlie," he hissed. "If he knows you're here, he'll use the boy to

force you to go with him."

Perhaps I could force an exchange, the boy's life for mine...

"Do it!" the mother screamed before I'd made up my mind.

The distant splash of something hitting water was a relief to hear. The crowd seemed to take a breath all at once.

"Get away from the hole." The edge in Frankenstein's voice wasn't quite as harsh anymore.

I pulled free of Seth's hard embrace and peered past him. Frankenstein moved toward the manhole behind the wall, the child still locked in his arm with a knife to his throat. As he disappeared behind the wall, Fitzroy reappeared. He did not have his hands raised, but his intense focus zeroed in on Frankenstein.

"Let him go!" shouted one of the men holding back the sobbing mother.

Everything seemed to happen at once. The boy was spat out from behind the wall, propelled into Fitzroy's waiting arms. At the same moment, while everyone's attention was distracted, the knife flew at the boy.

Several women screamed, including me. But Fitzroy spun the child out of the way and put his own body between blade and boy.

The knife buried itself in his side.

## CHAPTER 13



"LINCOLN!" My shout was swallowed up by the now rowdy crowd. They surged forward, surrounding the boy and Fitzroy. "I can't see him." I tried to pull free of Seth, but he held me. His gaze wasn't on me, however, but on the spot where Fitzroy had been standing.

Gus went ahead and tried to part the crowd, but they would not let him through. They jostled him and one another, their angry, vengeful shouts drowning out all other sounds.

Until a gunshot brought sudden silence. The echo left no doubt that it had come from down the sewer. Seth's hands tightened around me, and no matter how hard I tried to pull away from him, I couldn't.

"Sir!" I heard Gus shout. "Take this!"

"What's he doing?" God, how I hated not knowing. The ball of frustration growing inside me became too much and it burst out. I kicked Seth's shin then kned him in the groin. His grip loosened and I pulled free. I was too fast once I was out of his reach.

"Lincoln?" I called as I pushed through the crowd to where I could see Gus standing over the manhole. "Gus! Where is he? What's going on?"

"Fitzroy's chasing him."

"But he's injured!"

"He's got my gun." He straightened. His breathing came hard and fast as

if he were the one doing the chasing. "Where's Seth?"

"Gus, I saw the knife in his side."

"Seth got stabbed?"

"Fitzroy!" I punched him hard in the ribs and he coughed. "He's gravely injured." The drops of blood on the cobblestones were testament to that. The knife, lying forgotten near the manhole, was covered in blood. "He needs to dress the wound."

"He needs to catch Frankenstein. It's our best chance."

I went to punch him again, but he caught my fist. "That hurt," he said, rubbing his chest. His gaze lifted above my head. "Bloody hell, what happened to you? You look like you seen a ghost."

"I got embroiled in a melee."

"Why the white face?"

"My sword got in the way."

"You ain't carrying— Ah." Gus snorted. "Dagger, more like."

Seth peered down the manhole. "Where's Fitzroy?"

"Gone after Frankenstein. He's armed." He tapped Seth's shoulder. "I think it's time we left."

Three of the local men glared at us, their teeth bared. Behind them, the rest of the crowd still gathered around the boy and his family, offering comfort.

"We didn't do anything," Seth grumbled. "Fitzroy *saved* him."

"They want someone to blame. We're here, Frankenstein isn't." Gus took my elbow and tried to steer me away, but I refused to go.

"We can't leave Fitzroy down there!"

"We can and we will," Seth said. "He won't necessarily resurface this way, anyway. It's a warren of tunnels down there. We have no idea which one he's taken or where he'll end up. Come home with us, Charlie. He'll want you to be safe now."

I allowed them to escort me out through the arch. Seth dropped some

coins and the crowd pounced on them instead of us.

We hurried up Totten Lane and returned to the stables, some blocks away, where we'd lodged the horse and carriage. Seth drove and Gus rode in the cabin with me. His gaze flicked to me often but he didn't speak, mercifully. I wasn't ready to talk about what had happened. About Frankenstein being my father.

Back at the house, I sat in the library where I could watch the driveway. Seth joined me, but not near the window. He sat at the central table, one foot on the chair opposite, and crossed his arms. I felt his eyes on me, but I didn't engage him in conversation. Gus delivered tea then left again to get cake.

When we were alone again, Seth finally spoke. "He's not worth it."

I said nothing and continued to look out the window.

"You're better than that. Better than him." He sounded annoyed. I supposed getting kneed in the family jewels can upset a man. "This is your home now, Charlie. You don't need him. You have us."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Frankenstein. He may be your father, but he's lying about wanting you. He doesn't even know you."

"Oh. Frankenstein. Yes, of course." I turned back to the window, somewhat more distracted from my vigil than I had been before. Frankenstein had almost duped me, until he'd endangered the life of the child. What sort of man did that?

A desperate one. One I shouldn't want to associate with. Nevertheless, I wanted to talk to him, and discover everything there was to know about my ancestry—my mother.

"You don't believe anything he said, do you?" he went on.

"I believe he is my father."

"Yes. Well, that, I suppose. Now that I've seen him, the resemblance is remarkable, I'll admit. But that doesn't mean he wants to be a loving father."

But Frankenstein knew who my real mother was. No one else did.

A movement between the trees at the base of the drive caught my attention. I rose and leaned closer to the window. A hansom cab rolled up to the house and Fitzroy emerged from the cabin. He held his arm close to his body. His side was damp with blood.

I picked up my skirts and ran out of the library then flung the front door open. "Lincoln!" It wasn't lost on me that I used his first name to greet him.

It seemed it wasn't lost on him either. He blinked at me from the bottom step. His face was a little pale, his eyes circled by shadows. I trotted down the steps as the cab pulled away.

"Thank God you're all right. I've been sick with worry." I went to take his arm to help him, but he kept his distance.

"You shouldn't have concerned yourself." He strode past me.

I stood there, staring at his back, dumbfounded by his snub. What had I done to deserve that? "You cannot tell me what I can and can't be concerned about!"

My protest might as well have fallen on deaf ears. He didn't slow down, didn't acknowledge me at all.

Seth, standing in the doorway, moved aside to let his master pass. "Did you catch him, sir?"

"No."

Seth gave me a sympathetic smile. "He'll be in a foul mood for the rest of the day," he whispered when I drew closer. "Don't mind him."

"Why will he be in a foul mood? Because he failed?"

"Yes, and he's worried that Frankenstein will get the better of him and harm the royal family."

"You got all that from the few curt words he spoke?"

Fitzroy headed straight for the stairs, just as Gus came down them in the opposite direction. "Thought I smelled you." He wrinkled his nose. Fitzroy did indeed stink of the sewers, and his trousers were wet and filthy from the knees down. "At least you're balanced now, sir," he said cheerfully. At

Fitzroy's hesitation, he added, "Charlie shot you on the other side, didn't she?"

Fitzroy glanced back at me, and I froze at the coldness in his eyes. If looks could kill, I would have been turned into an icicle. I gulped and dipped my head, hoping he didn't see the color rise to my cheeks.

When I looked up again, however, he was no longer there. He'd gone quietly up the stairs.

"Better get some clean bandages to dress the wound," Seth told Gus. "I'll boil the water."

"You're going to dress his wound?" I asked. "Not a doctor?"

"If it's not too deep, he'll do it himself. He has some medical knowledge. We're just delivering the supplies."

"I wonder how Frankenstein got away," Gus mused.

"Probably lost him in the sewers," Seth said.

I left the two of them pondering that and headed toward the service area at the back of the house. "Where are the bandages?"

"Leave it to us," Gus said. "He'll prefer it."

"That's too bad. Besides, everyone knows women make the best nurses. You two lugs are too rough." They protested some more, but I refused to listen.

Cook gave me some warm water in a jug and Seth found bandages. "I'll see to the rest," he said.

"You sure you want to face him now?" Gus asked me. "He'll be a bloody-minded bear."

"He's less likely to lash out at me than you."

"True. Good luck."

I headed up the stairs, only to realize Fitzroy was in the bathroom. I could hear water spilling in the tub. I waited in his sitting room for his return, and he arrived some fifteen minutes later, looking damp, disheveled and delectable.

Thick straps of muscle stretched across his shoulders and chest. His hair hung loose, brushing the nape of his neck, and blood smeared his side. He stopped in the doorway when he saw me, his eyes huge. He seemed startled, not at all his gruff, cool self. The change threw me a little off balance and I remained rooted to the spot, uncertain how to proceed.

"Where are Seth and Gus?" he asked, recovering before I did.

"Fetching supplies." I moved close enough to him that I could smell the sharp tang of the carbolic soap he'd used. "Let me look at the wound."

"It's fine."

"It's not fine. There's fresh blood."

"The bleeding has almost stopped."

"Let me see. Is it deep?"

"It requires suturing."

Every time I came close, he either turned or moved away so I couldn't inspect the cut. After three attempts, I'd had enough. "Stop behaving like a child, and let me see."

He squared up to me and looked down that imperial nose of his. It was a pose that was probably meant to intimidate but failed miserably. It made him even more appealing, a wounded yet defiant warrior.

"A child?" he intoned.

"Yes."

"I am merely trying to protect your feminine sensibilities."

I burst out laughing. "I don't think I have any feminine sensibilities." At his flattening lips, I thought it best to be more serious. My laughter seemed to offend him. "Thank you for your consideration for my wellbeing, sir, but I'm not going to swoon when I touch you."

"That is not the point," he ground out.

I stamped my hands on my hips. "Do you honestly prefer Gus or Seth to do this instead of me?"

"I can do it."

"You can't."

He tried to prove me wrong by inspecting the wound. While he was able to reach it, he couldn't see it very well; he certainly wouldn't be able to suture it himself. "Seth can do it," he finally said, giving up.

"Seth is all thumbs, and Gus's fingernails are so dirty he's probably growing mushrooms under them. I'm gentle, methodical and can sew a stitch." Without waiting for his next protest, I dipped the cloth into the warm water.

To my surprise, he allowed me to clean the blood away without protest. The cut wasn't too deep, thank goodness, but it was important to keep it clean and avoid infection. I concentrated on my task, circling ever closer to the cut itself. I almost forgot that I was playing nurse to a very handsome man until that man sucked air between his teeth.

"Sorry," I said, glancing up at him.

He watched me from beneath lowered lashes. His face flushed when he realized that he was caught staring.

"Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head then stared straight ahead. He drew in a ragged breath. "Continue."

He stood as stiff as a statue while I finished cleaning the wound. Not even his chest rose and fell with his breathing. He only moved away when Seth and Gus arrived. I hadn't quite finished cleaning, but it would have to do. It seemed he didn't want the men to see me tending him. That would make stitching him up somewhat difficult.

He inspected the supplies the men had brought up. "Is everything sterilized?"

"Steamed the needle and thread in the kitchen," Seth said. To me, he added, "Surgical thread. We keep some just in case."

"You get wounded often?" I asked.

"Enough that we need a supply of it on hand. Mr. Fitzroy does all the

stitching, though. Never had to do it myself."

"Nor me," Gus chimed in. "I'm happy to try my hand."

"Try your hand?" I shook my head. "I may not be much of a lady, but I've been sewing and embroidering since I was old enough to hold a needle. I'll do it."

"Were you any good?" Seth asked.

"Adequate." I shot Fitzroy a reassuring smile. "The wound is straight. Unless you want me to embroider *Home Sweet Home*, I can manage."

Gus laughed so hard his eyes watered. Seth couldn't hold back his grin either, until Fitzroy's glare withered it.

"Stand still and keep your arm out of the way," I told him.

Gus handed me a pair of sterilized gloves and I threaded the needle. Despite my bravado, I was nervous. Stitching a sampler was one thing, a human being entirely another. I didn't want Fitzroy to see my apprehension, however, and managed to steady my shaking hand enough to proceed, under his guidance. He calmly informed me how deep I ought to go and how wide apart the stitches needed to be. It was over in a few minutes. He hadn't winced, flinched, groaned or hissed once. I wasn't sure he felt pain at all.

"Where did you pick up your medical knowledge?" I asked as I handed the needle back to Gus.

"A surgeon taught me," Fitzroy said.

"Your lessons included surgery?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Seth shaking his head at me in warning. I frowned at him, but Fitzroy caught it and arched a brow. Seth cleared his throat and followed Gus out of the room.

"My education was more varied than a regular student's," Fitzroy said.

"Why?"

"So that I could fulfill this role," he said matter-of-factly. "It's been my destiny since birth. The ministry is new, but its origins are ancient. I was chosen early as a future leader."

"At birth," I muttered.

"Before."

I laughed, then realized he was serious. "How could you have been chosen before your birth?"

"It happens." He picked up the gauze and placed it over his wound. "The bandage, Charlie."

If he had been chosen before birth, that implied there was something special about his parents. Perhaps a combination of characteristics that were deemed important in a future leader of the ministry. I wanted to ask, but he seemed to not want to talk about it. I gave up, for now, but I intended to find out more about his parents and childhood. It was thoroughly intriguing. *He* was intriguing.

I wrapped the bandage around his torso. It brought me close to him, my face just below his shoulder height. If I leaned a few inches forward, I could kiss him. I dared not look up into his face, but staring at the hollow of his throat did nothing to settle the blood raging through my body. Where before my ministrations had been clinical, now they were anything but. Every part of me was aware of him and how close we stood; how easy it would be to close the gap between us, tilt my head, and receive his kiss.

As I wrapped the bandage around him, my fingers brushed the smooth skin of his back and sides. I slowed, not wanting the connection to end. Wanting only to touch him more, to feel the muscles twitch with restrained desire, the thud of his pulse, the heat of his skin.

He wanted those things too. I could sense it, rather than see it or feel it. It was in the way he didn't move when I fastened the bandage in place, and how he lowered his face to my hair and drew in a deep breath.

With my hands still resting over the bandage, I dared to glance up at him. His eyes were closed, his jaw slack, making his face a little softer and even more handsome. I wanted to capture him in that moment, so I lifted my hand and cupped his cheek.

His eyes flew open and his face hardened. He turned away.

"Lincoln," I whispered.

He gathered up his ruined, bloody clothes. "Mr. Fitzroy," he snapped. "Or sir."

I stepped back as if he'd pushed me. "I—I thought—"

"You thought wrong." He stalked into the adjoining bedroom but didn't shut the door. He emerged a few moments later wearing a clean shirt. If I'd thought his jaw was rigid before, now it was positively rock-hard. His eyes were as black and bleak as I'd ever seen them, and his gaze didn't waver from mine. "I've decided. You can't stay here."

"Wh—what?" He was talking too fast. My head was still fuzzy from desire and his brutal rejection.

"When Frankenstein is caught, you'll go to live with Lady Harcourt."

He might as well have slapped me. My head was suddenly clear again. "No! You said I don't have to live with her if I didn't want to."

"I've changed my mind. It's the best place for you."

"Here is—"

"You can't stay here." He moved to the door, as if to see me out.

I stayed put. "Why not?"

"Because your infatuation with me is inappropriate."

My face burst into flames, or it might as well have, it felt so hot. I crossed my arms, as defiant as I could possibly be when utter humiliation ate me alive. I wanted to shout at him that he desired me too but, in truth, I wasn't sure. If he'd liked my touch as I bandaged him, it could have been because the fingers touching him belonged to a woman. Any woman. The look on his face may not have had anything to do with me.

"It's unhealthy," he went on. "And not in either of our best interests for you to live here."

Tears stung my eyes and tingled my nose. I had to hold myself very tight to keep from unraveling. "I understood your point. There's no need to pour

salt on the wound."

"This is the way it has to be. You will be well taken care of at Lady Harcourt's house. She's kind."

"And if I don't wish to go there?"

"You would be a fool not to."

"I think we've already proven that I am indeed that." I sniffed, but fortunately my tears didn't spill. I didn't want him to see how pathetic I was, crying over a man I hardly knew.

"It's that or a house of charity," he said.

"I hate you, Fitzroy."

"No, you don't," he said stiffly. "That's the problem."

His cruel words were enough to shock me out of myself, and forced me to see what I was doing and saying. A small flame of anger burned in my chest, and I fueled it with thoughts of how he'd abducted me, treated me like a prisoner, and callously ridiculed my affections. I took a deep breath and felt quite a bit better; more determined than ever to conquer my feelings for him.

He was right when he'd called it an infatuation. What I felt for him was quite possibly fleeting, and certainly foolish, brought on by living in the same house and my gratitude at being rescued from poverty. I could conquer my feelings, given a little more time.

There. Better. Admitting that my affections were misplaced was the first step.

"I'll miss Seth and Gus, and Cook too," I told him with a tilt of my chin. "Perhaps more than I'll miss you, in the long term. They've shown me nothing but kindness, whereas you...have not."

I never got to see what he thought of that. Seth and Gus returned, their steps full of bounce, and they asked for an account of Fitzroy's chase through the sewer tunnels. They lapped up the details as eagerly as the boys from the gangs did, when I told them stories in the evenings. I sat on a chair and listened too. The distraction was a welcome relief.

"He exited the sewers near the docks in Wapping," Fitzroy said. "He was far enough ahead the entire time that I couldn't catch him or get close enough to throw my knife."

"Why didn't you shoot him?" Gus asked.

"The gases in the tunnels are volatile. Shooting would have been hazardous. Once above ground again, there were too many people. I followed him to a small warehouse, tucked away behind the larger ones along the docks. I decided to return here instead of entering."

"Why?" Seth asked.

Fitzroy hesitated before continuing. "In the brief glimpse I caught as he slipped inside, I decided I needed to be better armed and have a plan of attack."

Seth and Gus glanced at one another, perhaps wondering if they were going to be part of the plan. "What did you see?" I asked him, sitting forward.

"A half dozen others, perhaps more."

"Men?"

He paused. "In a way."

I gasped. "They were his monsters, weren't they? His creations, as he calls them?"

"Bloody hell," Seth murmured. "What did they look like?"

"I saw them only briefly, and from a distance. They bore scars across their foreheads, necks and chests. They wore trousers but nothing else, and appeared to be strapped to large chairs."

I was about to remark at the horrible inhumanity of chaining someone to a chair, but remembered that the creatures weren't entirely human. "Were they...alive?"

"I'm not certain. They sat very still and their eyes were closed."

I shivered. "Thank God." I remembered how horrid it had been looking into the dead eyes of the bodies inhabited by the spirits of my mother and my savior from the holding cell. I wouldn't want to see the eyes of Frankenstein's

creations open.

"Did you see anything else?" Gus asked in a hushed voice.

Fitzroy shook his head. "He closed the door, and all the windows were covered. I returned here."

"That might have been the best chance to capture him," Seth muttered, half to himself. "While his monsters were strapped to their chairs."

Fitzroy just looked at him.

"He's injured!" I said on his behalf. "Indeed, he ought to be resting and regaining his strength."

"Right. Yes." Seth jerked his head at Gus. "We should go. Is there anything you need, sir?"

"No."

"Come on, Charlie," Gus said, escorting me out with a hand at my back.

I stopped in the doorway. I found it difficult to meet Fitzroy's gaze, but I managed it. What I had to say had nothing to do with our earlier conversation, and I shouldn't let that stop me. "There's something you ought to know. Frankenstein claims to be my father. Having seen him face to face now, I admit there's a strong resemblance."

His lips parted and for several long heartbeats, he didn't speak.

"The news has shocked you as much as it did me," I said with a wry twist of my mouth.

"That's his shocked face?" Gus grunted. "Looks like his normal face, to me." He quieted when Seth elbowed him in the ribs.

"Why didn't you say before?" Fitzroy said.

I shrugged. "I was going to. Stitching you up was more important."

"But I—" He shook his head. "You should have told me. I wouldn't have spoken so harshly to you."

"What does the news about my real father have to do with...anything else?"

"The day has been ordeal enough for you. I might have been kinder. Or

left our conversation for another day."

"That would only delay the inevitable. Besides, you were simply being honest, in that uniquely cool way of yours."

"I'm—"

"Don't trouble your conscience over it. A kinder delivery probably wouldn't have achieved the same result anyway. I'm grateful that you chose to enlighten me on your thoughts today rather than a point in the future. It allows me to plan ahead." I turned away quickly so that I couldn't see the impact my words had. I expected he would be relieved, since he'd managed to achieve precisely what he wanted—my willingness to leave Lichfield when this was over.

"What was that about?" Gus asked as he caught up to me in the corridor.

Seth drew alongside too. "What were you two discussing before we returned?"

"The future," I told them, pausing outside my bedroom door.

"And?" Seth placed his hand on the doorknob but didn't open the door.

"And he decided that my future does not lie at Lichfield Towers."

"You're going to live with Lady Harcourt?"

"No. I'll find somewhere else."

"Where?" Gus blurted out. "There ain't no work in the factories, you ain't trained for domestic work, and you're too bloody stubborn besides."

"Perhaps I'll offer to speak to the souls of the dying as they pass away. I wonder how much one ought to charge for such work."

"That's not funny," Seth growled. His face was surprisingly grim.

I patted his arm. "I'll think of something. Don't worry about me."

"Don't you think about goin' back to live on the streets," Gus warned. "That ain't no life for you. I'll hide you in the stables myself, if necessary."

I took his hand. "Thank you, Gus, but it won't come to that."

"I'll speak to him." Seth pointed his chin over my head back up the corridor. "He won't throw you out."

Gus snorted. "He won't listen to you. Or me. He don't even listen to Lady H."

"It's all right," I told them. "I just need some time to think up a plan."

"And what if he don't give you time? He's just as likely to toss you out the minute Frankenstein is caught. That could be as soon as tomorrow."

"I'm sure he'll give me more time. He's not *that* heartless."

"Isn't he?" Seth shook his head. "I'm not so sure." He opened the door and offered me a grim smile. "I'll bring you some tea, shortly."

I thanked him and entered my room—my cozy room with the pile of books, clean clothes, and soft bed. I sighed as they shut the door and left me to contemplate my uncertain future.



FITZROY HAD RECOVERED ENOUGH to leave the house the following morning with Seth and Gus. They were going to investigate the warehouse where Frankenstein kept his creatures. He wouldn't be drawn on whether they would attempt to capture him today or simply investigate.

I tried to read but my mind kept wandering. When I did manage a few pages of the new book, however, I had to set it down altogether. It was about a girl who learned she was adopted. At least *her* father wasn't a murderer.

I closed my eyes. Perhaps that wasn't fair. Frankenstein had seemed to genuinely care for his creatures. And what if the men whose parts he'd used *were* dying, as he claimed? Some deaths were prolonged and painful, and I could well see why the dying would beg him to end their pain. Did it really matter that he'd then used parts of them to create something else, something akin to another life?

And what of Mr. Calthorn, the spy master, the man with the knowledge to bring down the government and the crown? The brutal man who'd hurt his wife. If Frankenstein told the truth—and that wasn't a certainty—was he a

bad person for ridding the world of such a monster?

I didn't know what to think. The little boy he'd used as a shield came to mind, and so did Frankenstein's blue eyes—so like mine. I knew in my heart that *I* wasn't a bad person, despite what Holloway said, so how could the man who'd fathered me be bad?

It didn't make sense, and my mind spun around in circles, trying to think it through. I needed a distraction, so I ventured to the kitchen where Cook was attacking a leg of mutton with a cleaver.

"Can I help?" I asked. "Chop some vegetables or clean pots?"

"Vegetables are all chopped, but there be some dusting to do and dishes to clean. There's a pile of 'em in the scullery. Gus'll be right pleased if he finds them all done. It be his turn, today."

"Cook, why are there no maids or footmen here? The house could do with a few."

"Aye, it could. Gus and Seth manage a little, here and there, but the house is too big for 'em to do things proper. You be only a little thing, but if you be a few inches taller, you'd see the dust on top of shelves."

I chuckled and he smiled.

"The master don't like no maids and footmen snooping about, so he says. The ministry got too many secrets."

"Unless those secrets are written down, I don't see why employing some staff would cause problems."

He merely shrugged and returned to the range.

I fetched a duster from the utility cupboard and dusted everything I could reach in the entrance hall. The floor was filthy from the comings and goings, so I scrubbed the tiles with a bristly brush I found. I moved on to the sitting room next. The work wasn't difficult. Indeed, I found I enjoyed sprucing the house up. I took the liberty of rearranging a few pieces of the furniture in the parlor, and hiding some of the uglier knickknacks behind other things. A stuffed rat-like creature was the first to go. Who thought that ought to be

displayed in a parlor?

By the time I returned to the scullery, I felt content with what I'd achieved. Perhaps I *could* do a maid's work. It wasn't as awful as I'd expected, and although I would have to work with other maids, the company of women was something I needed to get used to. Perhaps I would ask Lady Harcourt for a reference. She might feel that the ministry owed me enough to lie for me. I couldn't work for her, however, no matter how often she asked. I would be forever expecting to see *him* there, and disappointed when I didn't, or when he ignored me, as a gentleman should ignore a maid. Besides, seeing Lady Harcourt every day would be a constant reminder of their relationship and how he found her tempting and not me.

It was a thought I entertained as I picked up the empty pail and headed outside, to the water pump in the courtyard.

I saw the flash of movement out of the corner of my eye too late. I was knocked to the ground, landing heavily on my knees and one hand. The other still held the pail. I whipped around and smashed the pail into my assailant, hitting him in the legs. His knees buckled and he fell on top of me, pinning me. I tried to push him off, but he was too heavy. He grabbed one of my wrists and squeezed so hard my hand went numb.

With his other hand, he held a knife to my throat. "Be still so I can remove the devil from you."

"Father! Please," I sobbed, "let me go."

"I told you." Holloway bared his teeth, and I noticed for the first time how long they were, how like a rabid dog he looked with madness brightening his eyes and saliva dripping from his lower lip. "I'm not your father. You're the devil's daughter."

Yes, I almost told him. *I am*.

"I'm going to save you, child. I'm going to release the devil from your body and bring you back to God's light."

"How?" It sounded strangled. The knife at my throat dug into my skin. I

felt a warm trickle of blood slide past my ear and into my hair. I dared not swallow, lest that make his blade dig in further.

"The devil is well entrenched in you." His voice wasn't normal. It was raspy, harsh, and pitched low. It was the voice of a madman. "It must be gouged out."

The knife pressed into my throat. I struggled again, pushing and kicking out, but nothing dislodged him, not even clawing at his cheek. Flesh scraped off in my fingernails, and blood poured down his face, but he didn't seem to notice. He was too intent on removing the devil from me. Too intent on killing me.

And I was too weak to stop him.

## CHAPTER 14



"*OUR FATHER, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name.*" Holloway's body shook. His lips curled back from his teeth. If there was a devil inside anyone, it was inside him.

I pushed and struggled, but it did no use. He didn't budge. I tried to scream, but either fear or the blade at my throat made it come out weak, strangled. I was pathetic, and soon I would be dead.

"*Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on—*" His eyes suddenly widened, the pupils mere pinpricks in the sea of white. His face twisted as he arched backward, his mouth open in a silent scream.

He sat back, alleviating the pressure of his weight on me. The blade was gone too, I realized. I pushed him off and he stumbled aside. He clutched his shoulder where a meat cleaver was lodged.

The moonlike head of Cook appeared above me. He held his hand out and I took it. He inspected my throat. "It ain't too deep."

Perhaps not, but it stung.

He reached down and, as calmly as he'd helped me to stand, he pulled the cleaver out of Holloway's shoulder. The man screamed and clutched at the wound, but it didn't staunch the gush of blood.

Cook sighed at his cleaver. "Have to throw this out now. Shame. Good knife, that."

I touched the cut at my throat and my hand came away bloody, but it was nothing compared to the blood covering Holloway's shoulder. "He needs a doctor," I said.

"He be needing a miracle when Fitzroy learns what he done."

Holloway curled into himself and sobbed into the dirt. He was pathetic; a small man with a closed mind. I couldn't believe I'd looked up to him, yearned for his love and respect. For the first time since discovering I was adopted, I was glad he wasn't my father.

"We'll put him in the cellar." Cook hauled Holloway up by his good arm. Holloway wailed in protest but didn't fight. He couldn't win anyway, not against a big man holding a meat cleaver. "Fitzroy can decide what to do with him when he gets back."

"We can't let him bleed to death."

"I'll patch him up best I can. I ain't calling the doctor until Fitzroy says to."

"Will he be mad if you let him go?"

"Furious. I'd rather have this cur's death on my conscience than be dismissed from Lichfield. Or worse."

He half-dragged half-carried Holloway to the house. I picked up his forgotten knife and followed. Cook unhooked a large key from inside the kitchen door then descended a set of stairs nearby. He unlocked a heavy oak door and marched his prisoner into the cool, musty room beyond.

Wine bottles lay on shelves to the left, most covered in dust. Sacks of flour huddled in the back corner, some empty crates beside them. Cook sat Holloway on one.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked.

"You thought yourself clever." He laughed harshly. "You were seen leaving the cemetery."

"By whom?"

"By someone you have wronged before. Did you visit my beloved? Did

her spirit talk to you, tell you that you revolt her?"

"That's not how it works." I wasn't going to try to explain my necromancy to him. Besides, I was curious about the person I'd wronged before. "Do you mean the costermonger?"

"He recognized you. You think a dress changes you, but it doesn't. The devil's creature is always recognized by the pure."

I snorted. "If this is the same costermonger who alerted the police to me, then he's anything but pure. I saw him fondling a whore one night, behind his cart. I believe he's married." It didn't surprise me that the costermonger recognized me that day when I left the cemetery with Fitzroy. He knew me well; I'd walked past his cart many times and stolen from him more than once. Holloway must have realized I would visit my adopted mother's grave and questioned him.

"Wait here," Cook ordered.

"The devil get you," Holloway hissed.

"One day. But not today. I be too busy."

Holloway's teeth ground audibly. "You'll burn in hell for this."

"No," I told him. "The bible preaches forgiveness. I will forgive you for this, in time, but you seem unable to forgive me for being born differently. Which of us deserves God's love?"

I walked away. It was only then that I saw the iron chains dangling from rings attached to the walls. I wondered if Cook had the keys to them. If so, he didn't chain Holloway up, but simply locked the door.

"I'll see to his wound," Cook said. "You rest."

Rest. I was too on edge to rest. Cook found a salve for me to use on my throat and I tied a clean bandage around the cut to protect it from my collar. I washed the dishes next, while he tended to Holloway's injury. I had to remember to thank him. If it hadn't been for the burly cook, I'd be dead.

That thought troubled me for the rest of the day. Holloway wasn't a large man, yet he'd completely overpowered me. And then there was the homeless

fellow who'd almost raped me, the men in the holding cell... Too many times, I'd come close to either losing my life or my virginity. Today was one time too many. I couldn't rely on someone else being nearby to help me. One day my luck would run out, and I would be alone and helpless.

It was time to stop being helpless and learn to fight off attackers. Somehow.

The day went by slowly. Fitzroy and the others didn't return for lunch or dinner, and when darkness fell, I was sick with worry. Cook was no help. He insisted they always returned after such ventures, occasionally harmed and exhausted, but always alive.

But what if today was the day *their* luck ran out? What if Frankenstein had discovered them and captured them? While it seemed unlikely—three against one—I couldn't shake the anxiety needling at me.

I told Cook I was going to bed early. Instead, I changed into my boys' clothing when I returned to my room. Sometime in the previous days, the trousers, shirt and jacket had been cleaned, folded and put away in my dresser. I unpinned my hair and dragged the long fringe over my face. A familiar boy stared back at me in the mirror, and I offered him a smile. Charlie wasn't as afraid as Charlotte. He was tougher, more resourceful, and fleet-footed. It was good to walk in his boots again.

Cook kept to the kitchen so it was easy to sneak out the front door. It was a long walk to the docks, over an hour, but the night was dark, and nobody saw me as I crept through the shadowy lanes to Wapping.

It wasn't an area I knew particularly well and there were more warehouses than I realized. Fitzroy had said Frankenstein's was behind the larger dock-side ones, so I ran down streets and looked for windows that were covered. At each one, I paused and listened. When I heard nothing, I moved on.

After another hour, I was beginning to think I'd missed the right warehouse altogether, but then I spotted one at the end of a lane with a crack of light edging the window covering. I squatted beneath the window and

listened. Only a faint humming came from inside. Not human, musical humming, but machine-like.

The window was locked; the door, too. A quick check showed there was no other way in through the front. I traversed back up the lane, past the row of joined warehouses, until an even smaller lane cut through the row. I scrambled over the gate and landed softly on the other side. The rear of the row was fenced off with gates providing access to loading yards behind each warehouse. I ran to the last one and tried to open it. Locked. Using a discarded crate as a step, I climbed over the top. My landing was as silent as all my movements had been so far. I may not have been able to fight off an attacker, but I'd been the best thief in the gang. None of the boys could match my combination of agility, speed and lightness. Dressing as a boy again reminded me of that. It was a skill I must remember to harness and use when necessary.

Now, it was vital.

The rear window was covered like the front. I squatted beneath it and listened. The humming sounded louder, like an engine coming to life. Then suddenly there was a crack, like lightning without the light.

I peeked through the window and had to cover my mouth to smother my gasp. Fitzroy had told us about the bodies of Frankenstein's creations, but seeing the six pale, scarred forms strapped to the chairs was far more gruesome than anything I'd imagined. The flickering light from a dozen candles revealed raw, ridged cuts across their chests, throats and foreheads, sewn up like seams. Blue veins formed intricate webs beneath their ghostly skin, and dark bruises circled their eyes. They were alive. I knew that much from the veins, yet they were utterly still.

So why the thick leather straps pinning their ankles and wrists to the chairs? And what kinds of chairs were made entirely of metal and had wires connecting them to a central machine? The humming and cracking came from that device. It was so loud now that any noise I made would not have

been heard by Frankenstein inside.

He bent over another body, lying on a table at the far end of the warehouse. There were two more bodies on separate tables, their feet pointed toward me. Their ankles were strapped down too, but I couldn't see if their wrists were bound from my squatting position at the rear window.

I dared to stand on my toes, but still I couldn't see the faces. There were three bodies, and I could tell from their large bare feet that they were all men. No. No, no, no. Surely Fitzroy was too clever—too strong—to have been caught. But the coincidence was too great for me to dismiss it.

Bile burned my throat. My stomach rolled and heaved. I squatted down again and sat with my back to the wall. I drew in large breaths and steadied my nerves. Then I began to plan.

I found crates and stacked them, then climbed up to peer through the smaller, high window, used for ventilation near the roofline. From that angle I could see all three faces of the bodies on the tables. They were bloodied and bruised, but I recognized Seth and Gus immediately. The third had his cheeks smashed in, and the rest of his face was swollen and covered in blood. His hair was matted too, but it was clearly black. Unlike Seth and Gus, the third figure struggled to breathe. His chest barely rose with each gasp of air, and once, a bubble of blood formed on his lips. He was unconscious. They all were.

I stumbled down from my makeshift ladder and threw up in the corner of the loading dock. Oh God. No, please no. Don't let them become a body farm for Frankenstein. Don't let Fitzroy die.

I pressed the heel of my hand to my heart, where it felt like a sharp blade pierced me. Tears cascaded down my cheeks, but I dashed them away. They weren't dead yet.

I steeled myself and climbed back up the crates. Frankenstein had moved away from the tables and was checking the machine. Candlelight picked out a cut on his lip, the swell of a bruise on his cheek, but they were nothing

compared to the injuries on my three friends. How had he overpowered them with only minimal harm to himself?

His face was slick with sweat, his hairline damp. He'd discarded hat, coat and gloves and stood in his shirt and trousers, rubbing his hands together as he inspected a glass panel on the machine. With a satisfied nod, he twiddled a dial and tapped the glass. His gaze flicked between his six creatures, then he turned the dial again. The sudden crack and snap of lightning made me jump. Bolts of light flashed at the points where the wires met the chairs, causing the bodies strapped to them to twitch and jerk as if they were alive.

My rapidly beating heart in my throat, I leaned closer to the window, unable to believe what I saw. I'd heard about electricity but never seen it in action before. Even so, I knew that I witnessed electricity at work. The engine must be generating it and sending it through the wires and into the chairs to animate the bodies.

If he had a machine to bring them to life, why did he need me?

The motor's hum began to slow, and the lightning bolts generated by the electricity ended. Yet the bodies still jerked and twisted.

The eyes of the one facing me opened, and I fell backward in surprise, landing on the hard ground. Thankfully the crates remained in place, and I'd not cried out. I was sore but nothing seemed broken. When I realized Frankenstein wasn't coming out to investigate, I climbed back up.

He wasn't there. I couldn't see the whole room from where I crouched on the top crate, so it was possible he was simply out of sight, or he could have left without snuffing out the candles.

The motor had wound down and stopped. Now that the humming had ended, the silence seemed unnatural. The creaking of boat timbers carried on the breeze, but otherwise, there were no sounds. The starless sky above was a vast, black sea. The only light came from the flickering candles inside the warehouse. They lit up the cloudy, soulless eyes of the creature facing me. He didn't seem to see me, but that could have been because he didn't see

anything.

His head moved from side to side and every part of him jerked or twitched. Then, as if it were nothing, he pulled free of the bonds strapping his wrists to the chair arms. His bound ankles freed next and he sat a moment, as if he wasn't sure what to do with his newfound freedom. Then he rocked forward and finally stood.

The other five bodies came alive too, each of them releasing themselves using unnatural strength. They stood on unsteady legs and checked their surroundings with blank eyes. I kept low, and thankfully my window was above their head height. They did not look up or down, only from side to side.

The first one, the one nearest me, tore the leather straps off the chairs and threw them. The others did the same, and even tried to pick up the chairs themselves, but they must have been bolted to the floor. One of the creatures took a candelabra and stared into the flames. He tried to catch one, and the fire didn't seem to hurt him, even when his skin began to burn. Then he snapped each candle in two, and threw the pieces to the floor where one of the others stomped on them, mashing the wax into the wooden boards with his bare heel. The first creature then slammed the metal candelabra against the chair until it too broke.

If I had any thoughts about these creatures being human, they were quickly dashed. They might have the appearance of men, but they had no conscience, no thoughts beyond violent instinct. They couldn't be allowed to roam free.

"I knew you would come, Charlotte."

My heart leapt at the familiar voice behind me. Slowly, slowly, I turned away from the warehouse, where the creatures progressed ever closer to the three bodies on the tables.

"I hoped you would be here to witness this." Frankenstein smiled up at me. He held out his hand, but I refused it. "Come away from there. If they see

you, neither of us will be able to stop them."

I climbed down. I could run now. He didn't appear to be armed, and I'd wager I was faster than him. It was the only way to keep myself out of his hands, to keep myself safe. I was dressed in boys' clothing again, and it would be easy to lose myself among the network of narrow lanes leading away from the docks.

It was so tempting to dash past him. I'd not kept myself out of danger for the last five years only to throw myself into the pit now. If I stayed, there may never be another opportunity to change my mind. It was unlikely that I could save myself once caught. I'd proven my ineffectiveness in fights several times over, of late.

No, I needed to make a choice now. Run, or stay and try to save Seth, Gus and Fitzroy.

Yet it was no choice at all. I could never live with myself if I left them to the mercy of this man. Fitzroy's callousness toward me hadn't stopped me from caring about all of them, including him.

"You must stop those things!" I cried. "They're going to kill them."

He held up his hands. "I can't. They don't listen to me. I learned that the hard way."

I frowned. "Then why did you animate them again?"

"Because I saw you there, watching, and I wanted you to see why I need you."

He'd seen me?

"Admittedly, I was looking out for you." He smiled gently. "I hoped that when your captors didn't return you would come to investigate. I had everything prepared—"

"My friends! You have to get them out!"

"They're not your friends, Charlotte. You can't trust them."

I went to shove him, but he caught my arms. "I see that they've succeeded in brainwashing you." He sighed. "Ever since meeting you, I've been

wondering if that's what happened. It's understandable."

"Listen to me," I growled. "Get. Them. Out."

He let me go and turned me toward the lower window. "It's all right, dear daughter. Their energy will dissipate before they can do any harm. Look."

Two of the creatures had fallen to the floor in crumpled heaps, while the other four seemed to be winding down, like automatons having run their course. Only one had reached a table. I watched as the remaining four stopped altogether then stumbled as if their legs could no longer hold them. Their expressions didn't change as their eyes closed and they too slumped onto the floor.

Tears of utter relief clogged my throat.

"The electrical currents only animate them for so long." Frankenstein sounded disappointed. "And even when it does bring them to life, they're not controllable. They won't even listen to me, their maker."

"That's why you came outside."

"It's too dangerous in there when they're alive. They're uncommonly strong, stronger even than the original men whose parts I used to make them."

"They're not alive," I spat. "They're not human. They're monsters."

"At the moment, you're right. But once they have souls, they'll be perfect. They'll think and feel—"

"Stop it," I hissed. "I'm not going to help you." Fitzroy had been right. Frankenstein wanted to use me to reanimate his creations, to bring them fully to life. To bring them under his control.

"You're sounding like them again." He jerked his head at the bodies through the window. "Charlotte, listen to me." He grasped my shoulders but I shook myself free. He sighed. "With your help, we can control them. They'll be absolutely perfect. There might not even be a need for the electricity. Imagine that!"

"I am, and it's sickening."

"Come now. Disregard what the ministry have been telling you and think

for yourself. I know you're a smart girl. You're my girl, after all." He smiled again, and it was patient and understanding. It was how a loving father smiled upon his daughter when she said something silly. "Together, you and I will have created life. How is that a bad thing? It's not. It's beautiful. You'll be a part of something amazing, and innovative too. Something that no one else in the world has done."

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. "So you can build an army and take over the government?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Once again, you've allowed yourself to be brainwashed. I'm a scientist, a doctor. I don't destroy life, I create it."

"Shouldn't doctors *save* lives?"

"Save, create...it's all balanced out. One sick, dying man's life is taken and given to another so that he may live and breathe again. It's not something to recoil from—it is something to embrace. It's the way of the future, Charlotte. It's where modern medicine is heading, and you and I are at the forefront of new and exciting things. They'll write about us in books and newspapers. They'll remember the name Frankenstein forever. I'll be the father of half the world—perhaps all of the world one day. Imagine it, Charlotte."

"I am, and I'm sickened. I won't help you."

His smile finally wavered, but not for long. "Come now. Don't be like that. I've been hoping to find another necromancer for so long and—"

"*Another* necromancer?"

"Your mother was one. She was a wonderful woman, but she had her reservations too."

My head began to spin. I pressed my hand to my temple. "My mother... that's why I'm like this?"

He frowned and his mouth flattened. "I don't want to talk about her. I was...upset when she left me." He touched my chin. "But now I have you. To think that I've gained both a daughter and a necromancer in one day...it's

beyond my wildest hopes. You are special, Charlotte. Never forget that. Special and loved."

"I...I can't..."

"Hush, child." He stroked my hair, my cheek. His hands were cool, but I didn't pull away. No one had touched me like that since my adopted mother, and it felt so wonderful. Whatever his motives, this man was my father. He loved me. He wouldn't hurt me.

"You will come to live with me, of course," he said, smiling again. "I live in Chelsea, in a nice house. You'll have your own room and dolls."

I almost told him I was too old for dolls, but stopped myself.

"We'll search for your mother together." He spoke faster and his smile turned harder. "She will love you instantly too. I know she will."

"She's alive? Tell me about her. What is she like? Who are her family? Perhaps she's living with them."

He pressed a finger to my lips. "All in good time. After you help me, we'll find her. I promise you."

"Doctor, I—"

"Call me Father."

I shook my head. "I can't help you. What you're asking is wrong. Dangerous."

"Stop it!" He thumped his fist against the wall, startling me. It must have hurt, against the bricks, but he showed no sign. "I'm telling you that they're wrong. They've fed you lies, brainwashed you. They are not your friends, Charlotte, no matter what they said. They're our enemies. They plan on stealing my creations and using them for themselves."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's not." He clasped my shoulders again and dipped his face to look into my eyes. "I'm sorry, Charlotte, but that's the truth. You can't trust them. Everything they've told you that I plan to do, it's *they* who plan to do it, only with *my* creations. They're simply waiting for me to complete the science and

reanimate the bodies before stealing all my work. But I've suspected all along, and I'm not going to give up my creatures without a fight."

"You're wrong, Doctor."

"Am I? My dear, I would never hurt the queen. I don't care for power. What would I do with an entire nation to run? I'm a scientist."

The truth of that struck me in the gut. He may be mad, but he was a man of science, not politics or the military. He was obsessed with simply seeing his work come to life, and being remembered for it in years to come—not with taking over the country.

"Listen to me," I said, taking his hands in mine. He squeezed them, and it was as if he could sense that I was about to give in and agree. How wrong he was. "Has someone from the ministry been in touch with you about your creations? Is someone paying you?"

He pulled away and patted my cheek. "Come on. Come inside. Let me show you what you need to do."

He grabbed my hand and opened the back door. He pulled me inside to the scarred bodies on the floor. "We have to get them back in the chairs first." He grabbed one under the arms and began dragging it.

I didn't help. I inspected the bodies on the tables. Seth and Gus breathed normally, but Fitzroy didn't. He labored for every breath, and only managed shallow gasps. I couldn't look at his battered face, once so handsome and now a pulpy mess. It made me want to throw up again.

"Did you do this to them?" I whispered.

"Those two are merely sleeping for now." He grunted as he worked to lift the body onto the chair. "I've given them enough diethyl ether to keep them unconscious for now."

"And Fitzroy?"

He looked up sharply then lifted the body and began dragging. He locked that one into a chair too then joined me by the bed. "He won't survive."

A sob bubbled in my throat. I couldn't hold it in, no matter how hard I

tried.

Frankenstein touched my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Charlotte. I see that you cared for him. Your affections are misguided, but I understand why you have them. He saved you from the streets, I believe. It's easy to mistake his actions for caring. He was simply doing his job—a job with the sole aim to rid the world of people who want to live outside the acceptable boundaries of an unyielding society. People like me. And you."

I swiped at my tears and turned away from Fitzroy. I couldn't look at him anymore; couldn't bear to see him struggle for breath. Such a virile, strong man, and now this. It was too much.

"Why do you want them?" I asked.

"You don't know?"

I shook my head.

"To complete the final component of our project. Your part."

I blinked at him. Blinked again. And then it sank in. He wanted me to use their spirits to reanimate the bodies of his creations. To do that, they had to die.

"I...I can't," I choked out. "I want nothing to do with it."

He slammed his fist on the table near Fitzroy's leg. A leg that was covered with dirty trousers, frayed at the cuff. I frowned and inspected the rest of the body. It was still fully clothed, yet they weren't the same clothes Fitzroy usually wore. I'd not seen him leave that morning, but I'd never seen him dress in ragged, untailored trousers. They hung loose on the body—a body that was considerably smaller than Gus's.

It wasn't Fitzroy.

Another sob burbled within me, but it was one of utter relief. I felt giddy with it. Wherever Fitzroy was, he wasn't here, half dead on Frankenstein's table. So who was? And where was Fitzroy?

I glanced around the warehouse, but saw nowhere for him to hide. I must be careful not to let Frankenstein realize that I knew it wasn't Fitzroy. He

hadn't corrected me earlier. Either he didn't know who was on his table, or he didn't want me to know that it wasn't Fitzroy.

"Listen, Charlotte." Frankenstein's voice had gentled again. "I know you're frightened, but there is nothing to be afraid of. You've controlled spirits before. You have nothing to fear from the dead, and they have nothing to fear from you." He turned me to face him. The reflection of a candle flame flickered in his eyes and deepened the shadows, making him look hollow cheeked and cadaverous. "This poor man will pass on soon, and when he does, you'll talk to his spirit. Guide him into one of the bodies. Along with the electrical current, it will be a spectacular reawakening. You and I will experience the dawning of new life. *Real* life. Come." He put his arm around my shoulder. "I want my guest of honor to turn the generator back on."

"I...I can't. Please, don't do this. I'm begging you—"

"No, *I* am begging *you*." He grasped my shoulders and pain shot down my arms as his fingers speared me. "It will be marvelous, Charlotte. Why can't you see that?" He shook me. "Why can't you see the good I can achieve?"

I jerked my head toward the bodies on the tables. "I doubt they think you're doing good."

"They're my enemies. *Our* enemies. They want to keep our nation—the entire *world*—in the dark. They want nothing to do with the fantastical. They think anyone who isn't like them is unnatural, wrong. If that were so, then *you* would be a monster, and you're not. You're beautiful. Different, yes, but that's what makes you perfect."

Tears burned again. Nobody had ever said such kind, loving things to me. Things I'd spent years dreaming of hearing. And here was my real father, calling me perfect, wanting me in his life. It was almost too much for my fragile heart to hold.

And yet my head wasn't so easily swayed. It didn't fall for a few longed-for words. I looked at the two men who'd been good to me in recent days,

trapped and vulnerable on the tables, and I knew what I had to do.

"What will happen to them?" I asked.

"What does it matter?" he snapped, letting me go. "They care nothing for you, why do you care for them?"

"Answer my question. What will happen to them?"

"I need their souls for you to do your work."

"You're going to kill them," I said flatly.

He pressed his lips together, as if he were summoning some patience. "The life of three enemies with vile intentions is worth exchanging for three of my creations."

"What if the souls refuse to help?"

"They cannot refuse." He frowned. "Do you not know the extent of your power? Charlotte, *you* control the spirits. They may have minds and wills of their own, but you command them. They must obey you."

I'd learned that much from Fitzroy's book, and now I knew that Frankenstein knew it too. He did not appear to realize that any spirit could be raised, not simply a newly deceased one. "Do you know that from my mother?"

He nodded. "She was a powerful necromancer."

I folded my arms and glanced at Seth and Gus, unconscious and unable to help me even if I managed to free them from their bonds. The third man's breath rattled in his chest, the skin surrounding the bruises paler than ever. Death clung to him, waiting.

Frankenstein checked the man's pulse. "It's almost time." He pushed the tables closer to the chairs and switched on the generator. It hummed to life. The three bodies on their iron thrones sat ready to receive their new souls—three dead bodies and three soon-to-be-dead ones, with only me to connect them.

"I'm not doing this."

Frankenstein didn't hear me over the increasing noise of the generator. He

checked the glass panel and spun one of the dials. I glanced around again, searching for any sign that Fitzroy was near; that he was lying in wait to capture Frankenstein before the bodies became animated.

What if my arrival had ruined Fitzroy's plans? What if he had intended for Seth and Gus to be caught and he was right now lying in wait? But where?

Or was he already dead and therefore useless for Frankenstein's scheme?

"Come, Charlotte." Frankenstein had to shout over the drone of the generator as he moved to the tables. "Stand closer, so the spirit can hear you." He nodded at the dying man on the table while he stood between Seth and Gus. "It's almost time."

Electricity flashed and crackled along the wires like blue, life-giving veins. The fingers of all three creatures twitched, their arms jerked. Their eyelids fluttered. They would soon be awake.

"Charlotte! Now!" Frankenstein opened a medical bag sitting on the floor behind Seth's table and pulled out a dagger. When he turned back to me, his eyes were bright with fevered excitement and his lips battled with a triumphant smile. He pointed the dagger at the dying man. "Stand there!"

I moved to the side of the third table, and caught sight of the bloodied face. I gagged on my own bile and quickly turned away again.

"He is almost gone," Frankenstein shouted, "but you must help him on his way. Press down on his throat. It'll be over in a moment. Hurry! The first is rising."

One of the creatures got to its feet. Where before it had rampaged around the room, and used up all its energy before reaching the tables, this time it focused on the tables first. And they were closer. We were closer. We couldn't control it, or the other two that had opened their dead eyes and turned toward us.

The only way to control them was by investing souls into them. But that would condemn Seth and Gus to death.

"Charlotte!" Frankenstein screamed. His smile had slipped and his face

was now distorted with uncertainty and fear. "Do it, or we will be torn apart!" His gaze flicked to the monster, now advancing with lumbering, loping steps toward me.

Frankenstein pressed the blade of his dagger to Seth's throat.

## CHAPTER 15



"No!" I cried. "Don't kill him!"

I dodged behind the table, away from the monster, and peeked out from behind the table legs. The creature had turned toward Frankenstein. Its blank eyes focused on its maker.

Frankenstein fell back, the blade still in his hand. I couldn't see if he'd used it on Seth, but I saw no spirit rise from the body. He must be alive.

I fell to my knees, partly from relief, but mostly because I'd spotted the medical bag. I rummaged through it until my fingers connected with something long and sharp. I pulled out a blade.

"Charlotte! Charlotte, you must do it now!"

He stumbled away from the table and his creature. I slipped under the table and came up on the other side. The sharp medical knife cut through the leather bonds easily, but Seth was still unconscious. I would never get him and Gus out while they slept.

Frankenstein's bellows drowned out the hum of the generator. He alternated between ordering me and begging me, as the monster backed him into a corner. I raced to Gus and cut through the straps trapping him too, and then I hoped for a miracle.

My movement caught the creature's attention. It lunged and fingers circled my arm so tightly it almost cut off the blood flow. I winced and tried

to pull away, but the creature was too strong. The second monster loomed at my side too. The stench of rotting flesh and foul breath swamped me, but it wasn't its stink that brought vomit to my mouth, or the blistered, red scars. It was the pale eyes, devoid of life.

I tried again to wrench away, but it was no use. He was unnaturally strong. His other hand circled my throat, over the cut inflicted by Holloway, and began to squeeze. It felt like my windpipe was being crushed. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't speak. Even if the unknown third man died, I wouldn't be able to command the spirit, because not a sound would escape my mouth.

Tears slipped down my cheeks. The cut stung, but it was nothing compared to the pressure on my throat. I closed my eyes, so that I didn't have to look into the creature's anymore, as I felt my life force slip away from me.

A soft thud had me open them again. I barely registered the black figure amid the shadows before it leaped onto the monster and dragged it off me. Everything was a blur and I hardly knew what happened until it was all over. The creature lay on the floor, its throat cut so deeply that the head was almost severed from the neck. Blood poured out, slicking the shadowy man's boots.

The figure approached. It was Fitzroy. "Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded, even though my throat burned and my chest ached. I gasped in air, the effort bringing a fresh wave of panic. I couldn't breathe. My throat was too tight. No matter how hard I tried, my lungs didn't fill.

Fitzroy removed his bloodied gloves and dropped them on the floor. He clasped my face, stroking his thumbs along my jawline. "It's all right," he said in that soothing, commanding voice of his. "Look at me."

I stared into the black pits of his eyes and he stared back at me, as if there was nothing and no one else in the room but us. It was a dizzying thrill to have his full attention, to feel like I mattered, and I didn't want it to end. I slipped into the deep pools of his eyes and could have stayed there forever.

"Concentrate on my hands," he murmured.

Those hands with the long, strong fingers that could confidently wield a

knife to slice through a man's throat then be so gentle and comforting a moment later. His caress traced the ridge of my cheeks up to the corners of my eyes. He dabbed away a tear with the pad of his thumb then tucked my hair behind my ear.

I drew in a steady, deep breath that filled my chest. It hurt my throat, but I didn't care. I could breathe.

Frankenstein's grunts drew Fitzroy away from me. He let me go but did not try to help as one of the creatures picked up his maker. It slammed Frankenstein against the wall, again and again, as if the doctor were a tool to be used to break through the bricks.

"Help me," Frankenstein whimpered after the third hit. He sounded weak, groggy. After the fourth slam, he groaned in pain. "Please, kill it! For God's sake!"

But Fitzroy didn't move. He turned his attention to the third creature. That one picked up a lifeless Gus in his arms and went to throw him.

Fitzroy attacked. He leapt at the creature, a knife in his hand. I hadn't seen him retrieve it. He went to stab the creature, but it swung Gus like a shield and Fitzroy had to duck or be swiped.

"Get outside!" he shouted at me. "Go, Charlie!"

I edged to the door, but didn't leave. The two remaining creatures were now both targeting Fitzroy. Frankenstein, the lesser threat, lay forgotten on the floor, spluttering and coughing. He got to his hands and knees then to his feet. With a glance at me that I couldn't decipher, he stumbled toward the dying man on the table, and calmly plunged the knife into his throat to the hilt.

I smothered my cry with my hands, not wanting to distract Fitzroy. He heard me anyway, and one of the creatures smashed its fist into his stomach. With a grunt, he fell back against Gus's table, then had to quickly duck to dodge another fierce blow.

The wispy spirit was almost invisible in the poor light. The tendril of

smoke drew together and formed the shape of a man's face. He blinked down at his badly damaged body, then at Frankenstein, and shook his head.

Frankenstein couldn't see it. "Do it," he snapped to me. "Or your friends will all die." He turned to the central table and pressed his knife to Seth's throat.

Fitzroy couldn't go to his man's aid. He fought off the other two creatures, his swift movements cutting them, but not deeply enough to kill them. One by one they attacked, and each time he managed to escape their massive fists, but for how long?

"Three," Frankenstein chanted, his eyes on me. "Two. One."

"I'll do it!" Saying the words hurt my damaged throat, and they came out faint, but Frankenstein heard me. He nodded, but did not lower his weapon. To the spirit I said, "I can see you there, ghost." The smoky form looked around then his gaze settled on me. I moved closer so that only he could hear me, not Frankenstein. "Yes, you. Please, listen to me."

"What d'you want?" The spirit seemed a little surprised that he could speak, and even more surprised when I answered.

"You have to save us, save my friends, by doing as I say," I whispered. "I'm going to ask you to re-enter your body."

"Blimey! That even possible?"

"Yes. It won't hurt you, and it will only be for a moment. You will then cross over to your afterlife, where you will find peace." Whether that was true or not, I didn't know, but it seemed like the best thing to say.

"Why would I help him?" He jerked his chin at Frankenstein who was staring at the body. His knuckles were white. "He did this to me. He killed me."

"You won't be helping him, you'll help me. He's going to kill my friends if you don't. Please, sir. I'm sorry for your death, but it had nothing to do with me."

"Why should I care?"

I rubbed my temple. Why couldn't he just do it?

"Now, Charlotte!" Frankenstein screamed from behind me. "Do it now! Command him! You have the power." His urgency was perhaps increased by Fitzroy defeating another one of his creatures. It lay in a pool of its own blood on the floor, and with only one left now, Frankenstein's options of a successful reanimation were limited.

"I'm sorry, but you have to do this," I whispered to the spirit. "Lie on top of your body to re-enter it. I command you," I said, louder for Frankenstein's benefit.

The eyes of the spirit widened and then the faint ghost settled on top of his body. "Oi! Blimey, what's happening? Stop it! Stop it! Let me go, witch!" The dead body rose from the table. Unlike Seth and Gus, he hadn't been restrained. There hadn't been a need to.

His swollen eyes turned on Frankenstein. His bloodied lips parted, revealing broken teeth. He seemed to be speaking, but only a whistling, thin breath came out.

"That's the wrong one!" Frankenstein shouted at me. "He was supposed to go into one of mine! You tricked me!"

The body sat up unsteadily, then slowly swiveled its legs around until they dangled off the table. It moved no further.

"Blast it!" Frankenstein's eyes gleamed as he pressed down again on the blade. A thin line of blood striped Seth's throat.

"No!" I shouted. "Stop, or I will direct him to kill you."

"Kill your own father?" Frankenstein laughed. "No, you won't. You love me, just as I love you, dearest daughter. You're precious to me, remember? My own perfect necromancer child. We'll live together in my—"

The knife struck him in the right eye. He made no sound as blood streamed down his cheek and he crumpled to the floor. Fitzroy strode around the head of the table, leaned down and removed his knife from Frankenstein's eye.

I stumbled all the way back to the door, my hands on my stomach. I stared unblinking at the man who claimed to love me. The man who said I was perfect as I was.

"You killed him," I whispered. "You killed my father."

Fitzroy stood over the body, his arms rigid at his sides, a bloody dagger in each hand. His loose hair fell to his eyes in ragged tangles. He was covered in blood, some of it probably his, and looked very much like an avenging devil. Or angel. I wasn't yet certain which. He peered at me through his hair but said nothing. It didn't really matter. There wasn't anything to say, and I wasn't sure what I even wanted him to say.

All I knew was that I'd had a father and he was gone. Nothing had really changed from the last few days—the last five years.

Except everything had.

"You witch." The reanimated corpse glared at me. His voice had strengthened and his movements were steadier as he stood on the floor. "You are vile," he spat at me. "As vile as that man there. Look at what you've done to me. Look!"

All I could see was the smashed face, the broken teeth and bones, and a man walking toward me. This wasn't a good man, as the one who'd saved me in the holding cell had been. This was a man I'd never met in life but who'd undoubtedly lived on the streets. In my experience, few good men lived on the streets.

Fitzroy circled him and plunged his knife into the base of the man's neck. The corpse stopped and then turned to his attacker. The knife stuck out from between his shoulder blades, but no blood dripped from the wound.

He laughed. It sounded brittle, broken. "You can't kill me, Fool. I'm already dead." He reached back and pulled the blade out.

Then he lunged at Fitzroy.

"Get out of the body!" I shouted as Fitzroy dodged the knife. "Leave this place. Go to your afterlife."

"Why would I want to—" But his words were lost, as if carried on a breeze, although the air in the warehouse was stuffy and still. The spirit emerged and flew away without a glance back at the body now crumpling to the floor.

I folded in on myself, using the door for support against my back. I drew in deep breaths and dragged my hands through my hair. It was over. I was alive.

A hand touched the back of my neck, resting there. I wasn't startled. I knew it was Fitzroy. He said nothing, but remained standing beside me, his bloodied boots in my line of sight. I swallowed a sob but not very successfully. I covered my face with my hands and let a few tears escape, but not too many. They were more from relief, but a little from loss too. I may not have liked Frankenstein but he was my father, and it felt wrong not to mourn him.

Fitzroy's thumb stroked my hairline on the back of my neck. His warmth seeped through my skin, infusing me with a little of his strength. I didn't stand up straight in fear that he might take it as a signal to stop touching me.

After several more heartbeats, he pulled away anyway. "Stay here," he said simply. "I'll be back soon."

I snapped to attention. "Where are you going?"

"There's a horse and cart in one of the neighboring yards. We need to get them home." He nodded at Seth and Gus.

"Oh. Yes, of course." I moved away from the door and he slipped out.

I avoided the bodies and as much blood as possible and checked on Seth first, then Gus. Both breathed normally and none of their injuries appeared too terrible.

Fitzroy brought the horse and cart to the rear door then carried Gus and then Seth to it. I sat beside him on the driver's side and we headed back to Highgate.

"Are you injured?" I asked him.

"A few cuts only. They'll heal quickly."

I splayed my fingers on my knees and breathed deeply. "Where were you hiding?"

"On a ceiling beam."

"But...how did you stay up for so long, and undetected too?"

"The beams were black and I lay on the most shadowed one."

It must have been uncomfortable. "I suppose you had a plan in mind, to save Seth and Gus. Did I ruin it by arriving?"

"Your arrival changed my plan to capture Frankenstein. It worked out well enough in the end. Perhaps better."

'Capture Frankenstein', not save Seth and Gus. Surely he hadn't been going to sacrifice them? I dared not ask. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer.

I did want to know the answer to my other burning question. "What happens to me now?"

"I haven't decided."

"What do you mean you haven't decided? The situation has come to an end. Frankenstein is dead. You no longer need me." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I need to know."

"I've been too busy to think about it since we last spoke."

I stared down at my hands, twining together on my knees. I stilled them.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," he said.

We drove north, through the quiet streets of London, not encountering a soul. Gus and Seth slept behind us. I wondered when the effects of the ether would wear off. I hoped they'd be back to their cheerful selves in the morning. I might need their support in my petition to remain at Lichfield.

"Your throat is bandaged." Fitzroy's voice startled me.

I touched the strip of cloth covering the wound Holloway had inflicted earlier in the night. "There'll be a prisoner waiting for you in the cellar. Anselm Holloway." I couldn't bring myself to call him Father.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "He hurt you?"

"Not as much as Cook hurt him. He's quite the knife thrower."

He lowered the reins, but the horse kept up its plodding pace. "Are you all right?"

"The wound isn't deep and doesn't hurt much now."

"I wasn't referring to the wound."

I blinked at him and almost reached across the gap between us and took his hand. Instead, I clutched my own hands tighter. "My nightmares will be different ones for the next little while." I laughed but he didn't join in. He continued to watch me with that blank face of his. "You must have heard me when we were sleeping in the same room. I've been told that I cry out. I was merely trying to lighten the mood by making a joke about it."

"I noticed." He'd noticed my nightmares or my attempt at a joke? He looked forward again and urged the horse to quicken with a light flick of the reins. "So you got to see the dungeon after all."

I blinked. "Er, yes, and once was enough. I hope never to have to go down there again."

"You won't." He said it with such surety that I wondered if he meant he'd made up his mind that I was leaving, and that's why I'd never see the dungeon again.



COOK EMERGED from the rear of the house when we arrived back at Lichfield. He met us near the stables before we pulled to a stop, and lifted his lantern. His eyes widened when he saw me jump down from the driver's seat. They widened even further when he spotted Gus and Seth in the back. He shook Seth's foot.

"Are they...?"

"Asleep," was all Fitzroy said.

"What'll we do with 'em, sir?"

"They can sleep in the stables tonight. The fresh air will do them good."

Cook nodded. "You know about our prisoner?"

"Charlie told me. Is he alive?"

"Aye, but he needs a doctor."

Fitzroy handed the reins to Cook. "Give Charlie anything she needs from the kitchen." To me, he said, "Will you be having a bath now?"

"Bloody hell, yes." My gutter language elicited neither a smile nor a frown.

"Then I'll see you in the morning." He walked off, but I raced after him.

"What are you going to do with Holloway?" I asked.

"Turn him over to the authorities."

I blew out a measured breath. "Oh. Good."

"You assumed I would kill him?"

"I...may have."

"I only kill those who threaten the queen and her family."

"Just the royal family? Not the government, prime minister, or those you care about?"

"I don't care about anyone. I can't afford to."

I halted but he continued. His stark words spun in my head. How could he not care about anyone? Even I'd cared about Holloway, right up until I learned he wasn't my father. In the gangs, there'd always been a boy or two that I'd tried to look out for, simply because I liked their company and didn't want to see them harmed. And in recent days, I'd come to care for Seth and Gus. And Fitzroy, although he didn't seem to want me to.

Perhaps it made it easier for him to do his job if he didn't care. A job that involved protecting England and the royal family from people like Frankenstein, who could do them harm using supernatural methods.

I frowned at his retreating back until he disappeared into the house. Something Frankenstein had said nibbled at the edges of my memory. I'd

been so distracted with his declaration of fatherly love, that I'd almost forgotten it. But now his words came flooding back. I wracked my brain, until I finally remembered.

'They think anyone who isn't like them is unnatural, wrong. If that were so, then you would be a monster, and you're not...'

A monster. To some people—perhaps many—I was little better than the creatures Frankenstein had created. I'd been of service to Fitzroy and the ministry, but now Frankenstein was dead and I was no longer needed. What if the decision about my future wasn't merely a matter of whether I would stay on at Lichfield?

What if Fitzroy needed to decide whether I—a necromancer, an abomination—should be allowed to live?

## CHAPTER 16



I SLEPT LATE. I wasn't sure how I'd managed to fall asleep at all, with so many thoughts buzzing around my head, but I felt refreshed enough to confront Fitzroy in the morning. If he refused to give me a direct answer about my future, then I would sneak away from the house and never go back. His avoidance of my questions seemed to be his way of not saying something he knew I'd dislike. I would take his silence as a sign this time, instead of finding out his intentions too late.

I opened the door to see both Seth and Gus in the corridor, leaning against the wall opposite.

"'Bout bloody time you woke up, sleepy head." Gus's craggy face creased even more with his grin. "We were thinkin' we'd have to check if you were still alive."

Seth thumped him in the arm then stepped toward me. I was swept up into a hug before I knew what was happening. He let me go, only for Gus to take over. He took longer to release me, and I had to gently shove at him before he stepped back again, a slight flush to his cheeks.

"Who're you calling sleepy head?" I teased him. "You two would have slept through the end of the world last night."

"We had a good reason." Gus grinned again. "Hear we missed all the action."

"You did."

"You saved us," Seth said, his eyes glistening. "We owe you."

"I think Fitzroy exaggerated." I laughed. "I'm not really sure who saved the day, but everyone's alive, and that's all that matters."

"You'll have to tell us the full story," Seth said. "Death told us so little."

"Ain't too chatty this mornin'," Gus said. "Committee's here."

My heart dove. I wouldn't get an opportunity to talk to him alone until after they left, and that could be hours. His decision might also be swayed by them. Or perhaps not. He'd been adamant that he alone made all the ministry's decisions. Whether that would work in my favor or not was yet to be determined.

"Is Holloway still in the cellar?"

Gus shook his head. "Death took him this morning." At my raised brows, he added, "Fitzroy handed him over to the police."

"He'll be charged with attempted murder against Cook," Seth added.

Not me. Was that because I wouldn't be at Lichfield for much longer? Or was there another reason?

I couldn't fathom it all. Not without knowing where my future lay.

"Where is the committee convening?"

"The library."

"It seems I'll have to wait to speak to Fitzroy. Would you mind bringing me up something to eat? And some fresh water for washing too. Thank you." I touched their arms. "I'm so glad you two aren't any worse for your ordeal."

"Wouldn't want my pretty face smashed in, eh?" Gus chuckled as he walked off.

I shivered, reminded of the third man, whose soul I'd coaxed back into his body.

Seth leaned down and pecked my forehead. "I'll bring up fresh bandages for your wound too."

I fingered the cloth at my throat and watched him retreat along the

corridor. His footsteps finally receded enough that I felt safe to follow at a distance in bare feet. I had only minutes before they returned, so I quickly crept to the library door. The hum of male voices on the other side was unmistakable, but I couldn't make out what they said.

Until Lord Gillingham, in his distinctive sneering growl, said, "She's of no use to us now!"

I cracked the door open just enough for the voices to tumble out to me, but I couldn't see anyone. "You can't send her back to the streets," Lady Harcourt said. "It's our moral duty to see that she has a home to go to."

"Why?" Gillingham countered. "She's not our responsibility."

"Gilly," the general chided.

"She's alone in the world." Lady Harcourt's usually serene voice turned crisp. "She needs guidance at this vulnerable age."

"She refused your offer of guidance, Julia," General Eastbrooke said. "I must admit, the chit doesn't seem to know what's good for her."

"We can't force her to live with me."

"But *why* doesn't she want to live with you?"

"I don't know."

"She's not used to living in a grand household," Fitzroy said. "There are rules and a specific way of doing things, whether she comes to you as a maid or a companion. It'll stifle her and she knows it. She's used to doing as she pleases."

"Then it's time she learned some discipline," Gillingham barked.

"Lincoln's right," Lady Harcourt said on a sigh. "More discipline will send her running away."

"I don't see a problem with that. Either she takes you up on your offer or we get rid of her. That's my advice."

"Get rid of her?" Fitzroy asked, tone icy.

"You know what I mean."

"No. I don't."

The leather of a chair creaked. "She's a magnet for madmen, a danger to everyone. Frankenstein may be dead, but there will be others. You know that, Fitzroy. She cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of unscrupulous types who'll use her as a weapon against us."

"Gilly, are you saying what I think you're saying?" the general asked.

"I am," he said darkly. "There's no need to spell it out."

Oh God. He meant to have me killed!

I sat back on my haunches and blinked through the small gap into the library. My heart had stopped beating. My sore throat ached more. I rose to my feet, steadying myself with a hand on the doorframe.

*Run. Get away.*

The round of protests from the other committee members made me pause, then Fitzroy's voice stopped me altogether. His harsh growl cut through the heated discussion.

"You won't touch her. None of you. And I will not do your dirty work on this. Is that clear, Gillingham?"

Someone—Gillingham?—made a strangled sound.

"Is that clear?" Fitzroy snarled.

"Yes, yes!"

The leather creaked again. Footsteps paced across the floor, but not near the door. Waiting for someone to speak was painful.

"Then what is to be done with her?" Lord Marchbank's calm words broke the tension. "Gillingham is right, in that she cannot be allowed to fall into our enemies' hands. For that reason alone, I don't think sending her to Lady Harcourt's house is a good idea. There are too many people coming and going."

"What do you propose, March?" the general asked.

"The village near my Yorkshire estate is far from civilization. She'll be out of harm's way there. I know a kind, elderly couple who will take her in, as long as we pay them a sum each month."

Yorkshire! That was so far away!

"Exile," Lady Harcourt said flatly. "I think that might work."

"Agreed," the general said. "But not Yorkshire. It's too close. And what if she is seen performing her necromancy?"

"She won't *perform* necromancy by accident," Fitzroy said.

"I do think exile is a good idea," Lady Harcourt said. "But perhaps in another country."

Another country! Why not just send me to the wilds of Africa and let the lions feast on me?

Eastbrooke agreed with her. "Leave it to me. Have her pack a few things now, Fitzroy. She can come with me today, and I'll have her on a ship by nightfall."

Today!

"To where?" Fitzroy asked.

"It's best if you don't know. The fewer people who do, the better."

"I disagree."

"An asylum would suffice," Gillingham grumbled. "That's where the freaks and deranged go. Hide them away, that's what I say. Does anyone know of an asylum in another country? Somewhere they don't allow visitors, preferably."

I gasped then shut my mouth. I listened for signs that they'd heard me, but none came. Lady Harcourt was speaking again.

"She doesn't belong in an asylum. General Eastbrooke, I like your idea of exile. I trust you have somewhere in mind?"

"I do. Pleasant little island I came across in my time in the army. It'll do nicely, but that's all I'll tell you about the place. Best if you don't know any more."

"I'll see that she's ready to—"

"No." Fitzroy's tone chilled me to the bone, even as my heart lifted to hear him speak out for me.

"No?" Gillingham sneered. "You dare to refuse the general's suggestion? If you ask me, she's getting off lightly."

"I'm not asking you. I'm not asking any of you for your opinions. Exile is not a good idea in this case."

"What?" Eastbrooke exploded. "Have you gone soft?"

"Let him speak," Marchbank said. "Go on, Fitzroy. What do you propose?"

"You're all correct in that our enemies will try to use her against us," Fitzroy said. "That's why we need to keep her close, not push her away. We can't keep her out of their hands if we can't see her."

"Don't tell me you want to keep her here," the general scoffed.

"I do, for two reasons. To protect her from anyone who would use her, and to study her."

"Study her! You have gone mad."

My sentiments precisely. Study me? As in subject me to tests and interrogation? I wouldn't be a party to that.

"No reason an asylum can't do the same thing," Gillingham said. "They have effective methods for *studying* patients."

"She will remain here," Fitzroy said. "Where I can keep an eye on her."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Lady Harcourt said. "This is a house full of men, for one thing."

Gillingham snorted. "You're worried about the virtue of a vile little whoring necromancer? My dear lady, there is no need for charity in this instance. The girl is an aberration."

"That is quite enough," Lady Harcourt snipped. "She is a human being, and an attractive girl. Living with a group of men is asking for trouble."

"I would hope, Julia, that you know me better than to think I would allow something unfortunate to befall her under my own roof." Fitzroy's frosty words were followed by silence.

The door suddenly opened and I fell backward onto my bottom. Fitzroy

towered above me, blocking my view. I couldn't see anything past him, but more importantly, the others couldn't see past him to me either.

He shut the door, reached down and grabbed my arm. He hauled me up and marched me toward the service area at the back of the house. His grip was hard but not bruising, but his strides were long and I had difficulty keeping up. He didn't slow his pace as we passed Seth and Gus, carrying trays and linens. They stared at us, but didn't ask for an explanation. Perhaps Fitzroy's glower silenced them.

He marched me out to the rear courtyard, but didn't stop until we reached the orchard where he finally let me go. I rubbed my arm and glared at him. He glared back.

"Hear enough?" he snapped.

"I was only there a moment."

"Liar."

I bristled. "Very well. I heard sufficient to know that Lord Gillingham wants me dead, the others think I ought to be exiled, and you want to dissect my brain for science."

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. Surely he couldn't be smiling at me. I had been entirely serious. "Your brain will be safe from me."

"So, you have decided. Will they abide by your decision?"

"Yes. The real question is, will you?"

I blinked at him. "It's not as if I have too many other choices."

"There is always a choice."

"Then I choose to stay."

A few heartbeats passed before he said, "You haven't asked me what you'll do here."

"Very well. What will I do? Aside from be your scientific experiment."

"Be my maid. There'll be a great deal of work. It won't be easy. I require you to dust, mop the floors, do the laundry—"

"I know what a maid does, and I accept the position. I don't expect to live

on your charity. I'll work hard. You won't regret the decision."

"I never have regrets."

"Lucky you."

"Don't agree, yet. Not without knowing everything."

"Everything? Are there rooms I've yet to see that are filled with mud?"

"I meant everything about me."

"I know you'll be difficult to live with." I tilted my chin, daring him to counter me. He didn't. "I know you have terrible moods, and I'll do best to avoid you when you're in a temper."

His eyes narrowed. "I admit that I have a temper, but I think I'm able to keep it in check."

I snorted, earning a glare from him.

"There is something aside from my temper that you need to know." He crossed his arms and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Do you recall that man who accosted you the day I set you down in Whitechapel?"

"He's difficult to forget. What about him?"

"I paid him to scare you."

My mouth flopped open. "Paid him? You mean..." I thought back to that night. The brute had mentioned receiving money, and his spirit had accused Fitzroy of tricking him. Bloody hell...

"I needed you to change your mind and help me find Frankenstein. I needed you to see that you were better off with me than living on the streets."

I slapped his cheek as hard as I could. It stung my hand and left a satisfying red mark on his skin, but not enough to quell the rage boiling within me. "He tried to rape me! What's wrong with you, that you would do such a thing?" I shouted.

He merely watched me from beneath long, thick lashes, but his face didn't change. Nor did he speak.

"You killed that man." I pressed a hand to my churning stomach. "You stabbed him to death, and yet he had done exactly as you asked."

"No, he didn't. He went too far. He was only meant to scare you."

"He succeeded."

"He wasn't supposed to go through with it and hurt you."

"Is that so? You thought you could control such a man?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Perhaps it's your fault that he almost succeeded," I snapped. "Perhaps he misunderstood you. Or were you just slow in reacting and rescuing me? Rescuing," I sneered before he could answer. "My God, Fitzroy." I leaned back against the trunk of an apple tree and drew in deep breaths to steady my frayed nerves. "How *could* you?"

Not only had he paid a monster to *scare* me, he'd then gone on to kill him. If he was capable of such things, what else was he capable of doing?

He didn't speak as I tried to gather my wits. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, with the mask in place, his eyes hooded. He held himself very still and seemed to be waiting for me to do or say something.

"Why're you telling me this?" I finally asked.

"So you can make an informed decision. If you choose to stay, that is the sort of person you'll be living with."

A cold-hearted killer. A man whose moral lines were blurred, and who'd do anything to succeed. The leader of an organization whose members didn't want a necromancer in their midst.

Yet he was also a man who'd never failed to protect me, and who'd offered me a safe home among friends.

"Do you want me to stay?" I asked.

"I want you to make a choice based on the facts. If you decide to stay, there will be a place here for you."

It wasn't the answer I'd wanted, but I knew it was the best he would give. He certainly wasn't trying to make it easy for me to decide, telling me I would be nothing more than a maid, as well as opening my eyes to the sort of person he could be. It was an odd way to induce me to stay, and yet I was

grateful that he'd been upfront and that he left the decision to me.

"I'll give you time to think about it," he said, turning and walking off.

I pushed off from the tree. "I'll have an answer for you tomorrow." I raced after him and he slowed his steps to match mine. "You could have caught my hand," I told him.

His gaze slid sideways to me.

"I know your reflexes are fast. You could have caught my hand before I slapped your cheek." When he still didn't speak, I added, "You'll be gratified to know that it hurt me too."

"Will I?"

"I assume that now I'll be working for you, I can no longer use violence against you when you do or say something ill-conceived."

"You assume correctly."

"Then you'd better not do anything ill-conceived. I have a temper too, and controlling it isn't easy."

"I'll be sure to catch your hand next time."

I didn't tell him I had a good kick on me. We walked back to the house together. The committee had all departed, and the delicious scent of baking bread wafted out of the kitchen. I was starving.

"There you are!" Seth called from the landing. He came down the stairs and grinned at me. "It's safe to come back inside now. The dragons have departed."

"They're not all dragons," I said, smiling.

"True enough. Some are snakes."

I laughed.

Seth's gaze flicked to Fitzroy and his smile died. "Luncheon will be ready soon." He left us and headed toward the kitchen.

Once he was out of earshot, Fitzroy said, "If you remain here, there is only one rule that I require you to abide by."

"Don't steal the silver?"

"No fraternizing."

I arched my brows, then glanced in the direction Seth had gone. I laughed. He was friendly enough but certainly not in a way that tempted me. "I'll cross that off my list of morning chores."

Without waiting for his response, I hurried toward the kitchen. It wasn't until I saw Cook, Seth and Gus chatting quietly near the range that I wondered if Fitzroy was actually referring to me fraternizing with *him*.

I didn't find that notion the least amusing.



THAT AFTERNOON WAS different to all the others I'd spent at Lichfield Towers. It was as if the four men finally relaxed, now that Frankenstein was caught. Well, perhaps Fitzroy wasn't all that relaxed, but the others were. We played some cards after luncheon, while Fitzroy remained in his rooms, but by mid-afternoon, Seth and Gus had grown restless.

"There be some cleaning for you to do," Cook told them. "The scullery's a pig sty."

"We're saving it for Charlie," Seth said with a wink at me.

"I haven't given my decision yet," I said. Fitzroy had briefed them on my future, and told them he'd given me until tomorrow to decide. Seth and Gus had treated me as a regular member of the household ever since. To them, it seemed natural that I would stay.

Perhaps I would, but I wanted to take the full time Fitzroy had given me. I wanted to make a decision with a clear head, after thinking through all the implications. I was, after all, giving up my freedom to become a servant.

"Want to spar?" Gus asked Seth after he lost all of his beans at cards. "I'm feeling restless."

"Sparring will be good. Meet me on the lawn."

The men left to change and I headed out to the lawn to wait. They showed

up ten minutes later, stripped to the waist. I glanced at the house, expecting Fitzroy to storm out any minute and order them to dress when around me, but he didn't. I didn't want the men to change their habits because of me, so I said nothing. I just sat on the grass and watched.

They were good, but Seth clearly had the upper hand. I could well believe he'd been a bare-knuckle fighter when Fitzroy had discovered him from his hard punches and nimble footwork.

When they finished, they sat alongside me to catch their breaths. Cook brought out tea and cake and we ate sitting on the grass. I glanced up at the second floor and caught Fitzroy watching us from his window. He turned away, and I waited for him to join us. He didn't come.

I tried talking to him that night, but he told me he was busy and that unless it was urgent or I'd made my decision, he had no time for idle chatter.

"All work and no play will make you even grumpier," I retorted.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

He shut the door on me and I signed a rude gesture at it before going to my own room. I picked up a book and read into the night. As I drifted off to sleep, I wondered if I would be allowed to remain in the guest suite or be moved to the servants' quarters in the attic if I decided to stay at Lichfield as a maid.

The following day, I needed some time alone, away from the house. I'd not seen Fitzroy all morning or afternoon, so I informed the others that I was heading to the cemetery for a while. I promised to return before dusk.

The day was warm, thanks to the blanket of cloud smothering the city, and my skin felt damp by the time I reached my mother's grave. No, not my mother. I must stop thinking of her in that way.

An ache settled into my chest. She might not be my mama, but she had loved me up until her death, and that's what I would hold onto. I may never find out anything more about my real mother, but at least I'd experienced a mother's love in my childhood. Some children never had that.

I sat beside her grave and leaned back against the headstone, my legs stretched out in front of me. I breathed deeply. The scents were so much earthier and cleaner than in the rest of the city.

I must have dozed at some point, because I awoke with a start to the sounds of digging. The groundskeeper must be preparing a new grave nearby. Odd, because dusk had already settled. I was about to get up and leave when voices stopped me.

"Hurry up!" hissed a man. "We're sitting ducks out here."

"You were the one who wanted to come in daylight," said another, also male, but a little deeper than the first.

"You want to go wandering around the cemetery at night?" The first man snorted.

"What does it matter? If you're worried about ghouls, you should be worried about digging up this blighter. His ghost won't be happy to find his body missing."

I peeked around my mother's headstone and saw two men dressed in dark coats, both with shovels and a mound of dirt piled beside them. It was a fresh grave that I'd seen on my way in, one that hadn't been there on my last visit. What were they doing opening it up again? Whoever they were, I was certain they weren't supposed to be digging there. I couldn't see their faces, but they were both solid men, with brown hair visible beneath their caps.

The digging resumed at a faster pace until the second man spoke again. "We've got to be deep enough now, surely."

The sound of a shovel striking wood made them both laugh. "There. Come on, let's get him out."

I watched as they removed more dirt and then one jumped down into the hole. The other unraveled a blanket and tossed it down. The scraping of wood on wood made me cringe.

"Blimey!" the man down in the grave said. "That bloody stinks."

"What'd you expect? Roses?" He glanced around, and for one sickening

moment, I thought he'd seen me. "Hurry up."

I breathed out a measured breath and remained still. They wouldn't notice me if I didn't move.

The man in the grave pushed something up. It was wrapped in the blanket, and shaped like a human. His companion reached down and hauled it further out then gave a hand to his friend. He then picked up the wrapped body and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Go on ahead," he said. "Signal if you see anyone."

I watched them leave, my heart in my throat. I ought to do something to stop them, but what? They were bigger than me and stronger than me. I silently cursed and wished I knew how to fight. I'd been at the mercy of others so often, and I was tired of it. Tired of being pathetic and weak. Being fast wasn't enough; I needed to learn skills to help me fend off an attacker bigger than myself. I'd seen Fitzroy do it. The brute under the bridge had been bigger than him, and Frankenstein's creatures were stronger.

I waited several minutes before leaving my mother's grave. I kept vigilant for the body snatchers, but didn't see them. In the morning, I'd have to give an account of what I saw to the police, but there was little they could do to stop such a practice, unless they caught them in the act. For now, the robbers were long gone.

I walked swiftly back to the house and was a little breathless when I pounded on Fitzroy's door. He opened it, a frown on his brow.

"Is there an emergency?"

"No. Yes. Not really."

His brows rose and he stepped aside. "Then you'd better come in."

He indicated I should sit on the sofa, but I couldn't. I was too wound up, too eager to say what I wanted to say.

"Stop pacing, Charlie, and tell me what the matter is."

I stopped. "I've made my decision."

"And?"

"And I'll stay, on one condition."

He paused, then said, "No conditions."

"Hear me out. It's not a terrible condition. I think you'll find it a good one, actually."

"Go on."

"I want you to teach me to fight someone bigger than myself."

He leaned against the chair behind him and crossed his arms. "What brought this on?"

"Everything! All my life, I've been vulnerable. My size and gender has seen to that. I've had to be continually vigilant to protect myself. I know how to avoid most situations, and I can run away fast, but running becomes exhausting, and I don't wish to run away from here. I want to stay, and staying means I must learn to defend myself."

A vein in his throat throbbed above his collar. "You won't need to protect yourself," he said quietly. "That's for me to do—if you agree to live here."

"I don't want to rely on you, or anyone else. What if you're not home and there is an attack? It happened with Holloway. Or what if you die and I find myself alone in the world again? In your line of work, all manner of unfortunate things could befall you."

His eyebrow quirked. "You think me incapable of protecting you?"

"I think you're human." I closed the gap between us and clasped his arms. He jerked at my touch, perhaps taken by surprise, but I didn't let go. "Please, Lincoln. Please teach me. You can have Seth and Gus oversee my training."

"No," he growled. "I'll do it."

I squeezed his arms. His muscles tensed. "Is that an agreement?"

He nodded then moved away. "Maids don't address their masters by their first names," he tossed over his shoulder. "You will address me as Mr. Fitzroy or sir only."

I saluted the back of his head. "Is that another rule?"

"Yes."

"So no fraternizing, and no first names. Anything else?"

"I'll let you know as I make them up." His voice sounded amused, as if he were laughing at me, but when he turned to face me, he wasn't smiling. I wasn't sure why I expected him to be. I'd not yet seen him smile, and I wasn't sure what it would take to produce one.

"Good. Then I'll start tomorrow. Sir." I gave him a little curtsy that almost unbalanced me.

"You'll do your chores in the mornings, and in the afternoons I will train you. Is that clear?"

"Yes." I beamed. I couldn't help it. *This* was what I wanted. Being able to fight off an attack was the ultimate form of liberation. I might be about to enter servitude, but I felt freer than I had in years. "Oh, I'll have to take some time off to visit the police. Or perhaps you can do it." I bit my lip and cringed. Speaking to the police went against every grain of my being. What if they recognized me as Fleet-foot Charlie the thief?

"Is this to do with Holloway's attack?"

I shook my head. "I went to the cemetery this afternoon and saw some grave robbers stealing a body."

He stalked across the room to me. "Was the grave fresh?"

"Only a day or two old."

His lips flattened. "This may not be a matter for the police."

"You're just going to let them get away with it? What if they come back?"

"I'm going to investigate myself. There are two motives for removing a body. The first is medical, to provide doctors with cadavers to use in their research. That's harmless."

"I'm sure the body's spirit would disagree, and the family members."

"The second is supernatural."

I gasped. "To create super humans like Frankenstein wanted to do?"

"Among other reasons."

I pulled a face. "I wish I'd followed them now and seen where they'd

gone."

"You did the right thing. Following them would have been dangerous."

"All the more reason to begin my training immediately. Tomorrow afternoon," I said as I headed to the door. "Do not forget. You promised."

The frown he gave me as I shut the door was one that I had no trouble deciphering—resignation. It was the closest thing to an expression he'd ever shown. It would seem he didn't always wear the mask after all. That glimpse into his thoughts made me more determined than ever to see him shed the mask again, perhaps altogether.

Now that I was living at Lichfield, I could plan how to draw out more of his expressions and the emotions that underpinned them. It was fortunate that I had nothing else to do, and nowhere else to go, because I had a feeling it would take some time.

~FIN~

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR ON TIMELINES

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was first published in 1818, over 70 years before the events in **THE LAST NECROMANCER** take place. Since I haven't written Victor Frankenstein as a 90 year-old, this discrepancy may bother some readers. I hope most of you will forgive my use of artistic license in bringing him into 1889, and enjoy the story anyway.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed **THE LAST NECROMANCER**. The sequel, [HER MAJESTY'S NECROMANCER](#) is now available. Follow me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) or [my website](#), and [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive a free short story introducing Lincoln Fitzroy.

# NEFERTITI'S HEART



## THE ARTIFACT HUNTERS BOOK 1

By A. W. Exley

### **Author's Note:**

This book uses British English

***Cara Devon has always suffered curiosity and impetuosity, but tangling with a serial killer might cure that. Permanently.***

1861. Cara has a simple mission in London - finalise her father's estate and sell off his damned collection of priceless artifacts. Her plan goes awry when a killer stalks the nobility, searching for an ancient Egyptian relic rumoured to hold the key to immortality.

Nathaniel Trent, known as the villainous viscount, is relentless in his desire to lay his hands on both Cara and the priceless artifacts. His icy exterior and fiery touch stirs Cara's demons, or could he lay them to rest?

Self-preservation fuels Cara's search for the gem known as Nefertiti's Heart. In a society where everyone wears a mask to hide their true intent, she needs to figure out who to trust, before she sacrifices her own heart and life.

*I may be the only girl in the frat house, but I wouldn't have it any other way.*

## CHAPTER 1



*SUNDAY, June 23*

There was something cathartic about wielding a crowbar. Cara used one end to loosen the tacks, before ripping up the expensive, patterned carpet. She tossed the strip in a growing pile by the wall. She never intended to remove all the carpet, but with the cool metal bar in her hand, she lost herself in the rhythm of tearing away a layer from her father's sanctuary. Pushing a deep auburn spike of hair from her forehead, she took a moment's break from the dusty work. As spring gave way to summer, Cara found the air inside the narrow terrace house stuffy and oppressive, a situation exacerbated by her current labour. She flung open the second-storey window, took a large breath of London air, and coughed. Coal smoke and steam belched from the horseless carriages below and spiralled past her window. The combination of the narrow street and tall buildings forced the vehicle emissions skyward.

She blinked the stinging smog from her eyes and leaned on the casement as she surveyed her work. She had taken up most of the library carpet, the floor underneath finally revealed. Coated in several years of dust and grime, the boards appeared dull in the morning light. Pacing the floor, she knew she was close; a spot to one side called to her. The hairs on the backs of her arms rose as she walked the bare boards. *Ah. There.* She saw wooden planks stained a slightly darker colour. A maid spent hours on her knees there. With

a scrubbing brush and bleach, she had tried to wash away the blood before the new carpets were laid.

There was an old saying: *blood will out*. Cara wondered if this was what her grandmother meant. *You can scrub as hard as you want, but you can never remove the taint, not once it leached into the porous fibres of the wood*. The stain became a permanent reminder of the violence committed.

Cara remembered as she lay on the floor; unaware her blood soaked the carpet and seeped into the floor beneath. Darkness crept over the floor and surrounded her numb body. Oblivion wove tendrils around her; sight the last sense she relinquished. Her vision turned black as her fourteen-year-old self watched her father. He took a book from the shelf and pressed the hidden lever, before the waiting darkness swept her into blessed unconsciousness.

Twenty-one-year-old Cara fixed her line of sight and walked to the bookcase. The book in question was *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade. She snorted at the irony. She and Justine shared a similar experience at a young age, but Cara was grateful she never followed the unfortunate literary heroine's sad path. She removed the book and balanced it in her hand. The leather was a dark red, soft and supple from years of hands caressing its surface. The book was a valuable first edition, as were all the volumes in the library. Her father had expensive tastes and a love for the finer things in life. He valued his material possessions above all else. Even his only child.

She hadn't been back to the house since that day seven years ago. She refused to return until he was dead. Otherwise, she would have been tempted to help him shuffle off his mortal coil.

She placed de Sade's book on the desk and peered in the gap on the shelf. Not seeing anything remarkable, she inserted her hand and pressed the wall beyond in an experimental fashion. The panelling shifted under her fingers. She pressed harder and heard a soft *pop*. Brushing the brown suede ends of her morning coat out of the way, she folded her long legs, resting on the balls of her feet to see what the lever activated.

A part of the bottom shelf jugged up and yielded its opening fully to her slender fingers. The shelf hid a small compartment, otherwise impossible to discern. Cara could have demolished all the shelving with the crowbar and still would have been lucky to stumble upon it. She briefly toyed with doing it anyway, simply for the satisfaction of destroying her father's sanctuary.

*Crowbars are great for working out parental issues.*

She tentatively reached into the cavity. She felt something square and squat. Withdrawing her hand, she held a small, fat notebook. The book bulged with extra inserts and cards, tightly tied with brown string. She had found her father's catalogue of antiquities. The book detailed everything he acquired and, more importantly, contained the vital details of where he secreted them. He had never been a man to share, and ensured he was the only person to touch his treasures. The notebook would tell her which bank vaults she needed to visit, and the required passwords and access codes for the safety deposit boxes.

"I'll take that, thanks," a husky voice announced from behind her.

Cara stood and placed the notebook on a shelf. She cursed herself for being preoccupied and not hearing the intruder. Composing herself, she turned and gave the stranger a deadly smile.

"I don't think so. This is my house, and you're trespassing." Her fingers went to the leather holster at her hip. She popped the metal dome and drew her pistol. Her arm was straight and unwavering as she aimed directly at the thug. "My friend here, Mr Smith, also wants you to leave."

"My master is very interested in that little book. And to make sure I get it, I brought my friend."

A second man stepped out from behind the first, a metal pipe dangling from his fingers.

The two men looked similar. Tall, with the muscular, powerful builds of those who spend a lot of time pounding and lifting heavy things for fun. They both dressed well, with fine pinstripe suits, custom made to wrap around their

broad torsos, and black felt bowlers pulled low on their foreheads.

*Not your average burglars. And judging by those arms, they could bend metal with their bare hands.*

Cara's smile never wavered. "I've got you both covered." She drew another pistol from the holster under her arm. "Mr Smith has his own friend, Wesson."

The first man chuckled and raised his hands in amusement.

"Look, Bruce, the pretty lady has a couple of popguns. What are you going to do with those toys, darling?" He edged closer to Cara as he spoke.

She didn't have time for his conversation; she had other things to do. She moved her line of sight and fired. The man cried out as the bullet penetrated the centre of his palm, rendering his left hand useless. He swore under his breath as he shook a handkerchief from his pocket. He wrapped the square of fabric around the injured hand. He blocked the hole and stemmed the trickle of blood down his arm, but not before droplets landed on the pile of discarded carpet.

*I see the library is up to its old tricks of demanding blood payment.*

Cara adjusted her line of sight. "Get out of my house or the next bullet goes through your forehead and ruins that lovely bowler."

"Well, we have a problem then," he said between gritted teeth as he continued to fumble with the handkerchief. "'Cause if we don't return with that book, our master is going to kill us anyway."

"Who's your master?" Curiosity niggled at Cara; she didn't think anything could be more compelling than a hole in one hand and a pistol aimed at the head.

"Lyons," he grunted. He pulled the ends of the cloth tight with his teeth, sealing the wound.

*Lord Lyons, the villainous viscount.*

"You do have a problem." *Failure* and *no* were two words that didn't exist in Lyons' vocabulary. He also had the emotional range of a slab of granite.

His underlings wouldn't receive any sympathy when they returned empty-handed.

"I'll help you out with your dilemma." While smiling at the first man, she shot the second in the shoulder.

He cried out as the impact spun him sideways; the iron pipe fell from his hand as he dropped to one knee. He keened to himself as blood splashed onto the floor. The library demanded a heavy toll today from so many unwelcome intruders.

"Lyons might be less inclined to kill you now you're both injured, or amused when you tell him a girl did it. And you can give him a message for me."

The two men exchanged looks. The second man groaned and swore in pain, as he bled heavily from the shoulder wound. His fingers scrabbled at his neckerchief, pulling it from around his neck to wedge between jacket and torn flesh.

"Tell your master I may be open to a business proposition, but he won't be taking anything from me." Cara's tone was flat, deadly serious, and bored.

The two men wavered. She cocked the pistols and lined them up with two foreheads, to help the thugs reach a decision.

"We'll deliver your message. Then we'll be back to wipe the smile off your face." The first man promised, helping his friend to his feet.

"I'll be waiting." She kept her pistols aimed on them as they backed out of the library. She stood immobile until she heard the front door slam. Going to the window, she checked they were indeed winding down the road before she relaxed her guard. Watching them weave haphazardly down the street, she fed the pistols an extra bullet each from her belt before returning them to their holsters.

The library timepiece chose to interrupt her thoughts with a single piercing peal. The ornate clock had been commissioned to commemorate Victoria's ascension to the throne almost twenty-five years earlier. Tiny

mechanical people stood around the edge, each waving a Union Jack flag as a royal carriage appeared from the back and revolved around the central clock tower. Cara hated it. It sat on its shelf, haughtily looking down at her. From her recollection, it only ever chimed when she was in trouble or being beaten.

She picked up the fallen crowbar and smashed the dome. Glass shattered, raining over the shelf and the floor. The whirring sound trailed off, and the mechanism fell silent. With a grin, she tossed the crowbar to the ground and stepped over the glass.

Moving to the small liquor cabinet, she poured a finger of whisky from the crystal decanter, retrieved the notebook, and then seated herself at the desk. Cara stared at the notebook, the formidable rival for her father's affections.

She took a swallow of whisky, letting the alcoholic warmth radiate through her. Brown string yielded to a tug from her fingers, and the notebook fell open. Lord Devon spent a lifetime, and a fortune, in pursuit of unusual antiquities from around the world. Cara flipped the pages as details of her father's adventures spilled forth. He was meticulous in recording his travels, where he found items, and how he acquired them. He often utilised illegal or immoral methods, which in part added to his paranoia about protecting his acquisitions. And vitally, the notebook revealed where each priceless treasure lay hidden.

Lord Devon never liked to share, but he occasionally held private viewings of his latest acquisitions. Showing off his latest treasures sparked a corresponding greed and envy within Lord Clayton. Clayton painstakingly collected her father's gambling chits until he held sufficient of them to demand either full payment or the artifacts. He underestimated her father's affection for his collection. He offered up to the cruel lord an item of lesser value. One he had no use for; his fourteen-year-old daughter.

A loud clanging alerted Cara to someone at the front door.

*Don't tell me they're back and ringing the bell?*

She walked to the window and then leaned out. She looked down on the top of a brown bowler hat and the shoulders of a plaid overcoat standing on the top step.

"What do you want?" Cara yelled down.

The bowler hat looked up at the sound from above. Gold frame spectacles regarded her, the light reflecting off them, hiding the eyes behind.

"Miss Devon?" He had a clipped accent, achieved through years at public boarding school.

"Yes. What do you want?" Cara repeated.

A hand reached into a jacket pocket and extracted a silver and gold badge, which he held up. Cara couldn't make out the detail from the second-storey window, but she recognised the shape and colour. The centre of the badge held the letters H, M, and E in blue enamel and entwined around each other.

"I'm Inspector Fraser of Her Majesty's Enforcers, and I require a moment of your time." He tried to keep his tone low, so the neighbours on either side wouldn't hear the exchange.

Cara gave a long-suffering sigh. "I'll be right down."

Darting out the library door, she skipped the stairs. Despite her father's repeated punishment, she rarely exhibited ladylike behaviour; she balanced on the balustrade and slid down the railing. With a practiced move, she jumped to the floor before she hit the ornate end post, and flung open the front door.

"I suppose you'd better come in." Cara ignored the offered hand, and waved the inspector into the foyer, then ushered him into the front room. He doffed his bowler to reveal sandy brown hair, an open, honest face, and grey eyes behind his spectacles.

*Cute, for a copper. Shame he's wearing the coat. I can't check out the rear view.*

Deep red paint covered the walls of the parlour. Cara thought it made the

room look moody, although benign compared to the blood-drenched library upstairs. She stood by the window. She had no intention of sitting and letting him get comfortable. She watched him take up a spot next to the cold fireplace.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" Cara had a pretty good idea, but wanted to see how the policeman broached the subject.

His hands played with the brim of his hat, rotating it through his fingers. "It's about your father's death."

She noticed he didn't offer condolences. She waited for him to continue.

"Your father's death was . . . unusual. We don't see many Egyptian asps in London."

Cara knew a snake inflicted the fatal bite, but the exact reptile had been kept from public knowledge.

"Are you implying some form of foul play?" She assumed someone else shared her hatred for Lord Devon and did her a favour. The snake was an exotic touch; a bullet would have performed equally well.

"We have interviewed the staff. Your father was alone the entire week preceding the unfortunate event. He received no visitors or unusual packages. And, as I am sure you are aware, his bedchamber is on the second floor, with no obvious means of access to his window."

She took that as Enforcer speak for the chances of somebody bowling up, pulling an asp out of a pocket, then lobbing it into Lord Devon's bedroom were considered remarkably slim. And no doubt, they were out of likely suspects.

"And we know where you were." He held eye contact with her.

She wondered how long it would take him to hint they considered her involvement in Lord Devon's untimely demise. "So it occurred to you the long-lost, and estranged daughter might have taken it upon herself to resolve her daddy issues."

He smiled; small dimples at the corner of his mouth made him even cuter.

She couldn't find anything to dislike about the man; from his appearance to his manner, he radiated casual charm. All topped off with good breeding and education, but not so much of either to make him unapproachable or stiff. There was just the tiny fact of him being an Enforcer, and Cara's loathing for the way the force failed her.

"We like to be thorough. But in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the doctor has ruled it accidental."

Cara nearly laughed aloud. "I'm sure he was bitten accidentally. It doesn't answer the underlying question, though, does it?"

She returned his smile.

He held out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "You can see my dilemma."

"Let me guess. You'll be watching me?"

"I see we understand each other, Miss Devon. The case will remain open. You never know when new information may come to light."

He moved out of the parlour to the front door, saving Cara from telling him to leave. He nodded and replaced his bowler.

She closed the front door behind him and then leaned against it. Thoughts churned and jostled around her brain, like hungry fish after chum.

*The sooner I clean up here and sell a few things, the sooner I can get the hell out of London.*

## CHAPTER 2



*MONDAY, June 24*

*Her eyes first attracted him and held him captive. They were a clear pale blue, like the sky of a crisp autumn morning. But night had fallen, and her eyes were wrong. He watched it happen. Her pupils dilated and chased the blue away and the colour didn't return. Now, empty darkness stared back at him.*

*The eyes were the gateway to the soul. And the heart was the seat of the soul within the body.*

*Her gate was barred against him. She was the wrong one. Her heart wouldn't be his.*

*He was learning, the power only just awakening as his memories returned. He accepted he might make a mistake or two before he succeeded. He would certainly pay more attention to the eyes next time.*

*If the eyes were right, her heart would open, and he would claim what rightfully belonged to him.*



ON RETURNING TO LONDON, Cara's first act had been to dismiss the household staff. Her father's brutality resulted in a high staff turnover, and she found the

Devon family home full of strangers. She held neither loyalty nor ill will toward the staff; she simply didn't want them around her. She ensured they were well paid, before watching them trudge from the downstairs entrance. She preferred to know she was the only person making noise and rattling around the Soho address. She couldn't abide the time she spent in the house. She endured its confines only while she searched for the notebook. She knew leaving the house unattended would be an invite to every questionable person in London wanting to track down her father's collection.

Every moment she spent under its roof was like drawing a knife blade down her arm. As she moved from room to room, the sharp tip caused her to draw in her breath as invisible steel carved into her skin. She imagined the phantom tears in her flesh leaving droplets of blood wherever she trod. She and the house hated one another. The terrace house had taken too much of her blood and life essence. If Cara possessed the ability, she would have torn down the building, brick by brick, simply to watch it suffer and diminish, until nothing remained but a pile of dust.

Luckily, she located the notebook, and would tell the family solicitor to advertise for a tenant. She only had to remove what few items she wanted and move to smaller rooms elsewhere, while she finished her business of breaking up and selling off the priceless collection. There was no need to retain staff to attend a non-existent resident. Certainly, the house wouldn't care, though Cara suspected it would sulk at the lack of attention.

She rose early, and dressed casually in beige, buckskin pants and brown, lace-up riding boots. Her corset was her only external extravagance; the rich brocade of swirling green and blue hues had laced ties at the shoulders and a short collar, echoing the tailoring of a man's jacket. The corset laced up the front, so she had no need for a lady's maid to pull the laces tight. The colouring of the corset perfectly offset her cream undershirt. She picked up her gun belt from the bed and slung the brown leather loosely around her hips. The shoulder holster went over the top of her corset, and the pistol

nestled by her armpit. To complete her outfit, she shrugged on a dark brown, morning coat.

Having no staff cluttering up the hallways also made it easier to avoid the social callers; without a butler to answer the door and take cards, a plucky few thrust their cards through the mail slot. Cara duly ignored the multi-coloured pieces of heavy paper, as they piled up on the entranceway floor. She stepped over the confetti on her way out and locked the door behind her. The key disappeared into a small leather pouch hanging off her gun belt.

She stood on the bottom step, taking in the hustle and bustle of the late spring, London street traffic. Soon, a heat shimmer would rise from the cobbled streets. Horses pulling a variety of different carriages worked alongside the new steam-powered coaches, which puffed black smoke as they were fed coal to keep them moving. Cara didn't know which she preferred, the equine droppings on the road or the noxious fumes of their steam replacements. She glimpsed one of the rare, new mechanical horses, powered internally by batteries containing stored electricity. With an exorbitant price tag, they seemed mere playthings for the most wealthy. The metal horses, a beautiful sight to watch, glistened in the morning sunlight, with gleaming copper and brass accents. The horses silently passed by and were soon swallowed up from view by the natural equines and more economical steam counterparts.

Cara jumped off the bottom step, then headed down the road at a cracking pace. With several errands to run, she hoped to avoid the society gossipmongers. They were curious for a glimpse of her face and hungry for details of her scandalous life for the past seven years. Though, she doubted any would recognise her. She bore little resemblance to the fourteen-year-old who last trod these pavements and who had scampered in and out of the London shops.

"Cara!" a voice called. Familiar, it tugged a memory from the back of her brain. Cara halted and turned; her eyes scanned the multitude of people

ebbing and flowing along the pavement.

She spied a pretty brunette, dressed in tonal greens and a hat topped with peacock feathers. The woman waved an arm madly and in a completely unladylike fashion as she pushed her way through the crowd toward Cara.

"Amy?" Cara said, as long dormant memories stirred and rose to the surface of her mind.

"Cara. It *is* you." Amy threw her arms around Cara. "I heard you had returned, but were closed to callers. I've missed you so much."

Cara stiffened; she disliked physical contact. She steeled herself before briefly returning the hug. This woman posed little threat to her safety, so she was able to endure the embrace. Amy had been her childhood friend, a lifetime ago, when she was once innocent.

Amy held her old friend at arm's length and scrutinised her face.

"Oh, Cara, your beautiful hair," she said on taking in the shorn locks. She reached out a gloved hand to touch an auburn tendril curling softly around Cara's ear.

"Don't," Cara said, pulling Amy's hand down. "That's what he said. My hair was the only part of me I could hack off and burn."

Amy swallowed her words, her eyes widened in distress. "I heard about your father. I won't say I'm sorry."

"You don't have to. I'm certainly not." She spat out the words. Glancing around, she noticed their conversation affected the flow of pedestrians. Their position in the middle of the pavement acted as a blockage. The foot traffic behaved as worker ants who found a leaf dropped in the middle of their track; they became frantic at the loss of their regular path.

She took Amy's arm and pulled her to the side, closer to the buildings and out of the way. The ants quickly resumed their original route, and their activity reminded her she had her own share of tasks to complete.

"I have to get going, Amy. It was nice to see you again." She turned, but Amy took her hand, forcing her to stay.

Amy held Cara's gaze.

"We were friends once." There was something imploring in her tone and in her large brown eyes. Amy had never been able to conceal anything on her face, always so expressive and easy to read. Amy's openness was probably why Cara ended up in so much trouble. Amy could never lie to an adult to conceal the mischief her friend sought out.

She shook her head. "We were girlhood friends such a long time ago, Amy, and much has changed."

Amy softened her tone. "I never stopped being your friend. I wrote you hundreds of letters."

Cara frowned. "I never received any letters."

Her friend coloured. "I couldn't get them out of the house. My father wouldn't let me contact you . . . ." she trailed off. Undoubtedly, her father hadn't wanted any taint of scandal to touch his daughter. It didn't matter that Cara bore no fault, and events were inflicted upon her. She was irredeemably sullied, just the same.

"I thought you didn't want to hear from me," Cara said quietly.

Amy retained her friend's hand, heedless of her discomfort at the contact.

Cara longed to snatch it back, but another part of her missed such a simple act. Her view of physical contact distorted, she had forgotten the gentle reassurance the touch of another could convey.

"Come with me for a coffee. You can't think you will escape me so easily after all these years."

She was torn. Amy had been her childhood friend, but there were so many things she would rather forget, and Amy reminded Cara of her previous life. "I don't know, Amy. I'm not here to re-establish my life. I don't intend to stay long in London."

Amy clutched Cara's hand like a lifeline, refusing to let her friend escape. "I lost you seven years ago, Cara. How long are you going to punish yourself for something that was never your fault?"

She fought an internal war, but given the early hour, the coffee houses would be full with the sort of bustle she could survive. The majority of aristocrats wouldn't even be out of bed yet, let alone ready to face the public.

"All right. But I'm starving, so food is a must. I'd kill for a bacon butty."

Amy laughed. "I know just the place."

"What are you doing out and about at this hour anyway?"

A broad smile broke over Amy's face.

"I am engaged and have much to plan." She squealed in excitement.

"Well, we do have some catching up to do," she said, allowing Amy to dictate their course through the morning crowd.

They strolled along the cobbled lanes and streets of Soho for some distance, before turning toward the square. Cara remembered the area; the face of London constantly changed, but a few things remained constant. The Soho Bazaar bustled with activity, noise, and aromas.

The heavenly smell of coffee and baking wafted down the street and resonated with Cara's stomach, which let out an impatient growl. *I need to stock the pantry*, she chided herself.

The two friends skirted the enormous building that housed the bazaar and, instead, headed for a smaller coffee shop on the southern end of Soho Square. Cara paused on the pavement; an urchin nearby held a wedge of papers under his arm and yelled the morning's headlines. A name caught Cara's attention. She stopped and fished in her pocket. Her fingers found a coin, and she tossed the copper to the boy. He caught it with a grin and in return, held out a paper. She flicked her eyes to the headline as she entered the shop behind Amy. She paused to raise her head and take a deep breath of the heady aroma of coffee and yeasty bread. Her stomach growled again, reminding her she hadn't stopped for breakfast.

The coffee shop bustled with noise and bodies, every inch of space occupied. Lower-class people queued at an open window to grab warm bread rolls before heading to work. Middle-class gents sat at round tables, loudly

discussing the day's business or arguing over chess and backgammon moves. A couple of ruddy-cheeked girls in smart blue and white uniforms with matching aprons dodged amongst the patrons. They expertly balanced large trays on their outstretched arms as they delivered orders to those lucky enough to have claimed seats.

Amy spied a waitress cleaning off the table top of a booth and waved her hand to catch the girl's attention. The girl smiled and beckoned to the two friends, flicking her cloth to shoo away a young man who tried to steal the table first. Amy pushed a distracted Cara through the crowd, in the table's direction, and gave their order to the girl.

Cara scanned the newspaper headline: *Jennifer Lovell, beautiful debutante, found murdered.*

Recently stirred memories snagged on the name; Cara knew her. She was of a similar age to her and Amy. Cara would have come out with them, if she hadn't been ruined beyond redemption. She took a seat and flung the paper onto the table while she settled.

Amy shrugged off her jacket and dropped the expensive garment on the bench. Glancing at the paper, she raised a hand to her face in horror.

"Jennifer?" Lowering herself slowly into the seat, she craned her neck to read the article upside-down.

Cara nodded and scanned the rest of the article. "Scant detail. It just says she appears to have been stabbed. The Enforcers are making enquiries to find the person responsible, but appeal to anyone with any pertinent information to come forward."

"I saw her only a few days ago." Amy's brow furrowed. "She had so many suitors. We've all been on tenterhooks waiting to see who she would pick. My money was on the Bulgarian Prince hanging off her, so dashing in his Hussar's uniform."

"I remember her; a pretty little blonde with quite unusual eyes. They were a pale blue. We used to go to the same parties when we were all little." Cara

had forgotten the tea parties and picnics they hosted to occupy their time between lessons. When Cara wasn't climbing trees or stowing away on boats and airships, or generally trying to escape her existence. She lost count of how many times either a governess or the Enforcers had to retrieve her and return her home. Those days seemed sunnier and easier, before dusk fell upon her and dragged her from the light into the dark.

"We debuted together nearly three years ago. All the eligible men chased her. They swirled around her like minnows after bread thrown in the water. The rest of us had to fight over her discards. She certainly had her sights set high. She wanted to snag at least an Earl." Amy dragged the paper around with a fingertip to read the article for herself.

Cara mentally blew dust off long-forgotten faces. "Her family will be devastated. If I remember correctly, she was an only child?"

Amy looked up and muttered thanks to the waitress as she delivered their coffee and food.

Cara fell on her bacon sandwich like a woman who kept forgetting to eat, which she did when preoccupied. She discovered the one downside to dismissing the staff: there was no cook to cater to her appetite. Or scullery maids to restock the pantry, ensuring there was at least bread and cheese to snack on when hunger reminded her to seek sustenance.

"Her parents doted on her. Gave her everything she desired. I think that's why she aimed high. She had a certain lifestyle she wanted to maintain, once married." Amy poured cream into her coffee and spooned in sugar before stirring absentmindedly. "She ruled supreme these last couple of years, and she had every intention of continuing to dominate society after her marriage. She would only consider anyone lower than an earl if they had a suitably enticing fortune with which to support her."

*So much for love; material possessions win every time for some girls.* Cara took a break from her sandwich to lick the bacon fat off her fingers. The advantage of being scorned by society—she didn't care what they thought of

her and she could lick her fingers in public. She added cream and sugar to her coffee before taking a large swig. She savoured the moment as the sweet caffeine fix introduced itself to the bacon-y goodness waiting in her stomach. *Bliss.*

Cara let Amy's conversation wash over her, as she looked around the busy café and wondered if the rooms above were to let. Living in this area was an appealing thought, being lost in the surrounding bustle every morning. The bakery and coffee shop occupied the bottom floor of a three-storey building, and often the top floors housed small apartments. It would solve her problem of feeding herself in the mornings.

*Although, if I start eating bacon and croissants every morning, I'll need longer laces for my corset.*

Amy watched her friend polish off her sandwich and nurse her coffee lovingly between her long fingers. "Where have you been, Cara? No one has heard from you for seven years, apart from the odd rumour of you being in some foreign country or another."

"I've been travelling. Grandmother was rather indulgent, once I recovered. She sent me to Europe, Asia, and America. Wherever I wanted."

Large doe eyes regarded her over the rim of a coffee cup. "So many years of running and keeping everyone at a distance. Aren't you lonely?"

Cara stared into her coffee mug. The steam circled inside, trapped by the porcelain boundary until it rose high enough to escape, freedom coming at the price of evaporation. Watching the wisps of heated air reminded her of travelling. Roaming the globe, Cara felt free, but insubstantial. No one shared her travels.

*Lonely?* She pondered the word. She always thought loneliness implied being empty. Something that was empty could sit, passive, waiting to be filled. She wasn't empty; she contained a vacuum deep inside, spinning constantly with an aching hunger. Reaching out, desperately trying to pull something, anything, into the nothingness. But at the same time, terrified of

what might draw near. The vacuum attracted and repelled at the same time, a never-ceasing vortex of constant activity, never resting. *No wonder I'm hungry all the time.*

"I don't know if I could trust anyone to let them close enough to relieve the pain." Cara raised her eyes to her friend's face. "It's too easy to be hurt."

She met Amy's concerned gaze.

"God never intended us to be alone, Cara, we're just not made that way."

She decided it was time to change the subject. Early morning in a coffee shop didn't seem quite the right place to become too introspective about the life-sucking black hole in her gut. "Tell me about Jennifer. Who was she seeing?"

"There were so many, and all so similar—handsome, titled, wealthy." Amy frowned, remembering something. "She was so secretive about it, keeping us all guessing. She knew how to play the game. But I just can't imagine anyone wanting to harm her, she was so beautiful."

*Perhaps someone got tired of the game and being kept dangling on the line for so long.* Cara didn't voice the thought aloud. "Well, I'm sure the Enforcers will figure it out." She dismissed the headline to move to more interesting matters. "What about your suitor? Who is this mysterious fiancé?"

Amy's eyes sparkled. "You'll have to meet him. Come for lunch with us, next Monday."

Cara raised an eyebrow. Society had turned on her, and the scorn was mutual. Front and centre at feeding time was the last place she wanted to be. Her friend must have read her mind.

"He'll love you as much as I do, and to hang with what everyone else thinks."

"All right." Cara was curious, and hoped any suitor of Amy's would be as genial and easy-going as her friend.

"And for goodness sake, wear a dress, please. Do try to remember you're a lady in London and not an adventurer exploring some remote corner of the

world."

Cara resisted the urge to poke out her tongue. "Technically, that's all I've been for the last seven years." Seeing Amy's distressed look, she thought, perhaps for the sake of old friendships, she should humour her friend. "All right, if it will make you happy, but I'll have to *buy* a dress first."

## CHAPTER 3



*TUESDAY, June 25*

Hamish Fraser took a slurp from his tea and scowled at the liquid.

*Cold. When did that happen?*

He remembered the piping hot brew being set down in front of him a few minutes ago. Or, was it an hour? He glanced up at the large, round clock on his office wall. Its gleaming brass face boasted a riot of gauges and dials. An enthusiastic creator had included temperature, barometric readings, seconds, and, somewhere, lost in the middle—the time, on a twenty-four-hour cycle. He squinted and changed the focus of his eyes after hours of reading fine print, to make sure he looked at the correct dial.

*Oh, two hours.*

He tossed the report he'd devoured onto his desk and sighed. Pulling off his wire-framed spectacles, he rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to relieve the pressure building behind his eyes. He ran a hand through his hair before donning the specs once more and returning to the pile of reports scattered over his desk. For a methodical and meticulous man, his workspace was a disaster. His desktop included a disordered mess of paper, files, and the occasional paper-wrapped sandwich. He refused to tidy up; he always found exactly what he needed, despite the surrounding chaos.

Hamish had been an inspector with Her Majesty's Enforcers for only five

years. He joined the ranks after college and a brief stint of military service. While the discipline and order of military life appealed, it lacked the intellectual stimulation he sought. The role of inspector seemed custom-made for him. He quickly rose through the ranks of the Enforcers with his keen mind and methodical approach. His gentle demeanour put people at ease. Many a criminal had been hanged by his own words, saying too much around the inspector, lulled by his genial manner.

The death of Lord Devon bothered him. Nobody stumbled upon an Egyptian asp in his bedroom unless somebody put it there first. Or they happened to reside in Cairo. It certainly didn't happen while living in London, three floors above street level. The dead ends in the case were frustrating and numerous. Devon's staff knew nothing, or they were too scared to talk, even in the wake of his death. His friends knew nothing, or so they said. And his remaining, and distant, relatives refused to say a word to the Enforcers.

The man had not been liked, with few friends and numerous enemies. The asp was a personal touch, a message and an executioner in one neat, reptilian package. The name *Cara Devon* occupied the number one spot on Fraser's suspect list. Any ill feelings she bore toward her father were entirely understandable. The brutality she suffered was before Fraser's time in the Enforcers, but he heard the rumours. Society liked to gossip about the misfortune of others, and her tale sent a frisson of horror through upper-class parlours. Occasionally, noble daughters were traded in marriage deals, to pay family debts. But never before had a father handed over his fourteen-year-old daughter without a contract to sanction the arrangement. He shuddered that the crime against her went unpunished. His position and wealth protected Lord Clayton, the villain, that and Lord Devon's refusal to press charges. The Enforcers were powerless to see justice done for the young girl in the face of aristocratic opposition and stonewalling.

Fraser pried a large amount of information from a talkative servant. The maid concerned had to scrub Cara Devon's blood from the library floor. No

one ever knew the full extent of the injuries inflicted by Clayton and her father. The staff he interviewed were incredulous she survived the final attack in the library. No one had seen her since that day, when her grandmother took away the unconscious child's body.

The first thing he did was ascertain the whereabouts of Cara Devon at the time of her father's death. She had been as close as Leicester, at her grandmother's estate, where numerous staff attested to her presence. He knew well enough that didn't mean she hadn't committed the act; it only meant she was well enough liked by the staff that they vouched for her. He had no intention of letting sympathy for her history allow her to take the law into her own hands and deliver rough justice. Though he wondered at the symbolism of the asp; if he could discern that, he believed he could crack the case.

Or, if he could rattle Miss Devon's alibi, he could mark the case as closed.

Finding a receipt for an asp in her name would be highly convenient. The only way to get the snake from Egypt to England in a timely fashion, before the cold killed it, was by airship. And no legitimate carrier had any record of *Egyptian Asp x 1 for Miss Cara Devon*. That left only one airship company with complete disregard for the legality of its cargo—Lyons. And that was another dead end. No one in his company or service would ever speak a word against Viscount Lyons. Either loyalty or fear sealed their mouths tighter than a deep-sea diving bell.

With no obvious leads and any trail cold, his superiors wanted him to shelf his enquiries. To top off his week, a titled girl had been murdered. The death of a young and beautiful aristocrat in a brutal manner took precedence over the snakebite death of a shady, and reviled, lord. Death amongst the upper classes always put the Enforcers on edge. Their superiors would start yanking his chain for answers. Fraser got the call to investigate the scene of the girl's death. While only landed gentry, and not a member of the peerage, he was the closest thing the Enforcers had to an aristocrat. His quiet demeanour was far more welcome in the drawing rooms and salons than the

hulking mass of the common-born uniforms.

His door cracked open and admitted the bulk of Connor, his sergeant. He was Fraser's backup on the street, and commanded a unit of street-pounding Enforcers who did the donkey work for the inspectors. Connor served as Fraser's sergeant in the army and followed his lieutenant into civilian life, slipping easily from one role to the other.

He jerked his meaty hand toward the door. "Doc's finished examining the girl and is ready to talk to you."

The girl's mother had been bereft. Fraser had to employ his talent for smooth talking, before she agreed to allow an examination by the Enforcers' doctor. She had been convinced her baby would be served up on an altar of degradation, her cold form pawed over and defiled by licentious uniforms. Fraser reassured Lady Lovell that the doctor would only examine the wound and determine the cause of death of her daughter. And no uniform would gaze upon her child's naked form. Even in death, they afforded full dignity to the victims during their enquiries.

"Good. I could do with a distraction." Fraser tossed the report to the desk and watched it slide under several others. The entire pile was close to slumping off the edge onto the floor.

Connor wrinkled his nose.

"Only you could call a trip to the morgue a distraction." A shiver ran over his frame. "Evil place," he muttered under his breath as he allowed his inspector to precede him out of the office.

"No." Fraser corrected him. "The evil is what is done to those who end up there. Not in the victims themselves or the place where they briefly reside."

The morgue was housed down several flights of stairs, deep under the earth. An imposing metal structure with reinforced bands guarded the entrance. Connor pushed open the heavy door.

A familiar blast of cold air greeted Fraser as they stepped inside. A dual layer of metal lined the walls. A constant hum came from the mechanical

motor in the corner, its job to circulate water continually between the two layers of steel to keep the room cool. The colder temperature was necessary to ward off decay from preying on the deceased residents.

One wall was lined with giant drawers, each able to house one cadaver, or several orphaned body parts. The previous summer, they'd experienced a killer in the grip of a butchering frenzy. He left bits of London's street girls strewn over the roads and stuffed down drains. Fraser laboured over the jigsaw puzzle from Hell, making sure the girls were buried with their correct limbs, or as many as they could match up. Not that his superiors cared; the victims were only lower-class girls. Fraser saw it as a point of honour, to give them the respect in death they never received in life.

Today the central slab was occupied, a pristine white sheet draped over the current subject of attention. The top of the slab angled by a few degrees toward one end, with deep channels chiselled around the edge. Any fluids evacuated during autopsy would be carried away by the channels and down through a connecting drain in the floor.

The Enforcer's resident doctor, known affectionately as Doc, looked up on Fraser's entry and moved to his charge. He picked up the top corners of the sheet and folded it down over the girl's waist, revealing only as much flesh as needed for the conversation.

Connor hung back at the entrance. For an imposing man, he suffered a weak stomach and delicate sensibilities, and he rarely ventured past the entrance to the morgue. Fraser smiled. Connor's reticence in the morgue seemed at odds with his formidable reputation on the battlefield. He was unstoppable in a fight, but hated to be confronted with the harsh reality of death, particularly when it touched the young or beautiful.

"She's a pretty thing," Doc said.

Her long, white-blond hair swirled around her shoulders, as though she were swimming and the locks drifted on the water. Her face was heart-shaped, and would have been beautiful with life and gaiety animating her

eyes. In death, her pupils were fully dilated. It unnerved Fraser, the strange black gaze, obscuring the original eye colour. An angry, raw scar marred her chest. The gash was the only visible sign of any trauma to her young body.

"Cause of death?" Fraser asked.

Doc laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. It would have been a reassuring gesture, if she still breathed.

"A broken heart," he replied.

"What?" He looked up sharply at the doctor, sure he was joking with him.

"She was stabbed in the heart. The weapon ruptured the muscle, made a bit of a mess internally. Poor thing never stood a chance." Doc walked over to the metal bench running the length of the morgue. He selected an item, dangling a cream-coloured evidence card secured by twine.

"I removed this from the wound." Fraser held out his hand and Doc placed the slender brass item in his outstretched palm.

"A key." Fraser stared in wonder at the object. The key was eight inches long, the bow picked out in ornate filigree work. The end was flattened where the killer had used another object to hammer it into the girl's chest. The bit looked similar to any other key used to open gates or large padlocks. Except when Fraser looked closer, he saw the ends chiselled to a point. In profile, the teeth of the key resembled the edge of a tiny axe.

"I'll ask a few locksmiths about it; the design is unusual. Let's hope it twigs a memory for someone."

"He didn't just force the key through her chest, into her heart, either." The doctor continued. "He twisted or turned it, as though he were trying to unlock something."

Fraser frowned. The imagery was potent, though rather literal. The killer made a graphic, and obvious, point. He bounced the key in his hand, thoughts running through his brain already.

"Did your examination reveal anything else?" He left the delicate question hanging, knowing Doc would understand.

The doctor shook his head. "No. He hadn't taken any liberties with her."

Fraser sighed in relief. He didn't have to tell her family that, apart from their child being murdered, she had also been defiled. He nodded his thanks to the doctor.

"I'll let the family know she will be returned to them now." He palmed the key into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"One more thing," Doc called out before Fraser left. "It's about the garment she was wearing. It's made of some form of linen. I have one of my squints analysing it under a microscope to determine its origin."

Armed with the additional information, Fraser headed for the door and slapped Connor on the arm. "Come on, Connor, work to do. We need to sniff out the wronged suitor, and from what I understand of Lady Lovell, we are going to have rather a long list to go through."

Connor jerked awake from his brief nap against the doorjamb. His mind latched onto the last words it heard. "What makes you so sure it's a jilted fellow?"

Fraser thought the answer obvious, but humoured his sergeant. "Who else would want to inflict a broken heart on a beautiful young woman?"



CARA ROSE EARLY and disappeared into the morning bustle of London. She had an appointment with her father's legal advisor to finalise affairs. She hopped a ride on a new public steambus to the City district, then alighted on Fleet Street, by the Inns of Court, and walked along Chancery Lane to Furnival Street. She paused and stared at the small brass plate affixed to the brick wall of a nondescript building. In a discreet font, it stated *Doggart & Allan—Solicitors*.

She took a deep sigh. She didn't want to waste a morning trapped in a stuffy solicitor's office, but there was paperwork to be concluded.

*I guess they are a necessary evil.*

She pushed open the door, then stepped into the small reception area. The décor, subtle and tasteful, matched the sign on the front door. Dark, neutral colours tied in with the rich mahogany and walnut furniture.

Cara approached the main desk. An efficient-looking, older woman with her grey hair pulled back in a severe bun clattered away at a typewriter. She wore small gold-framed spectacles; a chunky chain, in contrast with the delicate rims, ran from the frames and dropped away around her neck.

"Excuse me?" Cara interrupted the secretary.

The secretary's hands paused mid-word, suspended over the keyboard as she swung her head and stared over the top of her glasses at the interloper. Her gaze swept up and down Cara, taking in her unorthodox attire.

*At least I'm wearing a skirt today.* She hated the stiff skirts and crinolines favoured, and expected, by the rest of society. Cara found they hindered movement. If she had to wear a skirt, she chose her fabrics for practicality, in case she had to pick them up and run for it. Today, she paired the fluid green skirt with a front-lacing corset in a soft dove grey. A swallow-tailed jacket, in a complementary shade to the skirt, hugged her form. The coat, cut short at the front to display the corset, dipped into soft tails at the back. She left her hip belt at home, choosing to wear only the discreet shoulder holster. She figured she'd need only one pistol as company to visit the law office. Cara could visualise mental cogs ticking over, but the older woman was too well trained to voice any disdain or curiosity about the visitor in front of her.

"Yes?" One syllable, dripping with superiority.

"I have an appointment to see Mr Doggart. I'm Cara Devon."

A well-plucked eyebrow shot up. "I'll tell him you're here."

She rose from her chair and disappeared behind a panelled door. She emerged a moment later and held the door open.

"This way, please, Miss Devon." She had dialled back the attitude, her tone more solicitous.

Cara stepped into the office beyond. A solicitor of indeterminate age sat behind an enormous desk. He looked anywhere between thirty and sixty, his breed seeming to age prematurely and then hold in stasis until retirement.

"Ah, Miss Devon, please be seated." Doggart waved her to a chair. "Tea, please, Miss Wilson."

He directed his comment to the efficient secretary as she made her discreet exit, then swung his attention back to Cara.

"Terrible business about your father—" He paused, about to offer his condolences, but the icy look on her face froze his words. He coughed and cleared his throat instead.

"Yes. Well. You need to sign some papers, to finalise the terms of your father's will. As his only heir, the house goes to you." He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "As I'm sure you are aware, there wasn't much else, unfortunately."

Cara bit back a snort. He was trying to say, politely, the house was her father's only asset, unaware of the fortune in stolen artifacts hidden around London.

"I am aware of the state of my father's finances." Her father spent every penny he could lay his hands on in the pursuit of antiquities. Lord Devon dying impoverished was no surprise; she merely wondered how he survived so long.

Miss Wilson reappeared and deposited a teapot, cups, and a small plate of biscuits on the corner of the desk. Playing mother, she poured out the tea before handing over the cup.

Cara added milk and waited until the secretary had finished and closed the door before continuing.

"I have one small additional task for you. I need you to find a tenant for the house. I have no intention of living there, and have moved elsewhere."

"Of course," he murmured, taking a sip from his tea. "It's in a desirable location; it won't be difficult to lease. I'll take care of all the details."

Cara nodded; relieved to have matters settled and glad her father hired a discreet and efficient solicitor. "Thank you. If you will oversee the lease and collection of rent, then that probably settles everything."

Doggart walked to the bank of filing cabinets occupying one wall. Drawing on a chain hanging from his waistcoat, he extracted a bunch of keys from his pocket, instead of the expected watch. He selected a key and unlocked a drawer. He rummaged within and pulled out a slim folder.

Returning to the desk, he deposited papers in front of Cara.

"I just need your signature at the bottom of each copy." He handed her a slim, silver pen.

She signed her name in a firm hand, closing one chapter of her life.

"There is only one other thing." He withdrew a slender envelope from the folder and handed it to her. "Your father instructed me to give this to you, in the event of his death."

She looked at it curiously, turning it over in her hand, so flat it couldn't contain more than a single sheet of paper.

*I'm betting it's not a heartfelt apology.*

The back bore the family seal stamped in red wax over the flap.

Doggart held out a paper knife.

Taking the little, ebony-handled implement, she inserted the tip of the blade at one corner of the envelope and slit it open. She passed the knife back, before inserting her fingers to draw out the slip of paper.

Unfolding the heavy paper revealed only a single sentence: *Careful. They are more than they appear.*

Cara frowned. She had no idea what the note meant.

*Who are more than they appear?*

"He said the letter was important." Doggart tented his fingers, regarding Cara over the top. His eyes flashed, but his training was too engrained; he wouldn't ask about the contents of the note.

She chewed her lip in thought, and dropped the note into her satchel,

something to puzzle over another day. Rising, she shook hands with the solicitor and left his offices, glad to be back in the morning sunshine and life of London.

## CHAPTER 4



*THURSDAY, June 27*

Cara's long legs carried her at a brisk pace down the busy road. Today she wore a skirt in the same deep, earthy, green tone as her eyes. The soft wool skirts swirled around her legs like eddies stirred in deep water by an undercurrent. A matching tailored coat hugged her form and dropped over her skirts, stopping at mid-calf. The back of the coat was slashed to allow the train of her skirts to poke through. She wore nothing on her head, her close-cropped hair shining a deep auburn in the morning sunlight.

An elegant carriage approached and slowed its passage. The driver pulled the burnished horses short, to keep pace with Cara. She ignored it for a while, and then wearied of its constant presence. The time had come to confront the intrusive occupant and give him a piece of her mind.

*Another nosy noble, wanting a look at the damaged Cara Devon.*

Her father's funeral the previous week had contained more spectators than mourners. Those gathered exhibited no sorrow, but an abundance of eagerness as they sought to pick her out in the crowd. She attended only to make sure he was dropped in the ground, and kept at a distance. She was surprised anyone recognised her. Apparently, the season so far had been incredibly dull. Her father's untimely death, and her subsequent return to London, promised a temporary relief from the ennui affecting the ton. Now it

seemed they were competing amongst themselves to be the first to corner her.

Having found the notebook, she knew nothing of value remained in the house. The flow of cards through her mail slot was unrelenting. She escaped the constant banging on the front door by taking rooms farther down the road. They could rap on the door and peer in the windows all they liked; she had slipped through their fingers unnoticed. Except for this one.

Whoever her stalker was, he displayed incredible wealth. The horses were the new mechanical equines, so expertly crafted they appeared alive, though armoured. Overlapping, riveted, and articulated plates of metal allowed the movement of their limbs. Even their tails were metallic, streamers of thin copper wire a pure indulgence, serving no purpose whatsoever that Cara could discern. The animals travelled with sublime economy; unlike their breathing counterparts, they didn't snort, toss their heads, or paw impatiently at the ground.

*If you can make a mechanical horse, why wouldn't you make it a unicorn?*

Only when she stopped to give the imposing black carriage her full attention did she notice the man riding up front next to the driver. He gave her a familiar grin as he jumped down to the ground, his hand heavily bandaged. He doffed his bowler to her, before opening the carriage door. A small set of steps automatically dropped down with a soft hiss.

"Our master wants a word with you." He waved his injured hand, inviting her to step inside.

"How's your friend, the one with the shoulder problem?" Cara asked of the other man she shot.

A shadow passed over the henchman's face. "He don't work for Lyons anymore."

Cara shuddered, wondering what that meant.

The blinds, drawn over the carriage windows, concealed the occupant. She stared at the open door, debating her course of action. This development wasn't unexpected; in fact, she invited it. But his timing was annoying. She

had things to do and no desire to be in London any longer than necessary. Picking up the corner of her skirts, she stepped into the carriage and took the bench seat facing backward. The Villainous Viscount, known in society as Nathaniel Trent, Viscount Lyons, occupied the opposite side.

Cara guessed him to be approaching thirty, young for his position in the underworld, but he had spent ten years ruthlessly climbing to the top. He was reputed to be the head underworld figure in London and beyond. His family had no fortune to match their titles, so he set about acquiring one. With a formidable head for business, he established an airship cargo company. It generated a healthy income stream on its own, plus had the added benefit of providing an excellent front for his illegal activities, and extended his reach far beyond London. He simultaneously repulsed and attracted society. He was titled, rich, bad to know, and deadly to cross.

*And he's handsome.*

He was tall, his legs taking up an inordinate amount of room in the plush carriage. Her eyes ran up over highly polished, black boots and muscular thighs. Heading farther north, she took in his powerful torso in a formfitting, grey frock coat. He wore his black hair short and his sideburns narrow and long, emphasising his strong face and square jaw. A shiver ran down her spine as she met his steel-blue gaze.

"You shot my men."

At least he got straight to the point, no inane social niceties. She would never have to worry about inviting him over for tea, crumpets, and chitchat.

"They were trespassing in my house and tried to rob me." She undid the buttons on her jacket. The interior of the carriage constricted around her; the heat from his dominating presence caused the temperature to rise.

"I've killed men for doing less." His tone was well modulated, with no change in inflection nor any hint of anger; they could have been discussing the weather.

"So have I." She held his gaze. She could play this pissing contest all day

if he wanted. He wasn't getting his hands on her father's notebook. Lord Devon sold her into slavery and nearly beat her to death when she escaped. Her father owed her a large debt, and with his notebook secure, she intended to collect a small portion of her due. She was going to enjoy breaking up his valuable collection of antiquities as much as she enjoyed smashing his stupid, precious clock.

"Keep your men out of my house, unless you want to lose them permanently." She shifted on the seat. Her jacket fell open to reveal the shoulder holster with the gun nestled close to her chest. A custom Smith and Wesson with a carved ivory handle, the delicacy of the bone co-ordinated with the cream silk lining of her jacket. She made her threat without blinking. Let him discover she was no blushing English rose. She had thorns.

His eyes flicked to her weapon. His gaze moved from her gun, burned up over her rounded bosom, accented by the line of the corset, then back to her face. His expression remained impossible to read. Not one iota of emotion showed in his eyes. Cara had no way of knowing if he was amused, or annoyed.

"Very well. If you'll come to my house and have dinner with me." He stretched out his legs and casually crossed his booted feet, encroaching further on her space.

Cara tucked her legs closer to the seat and away from him. She fought the urge to fan her face, growing warmer under his scrutiny. "No."

He continued talking in the same regulated tone. "I'll have my carriage collect you at seven o'clock."

"What part of *no* did you not understand?" Cara cocked her head, wondering if he was even listening to her. Perhaps he was actually an automaton, which would explain his rumoured inability to emote. In her brief acquaintance with him, she had yet to see any flicker of emotion cross his handsome face.

"I'll have a carriage waiting every night until you accept."

"You're in for a long wait." She was at enough risk sitting in a carriage with him; she wasn't venturing into the lion's den. There was no guarantee she wouldn't be on the dinner menu.

"I thought you wanted to discuss a business proposition?" The tiniest change of inflection lifted his voice, but she couldn't pinpoint what it meant. He could be curious, have indigestion, or feel a building crescendo of rage, for all she knew.

She'd hate to sit opposite him at the poker table. *You'd lose a fortune before you realise he has no tells.*

She sighed, and leaned her head back against the plush, blue velvet side of the carriage, letting the fabric caress her cheek. She forgot the small detail of the business she wanted to engage him on. She enjoyed saying no to him, repeatedly. Refusal was probably a new experience for him, too, but it was hard to tell. Given her father acquired most of his treasures illegally, she needed the assistance of someone with access to the underworld to sell them.

"Saturday," she reluctantly agreed.

He nodded, satisfied with her answer, then rapped on the roof with his cane, indicating to the driver to stop. The door swung open, propelled by the grinning henchman. Lyons leaned forward and took her hand.

Cara flinched at the searing contact, fighting her urge to recoil at being touched. She'd spent years training herself to endure such social contact, to shake a hand or take an offered arm without fleeing. His presence unnerved her, bringing her deeply hidden fear to the surface.

He arched an eyebrow at her reaction, but his face remained impassive as he let her fingers slip through his grasp.

Unlike his henchman, who gave her a wide smile. "I'll be seeing you Saturday, then, darling. Don't keep us waiting."

The door slammed shut and the carriage pulled away like a wraith. The metal horses wore thick felt pads on their hooves, muffling all noise, the only sound the turn of the wheels.

Cara stood on the pavement, letting London's spirit swirl around her. She stared at her hand, expecting to see a scorch mark where Lyons touched her; he radiated heat. She shook loose the tension and fear from the unexpected encounter, and physical exchange. Once again composed, she picked her moment to re-join the flow of city life.

The carriage discharged her on Queen Victoria Street. She headed deeper into the oldest core of London, the City district. Walking along Threadneedle Street, she glanced up at the three-foot-high names carved into stone lintels. She stopped in front of the institution bearing the name inscribed in the squat notebook. A stone monolith, the building had Greek columns holding up its portico, which sheltered those on its steps who either ran toward, or away from, their money and valuables. The bank had occupied the same spot for over three hundred years. Stepping over the threshold into the cool interior, Cara suspected the bank still employed the original staff.

Wizened men in identical black suits perched on stools at ancient desks. The wood of the table tops had darkened to black with the oil from thousands of hands passing over the surface, sinking deep into the grain. Bent by age and the burden of lending and protecting the fortunes of the nobles, the bankers toiled at ledgers with silver metal styluses, the scratch of pen on paper relieved only by the *clack clack clack* of shiny beads on multiple abacuses, flicking back and forth in rapid calculations.

Tiny steel train tracks hung from the ceiling. A diminutive engine pulled small carriages containing messages, bank notes, and valuables. The cargo whizzed over customers' heads and disappeared through miniature tunnels cut high in the walls, hurtling to places unseen.

The floor of the bank was cream marble, in a beautiful parquet pattern, leading customers toward the service counters. Cara dragged her attention away from the identical drones labouring at their sums, and stepped toward a bank employee. He peered at her from across a large expanse of polished wooden counter. He appeared marginally younger than the drones, and his

suit was dark grey instead of black. The vast counter was designed to stop any budding bank robbers from vaulting over the top, although Cara suspected the small row of deadly spikes, embedded in the worktop, were a far more effective deterrent. At the moment, they lay dormant, their tips level with the surface, but the push of a panic button would send them leaping up to greet any assailant. Protecting the money and valuables of the aristocracy was a serious business.

"Yes?" Pince-nez perched on the end of his nose, making him look like a crane as he stared at her.

Cara wished he would sneeze; she bet they would fly off, if he did.

She cleared her throat. "I've come to access a safety deposit box, please."

"Hmm." He regarded her suspiciously.

She probably looked like a bank robber. She pulled her jacket closed to hide the shoulder holster. *At least I left my hip belt behind, or they'd be pushing all the alarm buttons.*

"One moment, please." He spun on his stool and gestured for another aged bank official to scurry over. A whispered conversation took place, before Official Number Two nodded his head. He disappeared, and reappeared a few seconds later, by means of an exit Cara couldn't discern. It appeared as though he simply stepped through the wall and materialised next to her.

"Vault number and name?" he asked.

"Vault six and I'm Cara Devon."

He inclined his head to indicate the information was stored. "If you'll follow me please, Miss Devon?" he asked in a quiet, lisping voice.

She shortened her stride to follow the employee. He remained silent, except for the clink of metal against metal from the keys dangling from a long chain looped around his waist.

He led her through a large double door, guarded by two enormous men in full body armour and holding small portable cannons with multiple barrels

for volley fire. In silence, she followed him as he descended a set of stairs, leading them far below street level. The corridor split in two, and he took the left path. A short distance along, the passage terminated in a metal door with a number of dials. His fingers flashed as he worked. Following a faint *click*, he swung the central wheel and the imposing door swung open.

The vault was cold and dim, and lit by a scant number of electric torches along one wall. Wrought iron gates lined the opposite wall. Each gate had a different elaborate design and a large number. The employee stopped suddenly, silencing the multitude of keys that jingled with every step he took. Guided by touch more than sight, he unerringly selected the right key to open the door adorned with rampant iron ivy and a brass 6 in the middle, attached to the bars. Beyond, Cara could see the alcove walls lined with small tin rectangles, like tiny coffins lining a crypt.

"Box number?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Five-seven-three-one-four-nine," Cara replied, having memorised the number from her father's journal.

He disappeared into the darkened bay. Cara heard a metallic rummaging noise, and then he reappeared carrying a large safety deposit box. Glancing at the container, she saw the numbers she recited emblazoned on its steel lid. He placed it on a high, central table and pulled the chain of the sole overhead lamp so it descended, casting a brilliant circle of light in the otherwise dreary room.

"You have ten minutes, and then I will return." He bowed slightly and withdrew, leaving her in absolute solitude with whatever secrets the security box contained.

Cara ran a hand over the sturdy metal container. Reaching into the satchel hanging at her side, she withdrew a small brass key. She fitted it into the lock and turned, pausing when she heard one click. The other lock consisted of a four-digit code. She spun the numbers on the dial to the correct sequence and heard a satisfying second click.

She opened the lid and stared at the object within its safe nest. She dropped a black silken handkerchief over the artifact, lifted the object, then placed it in the satchel. With one finger, she dropped the lid and spun the wheel of the number lock. She tapped her fingernails on the table top to alleviate the silence as she waited for the attendant to return and escort her from the eerie dungeon and back into the bright light.

## CHAPTER 5



*FRIDAY, June 28*

*He had the perfect location for his work.*

*Nestled deep in the earth's embrace.*

*The insulation, impenetrable.*

*It had been easy to acquire the tools he needed. Money greased hands and kept mouths shut. Shelving containing books, bottles, and vials, all vital to his research, lined one wall. A metal table dominated the centre of the room, leather restraints attached at key points. The table's legs were deeply secured into the stone below, so the thrashing of its occupant didn't dislodge its position.*



*SATURDAY, June 29*

Cara waited in the gloomy front parlour until she saw the mechanical horses glide to a stop opposite the Devon family home at exactly 7:00 p.m. She kept up the façade of living in the house, so where she slumbered remained a secret. She didn't want anyone to know where she laid her head at night. People were most vulnerable during the shadow hours, and she was dealing with those who would use that knowledge to their own advantage.

She glanced up at the single light in the room and marvelled at the work of Scottish inventor James Bowman Lindsay. His incandescent bulbs were replacing unsafe candles and gas, if people could afford them. She pictured the vertical metal ribbons that adorned the roof, spinning in the wind to generate power stored in batteries in the basement. The generators were a new status symbol; one glance at a tiled roofline advertised who possessed the latest technology. She punched the switch to turn off the light. A tingle of surplus current brushed her fingers and gave her a mild electrical shock.

"Bitch," she growled at the house. There shouldn't be any charge emitted through the switches; the house simply liked to mess with her. She locked the front door, then bounced down the stairs. She wore her buckskin pants, having spent the better part of the day finishing her search of the top floor. Lord Devon secreted keys to his lock boxes in various hidey-holes and she hoped she found every last one. The tenant took full possession the next day and she wouldn't be back.

Reaching the carriage, she cocked her head at the well-dressed henchman holding open the carriage door. "Since we seem destined to keep encountering each other, you'll have to tell me your name."

"Jackson," he growled, but Cara could see the smile in his eyes, he was hamming it up. They seemed to be making amends for their rough introduction.

"How's the wound?"

He held up a freshly bandaged hand.

"How do you think, lovey? It's got a friggin' hole in it." Although, he wiggled his fingers at her just fine.

"Admit it, I'm growing on you, aren't I?" she asked, a smile on her face as she placed a foot on the bottom step to the empty carriage.

"Like a wart, darling," he replied with his accustomed grin, before shutting the carriage door after her.

They took Oxford Street from dusty Soho to immaculate Mayfair. The

carriage turned off before Marble Arch and skirted the edge of Hyde Park, following the wide and picturesque Park Lane. On the corner of Park Lane and Wood's Mews, the carriage slowed, then paused. Cara heard voices and a whirring noise. Peering from the window, she saw a wrought iron gate slide open to admit the conveyance. The house was a two-storey, sprawling mansion. Gated and set well off the road, its resident lived secluded from prying society eyes. Electric lights, hung from simple wrought iron posts, lined the driveway and dispelled the shadows.

Cara hopped from the carriage, and followed the henchman up the wide, stone stairs and over the threshold. She stopped in her tracks to stare at an enormous clock, the centrepiece of the restrained entranceway. The face of the timepiece was two feet wide. Delicate filigree hands and dials showed the date, time, temperature, and phases of the moon. A beautiful, enamelled pair of peacocks sat on either side, tail feathers of rich blues and greens draped over the side of the clock.

Jackson cleared his throat, to attract her attention. Cara drew her gaze from the clock and remembered her purpose. She was shown through to Lyons' study, a room far simpler than she expected. Given the location and exterior of the house, she thought the interior would show similar excess. Instead, his sanctum was quiet, restrained, a reflection of the tight control Lyons held himself under. The walls were painted a rich reddish brown that reminded Cara of paprika. A fire enhanced the welcoming feel to the study, strangely at odds with the reputation of the occupant.

*Or maybe he uses the blaze to heat up the irons for torturing people.*

Piles of neatly stacked papers covered the large desk; a personal aethergraph unit hummed quietly in one corner, a ticker of paper sliding neatly into a nearby tray. Cara wondered if he used it to communicate with his fleet of airships, or their pirate commanders.

He looked up from his desk; his eyes swept over her before returning to the papers in his hand. "I've had the maid draw you a bath. Dinner will be

served at 8:00 p.m."

Cara frowned; she was being sent to have a bath? Though, now he mentioned it, the idea of luxuriating in hot soapy water sounded remarkably appealing after a day wrestling with the hell house.

She cast a look down at her attire. "I didn't bring a change of clothes."

"I've supplied something that should prove adequate." He never looked up from his work; his pen scratched over a page in a large ledger as he tallied a column of numbers.

The dismissal couldn't have been clearer. It never occurred to her to change for dinner. She was sitting down with a renowned criminal figure; she thought her everyday attire appropriate, but apparently, he heeded society conventions closer than she expected.

He continued his sums. "And you'll need to leave your weapons here."

Cara arched an eyebrow; sending her to bathe and change clothes was one thing, taking her pistols quite another. He finally crossed the line.

"I don't think so." She crossed her arms over her chest, one hand tucked around the pistol under her arm. As a defiant gesture, it would work much better if he looked at her.

"No one will harm you here, and they will be returned to you when you leave."

Cara snorted. She had fallen for that line once before. He finally laid down his pen and met her gaze, and she wished he'd go back to his work. His eyes drilled through her. She dropped her hands, placing them behind her back, so she didn't fidget under his scrutiny.

"I give you my word; you are safe under this roof."

A chill shot down her spine. Lyons was a man of his word. If he politely enquired about the state of a man's affairs, it meant the unfortunate individual was marked for death by dinnertime. She sighed and undid the buckle on the belt around her waist, and draped the gun over a nearby chair.

"And the other one." He returned to his work, but apparently knew her

armaments better than she thought.

She paused for a moment, quietly contemplating rebellion. She had a growing urge to do the opposite of whatever he directed, simply to try to make him react. But, she hankered after the promised bath. She pulled her jacket off, dropped it on the chair, then unbuckled the shoulder holster and laid it with its companion piece.

Jackson gave her a grin.

"This way, my lady." He swept his arm and made a mock bow.



NATHANIEL WALKED ACROSS HIS BEDCHAMBER, discarding his jacket as he went. The door to the bathing room was ajar, emitting a sliver of light. Movement beyond arrested his stride. He leaned in closer to the small gap. The blue and green tiled room contained a great copper bath, set in front of a blazing fire.

There came the gentle murmur of conversation between Cara and the maid. As he watched, Cara rose from the bath, her back to him. He thought of Venus emerging from the ocean, as water ran down her limbs and spine, to fall in rivulets into the bath. The water glinted silver over her back, until Nathaniel realised it wasn't water. They were scars. From shoulders to the small of her back, someone had torn her skin so deeply she was permanently marked. Pale scar tissue showed where the lash laid her open. It looked as if she had been raked by a tiger, a single, large paw having drawn its claws through her flesh.

The maid held a large white towel for Cara to step into, and her slender form was obscured from his view as the cotton enveloped her.

He shook his head thoughtfully as he stripped to change for dinner.



CARA SMOOTHED the rich teal velvet over her hips, took a deep breath, and stepped off the last stair. She was waved into the dining room and found Lyons waiting for her. He stood solemnly in front of the fire, his hands clasped behind his back. He had changed to a black evening jacket with a deep blue waistcoat, and tonal cravat.

*He doesn't look villainous, he looks devilish . . . or delicious.*

A long table dominated the room, and would easily have seated thirty or more. Tonight, layered plates and silver cutlery for two occupied one end of the table, Lyons at the head, and a place to his right. He moved to hold the chair out for her, waiting until she sat, before taking his place.

A footman silently appeared and produced a wine bottle from thin air, pouring the pale golden liquid to the midpoint of the heavy crystal glass. Cara took a hesitant sip. She had the uneasy feeling that alcohol and conducting business with Lyons did not make a good combination, unless she wanted to give him the upper hand.

She decided to launch right into it, over the soup. "Lord Lyons, my father —"

"Nathaniel," he interjected.

Cara paused.

"Excuse me?" She knew his name was Nathaniel; she wasn't dense. Why was he telling her?

"Call me Nathaniel. And I don't discuss business over dinner." His tone was low, the words carrying an authority to them. His face might remain a mask, but his tone conveyed volumes.

She blinked. She hadn't expected to be on familiar terms with him. If she couldn't discuss business with him, they would quickly exhaust conversational topics.

*Perhaps we could debate the merits of Colt versus Smith and Wesson? Or the most effective torture methods?*

"Nathaniel." She rolled the syllables off her tongue. They lingered in her

mouth, making the sound of his name as appealing as his appearance.

"Or Nate, to more intimate acquaintances."

Cara choked on her wine and coughed to cover her slip. She was here to discuss business, not her personal price.

The discreet footman whisked away the empty soup bowls, then brought out the fish for his lordship's approval before serving. The salmon smelt divine, Cara took up knife and fork and dove in. Their conversation covered a range of topics. Cara learned the history of the ornate clock in the entranceway, made by an obscure Russian jeweller called Fabergé. They discussed the implications of absorbing India into the British Empire, and the growing unrest in America.

The meal finished and plates cleared away, Nathaniel pushed back his chair.

"Tell me what happened," he asked.

Cara froze; her hand hovered in the air, caught in the act of reaching for the wine glass, while her brain whirled. She wasn't going to entertain him with the lurid details. Was that why he invited her to dinner, for gossip? "I understand the whole of London talked of it for months, and still does at times. There's no need to repeat the story."

He took a sip of his wine, meeting her eyes. "I want to hear it in your words, not those of the gossips. I would know the truth of it, and it won't leave this room."

She was tempted to stand and leave, to tell him to go to hell. But a tiny part of her could sense a release in letting the story free. Her grandmother knew part of it and Cara never spoke of it to anyone else. To whom could she talk? No one in polite society would listen; they preferred their sanitised version of events. Her friend would be crushed to hear the truth. She doubted the man next to her could be shocked, and he didn't care about reputations or the thin veneer of appearances. She wrapped her fingers around the delicate stem of the glass and took a fortifying sip of wine. Then, two more gulps,

before she began to speak.

She started with the easy part. "My father loved two things in life. Collecting antiquities and gambling. Both contributed to his ruin. He hit a losing streak and soon had a trail of chits from one end of London to the other. And Lord Clayton wanted the artifacts."

Nathaniel nodded, this part of Cara's story common knowledge amongst the ton.

"Clayton collected the chits and called in my father's debts, hoping to get his hands on certain pieces of the collection. He didn't know my father very well; he prized his collection highly. He spent all his time, and fortune, to acquire them. He would not be parted from them. So he gave Clayton something of infinitely lesser value. Me."

He leaned back in his chair. "Was he the one who beat you?"

A frown briefly flitted over her face. *How does he know that?*

"My father could hand me over, but he couldn't make me go quietly into slavery. I bit Clayton the first day, deep enough to draw blood. He thought the lash would teach me obedience. He believed, between the beatings and starving me, that I would become compliant." She took a hasty gulp from her wine glass. What happened to her wasn't a memory she wanted to revisit. She still couldn't understand why she was telling him. She stared at her wine glass, as though it were somehow responsible.

*Why am I telling him?* But the words continued to tumble out, needing to be free from the place where she imprisoned them for so long, no longer able to be contained.

"Every day he had his valet hold me down, while he raped me. Until I escaped." She hoped the glossed-over version would satisfy him, her mind still skirted around the finer details.

"How did you get away?" He revealed nothing, neither disgust nor sympathy.

"I tore at my corset until I pulled out the boning. I bound the pieces

together and filed it on the hearth bricks to make a sharp point. I didn't stop until I made a weapon. Then I waited. After a week, he got drunk, and thought I was weak enough to rape me without his valet holding me. He was wrong." She closed her eyes.

She heard him approach in the dark, laughing and cursing her father for handing over his fourteen-year-old daughter instead of the artifacts. He vowed to make Devon regret his decision, by abusing his daughter until the distraught father offered up the treasure in exchange. He crashed through the door, and threw her to the bed, his breath hot and rank on her face. Her fingers reached under the pillow and curled around the bundle of sharpened corset boning while he tore at her clothing. She waited for her moment, waited until he was vulnerable to her attack.

"He put it about he let you go." Nathaniel broke the memory, and Cara opened her eyes.

She laughed. "He did let me go. After I stabbed him as hard as I could in the thigh. I twisted the boning, wrenched it as far as I could, while he screamed for a change. And then I ran."

"Did you return home?"

"I was still naïve enough to believe my father would protect me. I was wrong. He flew into a rage. He thought, since I returned, he would have to hand over part of his collection. He would have beaten me to death if my grandmother hadn't arrived on the doorstep. He left me bleeding and unconscious on the library floor. I vowed I would never be defenceless again." She stared at her empty wine glass, light reflected through the cut crystal turning the room around her into a kaleidoscope.

Nathaniel shook his head. "You were never defenceless. You're a survivor, a fighter. You didn't give up and let events unfold around you. You fashioned a weapon and escaped. Most girls in your situation would still be there, waiting for someone else to charge in and rescue them."

Cara never thought of it that way. Lying down and giving up never

entered her head as an option. She fought, and would have kept on fighting, until either she broke free or he killed her.

Nathaniel pushed his chair back. "Shall we adjourn to the parlour?"

He rose and held his arm out for her. With the offer made, he waited, staying out of her space, letting her decide to go to him, or not.

She stared at his jacket sleeve. Something niggled in the back of her brain, when it hit her. No one in the house touched her. Even the maid had been careful in helping her dress; no one inadvertently made contact.

*Mere coincidence, or an order given by Lyons?*

She tentatively laid her hand on his arm, grazing the fabric with her fingertips. Her heart raced, and she drew a deep breath as they walked through the doors to the next room.

A restful taupe paint covered the parlour walls, the ceilings, and mouldings a deep cream, the furnishings rich browns and earthy tones in luxurious fabrics. The lighting came from several wall sconces, and not overhead chandeliers. The small lights mimicked candles and cast a comforting glow about the room.

Her mind flitted, wondering what game he played, because she was in way over her head and struggled to breathe. She allowed herself to be led to the rich brocade sofa, then Nathaniel continued to the side table. He poured two glasses of brandy and took one to Cara. Returning to the sideboard, he selected a cigar for himself from an open box. She watched as he cut the end and struck a long match on the fireside. The sweet smell soon drifted on the air as he drew on the expensive cigar, tossing the used match into the hearth. He watched her from the opposite side of the room.

Cara looked into her glass, concentrating on swirling the brandy, watching the heavy liquid move within the crystal. It formed slow-moving, amber beads that spun downward. She took a sip, letting the liquor calm her nerves, though it had a lot of work to do.

"You have a business proposition," he said after several quiet moments.

At last, a conversation her brain could engage in without faltering. "I need help finding buyers for my father's artifacts."

An inhale and exhale of dove-grey smoke. "How extensive is the collection?"

She smiled; she was keeping that information to herself. "There are sufficient items that I don't want to flood the market. One or two every six months should provide an adequate income stream."

He drew on the cigar and tilted his head, to blow smoke rings toward the ceiling. He watched their progress. "I'll find you buyers and the best prices, if you'll do something for me."

Cara heard he sometimes traded promises, always making sure the balance swung in his favour. A knot formed in her stomach. What could he expect to gain from her? She had very little of value to trade.

"What do you want in return?" her voice hitched on the words.

He turned his head; his look held hers and never moved away. "I want to touch you."

Cara's eyes widened; her stare flew to the door.

*I knew this was a mistake. He's no better than Clayton.*

"Why?" She stalled for time. Her throat parched as fear built in the pit of her stomach. She would never make it to her guns in the other room before he caught her, not with the long skirts hindering her. Her eyes roved the room, searching for makeshift weapons.

"Consider it an experiment. You've had something taken from you. I want to see if I can give it back."

Her brain tripped over his words, confused. She came here to discuss selling her father's treasures, not to dissect the emotional damage she suffered after a week of being raped and beaten. "No."

"Don't you want to know what it should feel like, to be touched?" After another long draw, he dropped his cigar into an ashtray and crossed the room.

She struggled to understand why he even cared, unless his sole purpose

was to unbalance her, to gain the upper hand in their business dealings. A tiny part of her burned with curiosity. She knew others found being touched pleasurable. Could it really be like that?

"I've already promised no harm will come to you under this roof." He flicked out the tails of his jacket and seated himself next to her on the sofa. He held out his hand, waiting for her acquiescence.

She stared at his long fingers and blunt cut nails, before she placed her hand in his outstretched palm. Burning curiosity waged a private battle with fear and neither emerged the clear winner.

He turned her hand over. His skin was warm. It surprised and fascinated her. He presented such a cold persona she expected his skin to be cool; marble like his demeanour. He stroked the inside of her naked wrist with his thumb.

She inhaled sharply. The simple touch was such an intimate gesture, her brain threatened to shut down, unable to process the responses it received from her nerve endings. He created electricity within her, yet it didn't hurt.

He paused, his thumb over her vein, her pulse raced and thrummed beneath his light touch. He held her gaze, his eyes calm and patient.

Cara took a ragged breath, but remained still, unused to the feelings running up her arm.

He bent his head and placed a kiss where his thumb caressed. Her eyes widened in wonder as he moved up her arm, kissing the delicate skin, his lips whispering against her.

"Have you ever been kissed?" he murmured against the inside of her elbow.

"No." She could hardly breathe the single syllable. Her frantic heart burned all the oxygen in her lungs to keep pounding.

"That's a far greater crime than any I have committed," he whispered. He looked up and leaned fractionally toward her.

Cara instinctively leaned away and came up against the backrest of the

sofa. Panic took control. She feared being trapped and had to stand and move her feet. She paced to the fireside. The long velvet skirts trailed behind and dragged at her steps. She didn't have butterflies in her stomach; she had unicorns. They ran in circles and charged her insides with their horns, gouging her as they rampaged.

He watched her, and let her settle, before he rose and drew near. He had the patience of a child trying to edge close to a feral kitten. He approached from one side. One quiet step at a time, and never placed himself between her and her line of sight of the exit.

They played advance and retreat, until she stood still, shaking with fear, but letting him move close to her.

He placed a single finger under her chin and tilted her head toward him.

She held her breath and closed her eyes tightly, bracing herself, but wanting it over and done with. Her adrenaline rush to fight and defend herself was mere nanoseconds from kicking into action.

His breath touched her first, warm and sweet from the cigar. His lips brushed hers. His tongue licked the seam of her lips, tasting her. She shivered at the sensation running down her body, so foreign to the painful memories, her only other experience of intimacy. She braced herself for something hard and cruel. She never expected him to display tenderness. The relief overwhelmed her. A single tear welled in her eye and rolled down her cheek.

He moved and kissed the tear away, a feather light touch on her cheek. When he returned to cover her lips, she tasted the salt of her tear. She breathed out a sigh. She parted her lips to move against him, curious to experience more, but he pulled away.

"I'll have Jackson see you safely home." She was dismissed, and confused. Fear, curiosity, and something completely new rolled around inside her. Each sensation fought the others for dominance and control of her body. Her eyes searched for any clue in his face. The hard mask he wore belied the gentle way he touched her.

He turned his back, returning to his brandy and cigar as he stared into the fire. If he was playing a game with her, it appeared to be roulette. Her head spun like the wheel; the small ball bounced round and round in her brain as she turned and left.

## CHAPTER 6



*SUNDAY, June 30*

*This one was different from the other. So reserved, holding herself back. He had been patient, earning her trust little by little. Playing didn't come naturally to her, but she learned, enticed by his gentle teasing. She had a quiet, noble countenance, almost regal. It boded well.*

*He chose the gap between the sole two gas streetlights. The small circles of light only deepened the surrounding shadows. He had selected a small lane, its cobbled and neglected surface not wide enough for even a narrow trap. In daylight, only foot traffic or the occasional horse and rider navigated the rutted path. The deserted alley served his purpose well. Quiet. Secluded. Wrapped in darkness.*

*He leaned against a stone wall, waiting.*

*The brisk click of her heels reached his ears before he saw her at the end of the lane. Her skirts rustled with every stride. She pulled her cape around her slim torso, fingers entwined in the rich red velvet as she kept the garment closed against the night chill. She stopped in front of him, breathy in the dark, as though she had run to meet him. Her eyes shone brightly; excitement tinged the air. The faint odour of soap and lavender hit his nostrils. She had bathed, before venturing out in the night to meet him.*

*"Are you ready?" he asked, taking her hands in his and leaning forward*

*to brush her lips in a soft kiss.*

*She hesitated only briefly, her decision already made when she left the safety of her home. "Yes."*

*"Did anyone see you leave?" He tucked her hand under his arm, drawing her closer to him.*

*"No, I crept down the back stairs while all the servants were busy."*

*"Then adventure awaits us." He stroked her hand, about to walk off, but she remained fixed to the spot. He ran his fingers down the side of her face and smiled softly.*

*"We'll have you safely home before you are missed." He allayed her fears. "I promise to return you to your rose garden you love so much."*

*She smiled up at him, the last obstacle overcome. Tightening her fingers around his arm, she allowed herself to be led down the lane, as he whispered of what lay ahead.*



*MONDAY, July 1*

Cara was supposed to be dress shopping in an aristocratic mall, like the Burlington Arcade in Piccadilly. Instead, she jumped on a public steam-carriage to the London Docks. She perched on a high wooden mooring bollard on the edge of the Thames, watching the bustle of activity surrounding the airships. It had been a jump and a scramble to her chosen spot, but the post was wide enough to be comfortable. Earlier, she stopped at the coffee shop below her new apartment, and bought paper-wrapped sandwiches and a pastry. The staff filled her metal thermos with coffee and the picnic was stored in her satchel. She munched on her breakfast as she surveyed the river, peering through the murky water looking for any sign of fish beneath the surface as she tossed crumbs down.

This area of the Thames was dedicated to airships; the more conventional

ships docked farther down. Only a few brave boats circled near the hangars and private jetties, trying to stay away from the incoming airships. Occasionally, one swept in low, like a giant bird of prey, causing the boat to rock madly trying to steer out of the way. Some of the newer model airships could land on the water and glide into their moorings, blurring the line between sky and water as they moved in both realms. Others were tethered to high mooring towers, their bows attached to the structures so their passengers and cargo could be transferred within the metal holding structures. They moved and swayed, giant streamers floating on the air currents.

Cara was an easy hundred feet away from the Lyons hangar and private wharf, watching one of the vessels arrive. It approached the Thames at a sharp angle. It terrorised a fisherman in a small dingy as its keel sliced through the water. The captain dropped her lower and she turned from airship into ship, backwash peeling away as she cruised smoothly toward the jetty. Men rushed to throw ropes as she bobbed against the side of the wharf in a gentle, welcoming kiss.

The captain strode the deck; his arms gestured to the men securing the lines as he issued his commands. Without waiting for the gangplank, he jumped over the railing and onto the wharf. His hand outstretched in greeting to—

*Nathaniel.* Cara's breath caught in her throat, even given the distance between them. She was surprised to see him dressed casually. He had no need of a jacket on the warm spring morning. The white linen shirt hung open at his throat, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, as though he had been interrupted in the middle of working in the hangar. The addition of black knee-high boots made him look similar to his captain.

*If he wore a sword hanging off his hip, I would swear he was a sky-pirate.*

The routes between England and the Orient were notorious for sky-pirate attacks. Rumour had it Lyons employed pirates to command his ships and keep the other marauders at bay. The romantic version said he started as a

sky-pirate and earned his start-up capital by plundering the cargos of European airships. A task sanctioned by Queen Victoria, like a latter-day Elizabeth and Drake.

The two men bowed their heads together, captain and commander. Lyons looked up, directly at Cara sitting on the bollard. He gave a small bow in her direction and she saw him say something to the captain. The thinly disguised pirate turned and stared at Cara, before giving a salute. He passed a comment to Nathaniel and she saw the two men laugh.

They walked toward the hangar, leaving a hive of activity behind them. The vessel had few passengers, who quickly disembarked and dissipated into London. She watched the process of unloading the cargo; an enormous mechanical arm stationed on the wharf side lifted boxes and crates of varying sizes. The arm lowered a chain into the open hold and brought forth the payload. Smaller items were carried by hand, larger crates dropped onto a waiting train gurney, which rumbled up its tracks into the cavernous hangar. One man utilised a metal exoskeleton to give him the strength to carry an enormous crate into the hangar.

Cara wondered how much of the cargo was legal, and how difficult it would be to transport an asp, hidden in one of the smaller boxes. Unless her father had chosen a rather poetic way to commit suicide, somebody had gone to the trouble of acquiring an asp to kill him. Inspector Fraser could puzzle away at its meaning, but her money was on someone her father annoyed on his trip to Egypt. He journeyed to Thebes, and stole a very special artifact. If the previous owner wanted it back, he needed the notebook, another reason to move out of the Devon house. She had no intention of falling victim to an asp amongst her bed sheets and meeting an end similar to Cleopatra's.

What really bothered her was the timing. Her father had travelled to Egypt eight years ago; why wait this long? What triggered the murderous attack now? If the snake charmer wasn't the artifact's previous owner, then it had to be someone who knew of its existence. That left Cara with an

unknown enemy. She shivered at the thought; she didn't know who to trust and there were too many people who would dearly like to lay their hands on Lord Devon's infamous collection.

Packing away the remains of her breakfast, she slung the satchel over her head and leapt down from her perch. *Time to brave the dress shops.*

Cara mentally kicked herself. Her brain rattled since returning to London and encountering Viscount Lyons. She couldn't believe she agreed to lunch with her friend in a favourite haunt of the ton. Sitting in the open while the nobility gossiped and twittered about her behind their fans. Not that she cared what they thought, but it took energy to remain stoic.

She eventually did as Amy requested and went shopping for a dress suitable for the occasion. She hated the crinolines and wide skirts currently in vogue. She followed the Artistic Dress movement, and favoured simplicity and flowing designs. Her mind kept drifting to the deep teal gown she wore when Nathaniel bent his head and tasted her lips. The dress evoked simple elegance in the way the lush velvet conformed to her body.

She arrived on the pavement outside the restaurant in Covent Garden at precisely 2:00 p.m., just as it started to fill with aristocrats venturing out to brave the day. A steady stream of fashionable carriages, both equine and steam powered, discharged nobles hungry for food and the latest gossip.

The dining room radiated light and noise. The walls lined with the palest cream silk, glittering white chandeliers hung low from the ceiling at regular intervals, and even the floors were whitewashed. The simple décor became the perfect backdrop to display the latest expensive fashions draped on the women, the venue large enough to seat hundreds at identically laid-out tables of pure white linen and transparent crystal. Luxurious booths lined the walls, giving privacy to those who could afford it. Surrounded by yellow velvet drapes, they were the only burst of life in the calm colour palette. The chatter of those assembled and the collective clinking of hundreds of teacups nearly drowned out the gentle music of the mechanical quartet occupying the central

raised platform. Their metal limbs played their pre-programmed compositions, oblivious to the disinterest of the diners, the beauty of Mozart and Bach lost on those more interested in the rise of Charles Frederick Worth.

Cara made her way through the elegantly set tables, following the waiter who led her unerringly to Amy. She kept a smile on her face and feigned indifference to the diners she passed.

For the sake of her friend, Cara dressed as expected for her station. She wore a deep blue and brown striped taffeta gown, her bodice cut tight, with large silver buttons running up the left side. The top echoed a military jacket, except for the way it accentuated her slim waist and rounded bosom. She hated fussy clothes; no one could climb a wall in a crinoline, so the skirt was simple. Cut close, it rippled and swirled out behind her in a soft natural bustle and small train. A small brown top hat completed her outfit, perched on her head at an angle, with a tiny half veil and a couple of curling brown feathers as an accent.

Amy gasped on seeing her. "Lovely," she said, as she kissed Cara's cheek. "John is running late, some business meeting in the city. He's a banker, you know. But he'll be here as soon as he can. And it gives us a chance to catch up."

Cara settled opposite her old friend and sipped her coffee quietly as Amy launched into a rambling monologue detailing her life for the last seven years. Cara was required to venture only the occasional comment or monosyllabic noise to keep up Amy's momentum.

Halfway through their coffee and sandwiches, an elegantly dressed man approached their table. He wore grey pinstripe and had dark brown hair, matching eyes, and a dandified moustache with twirled ends. Amy broke into a rapturous smile and grasped his hand affectionately.

"Cara, this is Sir John Burke, my fiancé. John, this is my dear old friend. Cara Devon." Amy did the introductions.

He started to extend his hand, and paused. "Miss Devon?"

"Yes." Cara could smell the smoke as his cogs did overtime in his head. Her gut told her this introduction was about to detour off the rails.

His hand dropped back to his side, contact never made.

"Your father recently died?" He drew the words out, ending on a querying note.

"Yes." She didn't need the mental alarm bells screaming their warning to know the train wreck was imminent.

He narrowed his eyes and swung his attention back to Amy.

"Do you really think Miss Devon is an appropriate friend, my dear?" He took the seat next to Amy and farthest away from Cara.

"What?" Cara and Amy said in unison.

"Well, she is unwed, and . . . not a maid." He made vague hand gestures at Cara, trying to demonstrate his point without actually looking at the object of his contempt.

A flush ran up Amy's neck, matching the deep red of her afternoon gown. "Cara was a child. You'll not hold another man's act of violence against her."

"It's more than that." He coughed delicately into his hand, and twisted the end of his moustache into an even sharper point. "Lord Clayton said she was no maid when he had her."

*What?* Blinded by the light from the oncoming train, Cara didn't step off the track in time. The engine smashed into her, and sent her body hurtling down the rail. With a shaking hand, she tossed her napkin onto the table. She had lost her appetite. The air was stifling in the cool room, burning her lungs as she drew a breath, fuelled by her rising anger. She would not stay and be insulted by ignorant toffs who turned their back on her. None of them lifted a finger to help, choosing instead to gossip about her misfortune. Cara had a small Derringer hidden in her satchel and her fingers jerked over where it lay. She briefly toyed with shooting Sir John in the middle of the salon, and saving her friend from future heartache with such a shallow and vacuous

man.

"It's all right, Amy. I'll go." *Before I'm tempted to spill his blood all over this lovely, pristine tablecloth.*

She stood; John turned in his chair, so his back faced her and refused to rise. Amy flushed a deeper red at the deliberate snub.

Cara caught her breath, but she refused to cry. Conversation around them dropped as curious eyes turned to watch the unfolding humiliation: dinner and a show, centre stage. Mechanical tea trays continued to weave between the tables, unaffected by the imminent drama.

A firm hand took hers and squeezed her fingers.

"I was just coming to fetch you. I assumed you would rather join me." Nathaniel materialised from nowhere and saved her from death by social embarrassment.

There was a hurried scraping of a chair, Amy's fiancé caught in the act of having his back to Viscount Lyons.

"Yes." She stared at her hand in his; instead of her usual anxiety, she was surprised to feel calm, even comforted, by his presence and touch. His unflappable control soothed the shame and anger surging within her. He coolly ignored the other man at the table. His indifference delivered a death sentence to his social inferior, witnessed by a hundred eagle eyes.

"I'll talk to you later, Amy."

Her friend rose and kissed her cheek, an unspoken apology in her distressed eyes, before she rounded on her hapless fiancé.

Nathaniel drew Cara away as the argument rose behind them.

"I'm glad you resisted the urge to shoot him. I think even my influence with the magistrates would struggle to cover up the crime with so many witnesses. No matter how much he deserved it," Nathaniel whispered in her ear as he escorted her to his private table.

"How did you know what I was thinking?" Her anger rose and fell, leaving an empty hole in her gut. She hated such confrontations; they were

exactly why she avoided any place the aristocrats frequented.

"Your trigger finger was twitching. If I'm right, you fired at least three shots into his body while he convulsed on the table." His booth was an expensive and secluded oasis amidst the noise and activity. The velvet, tasselled curtain was partially drawn and left only a small gap for the staff to come and go. They were segregated from the main dining room and as private as possible, when surrounded by a hundred other people.

"What brings you here?" Cara asked as he held out a chair for her to be seated. "Apart from stopping me from committing an act of murder?"

"I'm hunting a bollard bird I spotted this morning." He took his seat opposite her.

Cara was speechless, trying to read his face. "Did you just make a joke?"

His mouth twitched. "You're not the usual type of bird we see perched on the mooring posts. My captain and I agreed you were a definite improvement to the scenery."

"I wanted a quiet spot to do some thinking. I find it restful near the water, even if it is the dirty old Thames."

"What were you thinking about?" He poured coffee for her, before leaning back in his chair. His blue eyes were like the sky today, encompassing everything, observing every tiny detail unfolding under his reach.

"Egypt." She blurted the word without thinking. She saw the way his brows drew together before relaxing again, as though it triggered a memory. Reaching for the cream jug, she busied herself with cream and sugar. Stirring the elegant silver spoon, she created mocha eddies to distract herself from dwelling on what Egypt might mean to Nathaniel.

He took a sip from his cup. "Jackson tells me you didn't return to your Broadwick Street house last night."

"No. I have no desire to live there. I moved last week." Her solicitor advised her that the new tenant took possession on Sunday. *And he is*

welcome to the cantankerous baggage. Cara idly wondered if the house had made its malicious side known to its newest resident yet.

"Where are you residing now?"

A slow smile spread over Cara's face. "I'll keep that information to myself."

There was a glint in his eyes. "I will find out."

He drummed his manicured nails on the table top before catching himself, and picked up his cup instead.

"We shall see, then." She was careful coming and going, never taking the same route. She also had a variety of shops and cafés she could slip through, if she thought anyone was following her.

His drained cup dropped back on its saucer with an undignified rattle. "You're on dangerous ground if you think to tease me."

She resisted the urge to laugh.

"Teasing you is akin to playing Russian roulette: both hobbies have a high chance of ending in a fatality." She closed her eyes and let out a sigh, far more at ease hidden behind the buttery swathe of fabric. *Let the matrons add this encounter to the gossip about me.*

Nathaniel shifted in his chair. "I wanted to ask if you could do me a favour."

She opened her eyes, listening, curious what he might want from her.

"My captain brought me a package today that needs to be delivered."

"Why can't you do it?"

"The lady concerned and I are not on the best of terms. She doesn't want to see me or my men." He ran a fingertip around the rim of his cup.

Cara watched him caress the porcelain and remembered his light touch under her chin before he kissed her. "I'm sure you can conjure up somebody capable of delivering it for you."

"It's of a personal nature. I need to know if my promise to her is fulfilled. I require someone discreet." His hand stilled and dropped back to the linen

tablecloth.

Curiosity overcame her; she wondered if the woman concerned was a former lover. Perhaps she was being paid off for services rendered. "All right."

He put a hand into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a small silver cardholder. He slid a cream card from the deck. Extracting a gilt pen from the same pocket, he wrote something on both sides, before handing the card to Cara. On the back he had written the name Countess de Sal and a Belgravia address, across St James Park from the restaurant. The front of the card bore an entwined V and L in the upper right corner, the bottom inscribed with Lyons Airship Cargo and Enterprises. In the blank space in the middle, he wrote her name in a large ornate hand. Her name on his card was a subtle sign and one that made her frown. She wasn't in his pocket.

Nathaniel held out a small rectangular parcel slightly longer than his hand and about as wide. The nature of the object lay concealed under layers of brown paper and tied with string.

Cara glanced at it and raised an eyebrow. Picking it up, she noted the package wasn't heavy, before tucking it safely in her satchel.

*God, I hope it's not a snake.*

"I'll have my carriage brought around." He gestured to the waiter hovering just beyond the curtain, eager to respond to any request.

"I'll walk. I could do with the fresh air." Cara rose, and Nathaniel fluidly rose in time with her.

"It wasn't a question. It's at least a thirty-minute walk."

"I know." She looked him in the eye. "Don't presume to give me orders. I'm not in your employ."

He took her hand and stroked her palm with his fingers, before kissing the top. With the first breath-stealing smile she had seen from him, he let her leave as she chose.

## CHAPTER 7



CURIOSITY ATE at Cara as she walked the pavement. Her body moved automatically, heading down the Strand and across Green Park to the address on the card. Her brain was free to concentrate on the spinning vortex of questions. Who was the woman? How did Nathaniel know her? What did he promise? And most intriguing, what was in the package?

On reaching Wilton Row, and the correct house, she paused at the bottom of the steps. The façade of the house gave a distinct air of dishevelment. Paint chipped and peeled from the windowsills. Brown grasses grew in the window boxes and tumbled their seed heads over the sides, as though trying to escape. Cara was grateful she was dressed appropriately for calling on a Countess, but wondered what she would find, given the neglected state of the exterior.

She rapped sharply on the knocker and waited. And waited.

An elderly butler opened the door. A long creak emitted from either the door or the butler; they both appeared to be in a similar state of disrepair.

She held the card out to him and he cautiously took it from her. He stared at it, blinked, held it at arm's length, and stared at it again. Cara had the distinct impression he'd misplaced his spectacles.

He showed her into the entrance hall. A thin layer of dust coated the skirting boards; the wood of the stairway balustrade was dull with grime. Despite the bright day outside, gloom ruled inside, even the air chill, like a

mausoleum.

"One moment, please," he said before shuffling away, muttering to himself. He eventually returned and showed Cara into a decadent and decaying parlour. The walls were resplendent in duck shell blue and cream with gold highlights. It would have looked chic and slightly French, if the gold wasn't muted to a brownish yellow by the layer of dust. The silk cushions on the window seat were pale images of their former selves. The sunlight ate holes in the delicate fabric, so their stuffing spilled out of tiny evisceration slashes.

"The Countess will be down shortly." His job completed, he ambled away to whatever dark corner he emerged from, or off to find an oil can.

*Maybe he could find a duster or a maid.*

Cara entertained herself picking up the various objects scattered around the room. There were delicate porcelain figurines, decorative plates, and vases. After the third item she sensed a recurring theme, which involved a lack of clothing, a very special friend (or two) and rather athletic poses. The decorations gave an insight to the potential nature of Nathaniel's relationship with the countess and added fuel to her speculation.

The parlour door swung open and revealed the Countess de Sal.

*Oh, lordy.* Cara bit her tongue. The countess had long, greying locks in complete disarray, circling out from her head in a tousled, hairy halo. Her face had once been attractive, but time had rapidly stolen her beauty away. Her clothing was haphazard, mismatched, and buttoned wrong. Cara figured all was not quite right with the Countess de Sal. One look in her unblinking eyes told her the countess' cogs were seriously overwound.

"You have something for me?" She held out her hand expectantly, her fingernails cracked and torn, as though she had clawed her way out of the grave. Her fingers gestured to be filled, twitching and unfurling around an invisible object.

"Yes." Cara extracted the package and passed it to the countess.

The older woman turned her back, like a child jealously guarding a Christmas present. She pulled the string free, dropping it on the floor. The brown paper was eagerly torn off and discarded. Cara caught a glimpse of a small wooden box with brass corners. The countess ran a hand over the lid before cracking it open and peering within. She threw back her head and gave a deep, throaty laugh.

Cara was bursting to know what lay inside. Instead, she asked Nathaniel's question. "Lord Lyons wishes to know if his promise to you is fulfilled."

The countess spun around; the whites of her eyes showed as she stared not at Cara, but through her, at something in the middle distance. "Oh yes. Whatever else Nate may be, he is certainly a man of his word."

*He did this to torture me. What the heck is in that box?*

Unfortunately, there was no polite way to ask, unless she could get the woman out of the room and snatch a quick look inside. The countess stroked the lid of the box affectionately, as though a kitten lay curled in her hands and she caressed its fur.

She peered at Cara, seeing her for the first time with clear eyes. She cocked her head to one side. "Do you work for Nathaniel?"

"No." She made her tone emphatic, keen to hit that rumour on the head before it gained any momentum.

"Shame. There are matters, as I'm sure you appreciate, a woman cannot put in the hands of either the Enforcers or her family." She started dancing around the room with her box/kitten, singing it a lullaby in French.

Cara eyed up the door.

*Time to leave before the crazy rubs off.*

"I'm afraid I'm not following you." She edged toward the exit.

The countess spun her eyes lucid, in stark contrast to the rest of her appearance. "There are noblewomen who need your help. Women have problems, which can't be made public, but you could solve them, with a little help from Nate. You are one of us, and yet not, at the same time."

Cara laughed. "Why would I care? I'm out in the cold; to society, I am persona non grata."

She stepped close to Cara. "No. You're free." She tapped the end of Cara's nose, as though the action somehow verified her statement. "You just don't know it yet."

"You have the contact with Nathaniel, why don't you do it?" As soon as she said the words, she knew how ridiculous they sounded.

The countess laughed and muttered something in French to her small wooden box. "I prefer not to talk to Nate. He is a reminder of betrayal. And I no longer venture into society, I'm sure you can imagine why." Her hand swept down her body. "I am not long for this world. I have a bet with myself about which gets me first, the pox or the mercury."

Cara didn't know what to say. She heard syphilis killed just as horribly as the mercury supposed to cure it. Something was about to win the bet; the final stages of the disease explained the woman's appearance and erratic behaviour.

"I know a young woman in need. Her name is Isobel, and she has a rather delicate problem. Talk to her, make up your own mind if you will help. Many of the women are trapped in their lavish cages. Unlike you, they do not have the resolve to fight for themselves. You seem rather tailor-made for the role of problem solver." She extracted a card from amongst her ample décolleté and held it out toward Cara.

*This is starting to feel like a bizarre treasure hunt, following clues written on little cards.*

"I'll talk to this Isobel, then. If you will tell me something. What was Nathaniel's promise to you?" Cara took the card between two fingers and tucked it into her satchel without bothering to look at it.

"Long ago, he gave his word to deliver the source of my infection." Her eyes glazed over and peals of laughter bounced off the parlour walls. High-pitched glee echoed around the room, as she danced with the wooden

receptacle.

Cara shuddered, understanding what she cradled to her bosom.

"I'll show myself out." She backed out of the parlour, the twirling countess oblivious to her presence or departure.

She slipped through the front door, stood on the porch, and let out a deep breath.

*Time for some fresh air, and a change of clothes to shake off the crazy.*

Cara headed to her small apartment, taking a circuitous route, which involved a stop at a nearby bookstore. She paced the aisles, running a finger along spines, looking for a title that grabbed her interest to keep her company at night. She saw a familiar figure pace in front of the window. Jackson stalked the pavement outside. She smiled.

*Game on.*

Seeing none of the other customers paid her any attention, she slipped behind the counter and through the door to the back. The startled owner raised his hand to stop her, but Cara flashed him a beguiling smile.

"I'm trying to escape a boorish suitor; he just won't leave me alone. Do you mind terribly?" she said as she disappeared out the back door, and into the alleyway beyond, where she picked up her skirts and hightailed it before Jackson realised she was gone.

Safe in her rooms, she slipped out of the taffeta bodice and skirt, hanging them neatly in her wardrobe. The little hat with the feathers sat on the shelf above its accompanying outfit.

Cara pulled on her usual outfit: trousers, front-lacing, collared corset, her two Smith and Wesson pistols, and a long swallow-tailed jacket over the top. She ran her fingers through her short hair after its confinement under the top hat. She stopped herself from messing it up too much, in case she started to resemble the loony Countess de Sal. She moved the rug in her bedroom. Prying up the loose floorboard, she retrieved the black silk-wrapped object and tucked it in her satchel.

She headed out into the late afternoon in a much better mood. She was surprised to see Jackson open the door to the Mayfair house and wave her toward the ground floor study.

Cara stepped into the entranceway, before turning back. "Did you not find a book you liked today?"

His eyes widened for a moment, before he growled at her. "You're not making my life any easier, you know."

She grinned. "I can be like that. But you could stop following me?"

"Not allowed to do that." He gave her a conspiratorial wink.

Cara wondered why Nathaniel had his men following her. To win the bet that he could find out where she lived, or to get his hands on the artifacts as she retrieved them?

"Since you're in a chatty mood, do you have a first name?" She was curious about her tail, and he seemed to have shrugged off their rough start.

"Yes." He leaned back against the closed door, his bulk blocked her only handy exit, but the restriction didn't worry her. Nathaniel promised no one would harm her under his roof, and she believed him.

"What is it? What's your name?" She nudged for more information. Two other men occupied the wide entrance hall. Tall and broad like Jackson, they looked more like bodyguards than footmen. They eyed her, and moved from their positions against the wall.

"Now why would I tell you?" He waved to the others, sending them back to their corners.

"I thought you had a soft spot for me." She stuck her bottom lip out, feigning a pout for effect.

He gave her his customary wide grin. "Jackson."

Cara smiled. "Seriously? Jackson? Your name is Jackson Jackson?"

He gave her a wink and she laughed. She wrapped the good mood around her, and bounced into Nathaniel's study. Her eyes shone with mischief.

His head shot up at the unexpected, and unusual, intrusion. He arched one

black eyebrow. "You're in a good mood."

"Yes." *And I shouldn't be, standing alone in the lion's den.*

He wasn't only a lord by title, but by deed. He headed an underworld empire of unknown depth. Some said even the Rookeries deferred to him. Everything about him spoke of power, from the strong line of his jaw, to the broadly muscled shoulders under his expensive jacket, and the deference of people around him. He was dangerous, powerful, and utterly intoxicating. Especially to a woman who suffered a lack of impulse control and no respect for the mores of society.

*He promised I'm safe here.*

She flashed an impish grin. "The package is delivered and the countess is satisfied. And amused. And ever so slightly bonkers." She made circles in the air, next to her head. "When I left she was giggling over whatever is in that box."

She burned to ask the background to the story, but didn't fancy her chances of getting it out of him.

Nathaniel nodded in a noncommittal fashion. "Thank you."

"Are you always working?" She stopped in front of his desk, littered with reports, invoices, and accounts. The aethergraph ticked continuously, spitting its coded messages into the tray, where they lay patiently.

"There's always work that requires my attention." He dropped the paper in his hand on top of a growing pile on one side of the desk.

"You need a number two." She wondered if his legitimate or illegitimate business, kept him busy at all hours. She tilted her head, trying to read some of the dispatches upside-down.

"The problem with having an adequate number two is they usually aspire to be a number one. That's how I came to hold my position, and I have no intention of relinquishing it." He brushed the papers aside.

"So, assuming you have any non-work time, what do you do for recreation?"

He arched an eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. "It depends. I often go out at night to seek entertainment."

She shook her head, not satisfied with his answer. "That's a bit vague. With you that could mean anything. It could be stalking a ballroom or a bout of fisticuffs somewhere in Seven Dials."

He threw down his pen and gave her his full attention.

"You could come with me one evening and find out, if you wish." He made it sound like a challenge.

"Only if you promise it's going to be boxing." She changed her stance, dropped her weight, and gave a few experimental jabs at an imaginary opponent.

"You can box?" The corner of his mouth twitched.

She might have surprised him. Having seen him crack a smile at the restaurant, she longed to see another spread over his face.

"Yip." She took a few more jabs, putting the face of Sir John Burke, Amy's indignant fiancé, onto her phantom opponent. She finished him off with a right hook.

"But you don't like being touched." He pointed out the dichotomy in her behaviour.

"I'm used to being hit." She uttered the words before realising how pathetic they sounded aloud, and continued to cover her slip. "My grandmother indulged my desire to learn how to fight. You could make some money betting on me if they have lightweight fighters."

"You'd be bantam weight soaking wet." He raked his eyes over her form, making her skin prickle under his intense scrutiny.

"Apart from telling you I've delivered your package, I also brought you the first piece to sell." She dropped her arms and opened her satchel to withdraw the black silk handkerchief. She unwrapped the treasure, a solid gold cuff, encircled with green gems, five inches wide and covered in deep Gaelic images and runes.

"It belonged to Boudicca. Legend says it gave her good fortune and luck in battle. Unfortunately for her, a servant stole it before her last, and fatal, battle with the Romans." She dangled it from her fingers. "It's solid gold and edged with emeralds."

Nathaniel rounded his desk, perched on the edge, and extended his hand. Cara dropped the heavy piece of jewellery into his palm. He turned it over. Their current queen, Victoria, styled herself as the ancient Briton Queen

"And the provenance?" He examined the heavy item.

"There is a contemporaneous account describing the bracelet and how Boudicca hanged a servant for stealing it. The thing must be lucky, because she hanged the wrong servant. The cuff was passed down through various offshoots of his family, until my father stole it."

"It will fetch you a pretty penny, and whet some appetites for what is to come."

"Good." She needed the money, and the independence it would bring. She hated constantly asking her grandmother for funds, however willingly they were given. "And what's your cut?"

"Ten percent."

Cara gave an indignant snort. He was dreaming if he thought she would simply hand over ten percent of her father's collection.

"Five," she countered.

"Seven. And a favour." His gaze was steady and unflinching.

She knew the sort of favour he would demand. The unicorns pranced in her stomach again, their feet stomping up and down impatiently, but they hadn't started charging in circles yet. The monstrous fear lay in a corner, alert but watching. True to his word, Nathaniel hadn't hurt her, or pushed her beyond her comfort zone. He challenged her gently and showed her a glimpse of the sensations her body missed.

*I want it, she realised. I want him to touch me.*

"All right." She still had her guns. She hooked her fingers into the hip

holster to give them something to do.

He took a step forward. She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent as he leaned close to her. He smelled warm and musky, with a faint tang of citrus. Her brain drifted on a current, wondering if he brought fruit in by airship. His chest was mere millimetres from her, but he held himself apart, not touching her. He bent his head and kissed the base of her ear.

She stiffened for an instant at the unexpected touch, before relaxing into the sensation. "What are you doing?"

His lips caressed her skin; heat flowed over her nerve endings, spreading from her neck upward and downward. Her hair follicles rippled and stood to attention, making her scalp tingle.

"If I'm giving up three percent, I'm going to make it worthwhile." His lips trailed down her neck; his tongue found the hollow at the base of her throat. She gasped as he licked the sensitive spot. She fought the urge to lean into him as a slow beat pulsed through her torso. Her mind wasn't ready to surrender yet; a part of her was constantly braced against the anticipated violence. She arched her neck, giving him better access as he kissed his way from the hollow, upward.

The fear stirred and stretched itself. Stimuli overwhelmed her brain, as the pleasure trying to take over her body registered as a threat. She had to protect herself, and took a step backward. Drawing in a deep breath, she let the fear resettle in its corner.

Nathaniel remained immobile, rooted to the spot. He didn't pursue her, he simply waited.

Under control again, she stepped toward him. The fighter in her needed to push herself, to find her limits. She needed to determine how much she could take before she fell. She tilted her head, reaching up for his lips. He took her bottom lip between his teeth, biting softly before letting go to claim her mouth, sliding his lips over hers. His tongue brushed against her teeth and carried on, finding her tongue and caressing it gently. Warmth radiated out

from her stomach, as though she knocked back a hit of hard liquor. The same languid sensation ran through her limbs. She gave a soft cry, wanting more, but afraid of the pleasure running riot. She battled herself, trying to hold her ground.

Nathaniel stepped away, giving her room to breathe. Burgeoning desire ran through her body for the first time. He met her eyes, sucked in a breath, and turned his attention back to the gold cuff, still clutched in his hand.

"Word is spreading that you intend to sell off your father's collection." He brought the conversation to more conventional business matters.

"It should increase prices, then." The words came out breathier than she meant them; her body still battled her brain.

"It also increases the risk to you."

"I don't follow the connection?" Her brain only now turned from pleasure back to more mundane business matters.

"There will be others trying to lay their hands on Lord Devon's notebook."

"I can look after myself." She unconsciously traced a finger over the handle of her pistol.

"It would be safer here. I can keep it secure for you." He dropped the cuff into a drawer in the large desk.

She was silent. His behaviour made sense, his strategy revealed. She gave a short laugh. "So that's the game you're been playing. This whole gentle courting routine, asking favours, was simply a ruse. You've just softening me up to get your hands on the notebook."

She accused him, and herself. She had been so stupid; his tactic deceived her, and she responded so easily. She was so pathetically grateful to lap up his attention.

"You're wrong. I have my motives, but they are independent of your father's collection." He moved closer to her, but stopped a stride away.

"I'm not that gullible, but thank you for the education. I'll not be so

foolish again." Her nostrils flared, and her voice came out harsh and clipped. Pacing to the door, she reached out for the handle.

"I want you." His tone was so low the words reached her ears only, and wouldn't carry to those listening beyond the door.

She froze, not daring to look over her shoulder. Her heart pounded, she was unsure whether to stay or flee. "You want the notebook. Don't confuse us."

"You."

One quiet syllable that arrested her headlong rush. A tiny part of her wanted to believe him.

"I have no interest in taking the frightened child to my bed, a girl whose only experience is pain and brutality. I want the spirited woman who shot two of my men to garner my attention. The strong woman who stepped into my carriage and didn't back down and who, apparently, knows how to box. She is the creature I want."

She turned to face him, a frown on her face. "If you think I'm going to fall into bed with you, you're mistaken."

His gaze mesmerised her, drank her in, possessed her. She swayed on her feet.

"Today? No. Tomorrow? No. But I'm a patient man and I always get what I want, in the end."

"No." She shook her head, breaking the visual contact. The flow of emotion was too much. Her body wanted to revel in his touch, but her brain couldn't comprehend contact without pain. Her mind screamed a warning and, turning, she ran out the study door and past a startled Jackson.

She hit the stairs at a run. Only the press of pedestrians on the pavement slowed her escape. Dropping to a quick walk, she let her body choose a random direction. She needed to walk. No, she wanted to punch something, hard, but walking would have to do. Her brain smoked with all the information thrown at her.

Part of her believed Nathaniel revealed his true goal, trying to get his hands on the notebook and through it, the collection of artifacts. Part of her desperately wanted to believe he was trying to get his hands on her. The second thought sent a frisson of fear up her spine and over her scalp, tinged with awakening desire.

## CHAPTER 8



*TUESDAY, July 2*

*This one lasted longer. He balanced on the point of hoping she was the one, when night descended over her face, and the darkness snatched her from his grasp.*

*He didn't understand. He thought she was the one, so gentle and regal in her manner, such an echo of the other, millennia ago. He was tender toward her, his hand loving as he drove the key into her heart. Explaining to her that he did it so they could be together, forever. Unlocking her heart was the only way to reclaim their lost immortality. He thought she understood.*

*Why did she not return his love? Why did she deny him? How could they be together if she hid her secrets from him?*

*He was doing something wrong. Perhaps he was still too hurried, his excitement carrying him away. Certainly, she had been excited. Perhaps the anticipation of waiting for the key was too much? With the next one, he would move slower. He had all of time stretching before him. He could afford to exercise more patience.*

*He was learning and adapting; each failure brought new intelligence. Fierce hazel eyes beckoned him. Her eyes swirled to green with her desire for him. His groin tightened at the memory. It had been three thousand years since he buried himself in her.*

*Soon.*

*He already had an idea.*

*He needed chloroform. He would let the next one slumber and awaken her only when he was ready to turn the key. It would be a surprise for her.*

*Yes, the next one would be right. Then, all of eternity would be theirs.*



*WEDNESDAY, July 3*

Fraser frowned at his desk. He left a report there, and now couldn't find it. His desk comprised less than six square feet. How could a report simply vanish in such a small space? It didn't help he had approximately one hundred reports scattered over the desktop; he expected the exact one he wanted to be lying right on top. And it wasn't. He contemplated the pile. He might have to tidy something up, and such an action would disturb the delicate ecological environment he cultivated.

His door flew open. Connor's bulk appeared. His mass bounced over the sprung floor, and the vibrations jostled the desk's contents as he approached. A single file slid to one side, heading in a precarious lurch toward the edge.

"Ah!" Fraser lunged sideways and grabbed the thin cardboard about to make the last leap to escape. Just the one he sought. *No need to tidy up, then, the system still works.*

"Grab your coat, we're up." Connor gestured over his shoulder with his thumb in a *we're outta here* way.

Fraser frowned, briefly distracted from reviewing the report in his hand. "What's happened?"

"Another girl. Same as the first one. Them upstairs are going to yank your chain real hard on this one." The hand gesture changed to one pointing above their heads, indicating the offices above.

Fraser's frown deepened. "The same? What do you mean? Do elaborate."

He tossed the file back into the fray as he retrieved his hat from the rack.

Connor continued talking as he flipped open his notebook. "Lady Abigail Swan, twenty-one years old, brunette, and apparently rather beautiful. Found dead this morning, with a brass shaft of some sort protruding from her chest. Sound familiar at all?"

Fraser swore under his breath. "Well, there goes our jilted suitor theory. Unless by chance, and happy coincidence, did this girl have the same suitors as Lady Lovell?"

Connor consulted his all-knowing notebook as they descended the stairs. "Nope. This girl only had one fellow courting her. We're back to square one, unless you come up with another theory."

They exited the Enforcers Headquarters at street level and climbed into the waiting steam-powered coach, which jostled and belched its way to the Swan home while Fraser ran through the Lovell case in his head. He re-familiarised himself with the previous case before stepping into the next one. The process ensured his brain would have the best opportunity to spot any similarities while the trail on this one was still warm.

Curtains in the surrounding houses twitched and shook on seeing the dark blue Enforcer conveyance in the quiet street. The neighbours would be well aware of the unfolding tragedy, but far too polite to gossip on a street corner. The news would pass lightning fast over back fences between servants, to be delivered upstairs in elegant rooms to eagerly awaiting ladies.

On ascending the stairs, Fraser found a house simultaneously in uproarious confusion and silent mourning. Many of the servants went about their tasks like automatons, devoid of all emotion, gliding about unseeing, deaf, and mute. At the same time, a high-pitched keening came from upstairs.

*The mother, presumably.* Maids flew up and down the stairs, trying to avoid the robotic staff as they responded to every shriek. The swift-moving women dashed amongst the solemn footmen, like wisps of mist ducking and diving amongst shadows.

Fraser flashed his badge at the sombre footman, although with Connor's uniformed and hulking presence behind him, his identity as an Enforcer was plain.

"This way, sir." He directed Fraser and Connor through the house and out to the rear garden.

The screaming diminished as they moved farther from the house. They walked a short distance down a terrace and over the manicured lawn. In the midst of the picturesque rose garden, circling dark blue uniforms indicated where the girl's body lay.

The unfortunate's father paced back and forth, futilely guarding his child. Colonel Swan looked up as Fraser approached. Despite his red-rimmed eyes, his back was ramrod straight. He gave off a military air in both his posture and staunch demeanour.

"Inspector Fraser." He showed his badge by way of introduction. "I am so sorry for this terrible occurrence, Colonel Swan. Rest assured we will do all in our power to find the person responsible."

Colonel Swan nodded his head. "Do what you have to. And do it swiftly." His gaze raked the bobbies treading the gravel of his garden. "But I'll not have any of them touching her."

Fraser sighed. Righteous indignation was a common reaction of the aristocracy, their fear of the regular constabulary poking and prying into their business. Or worse, poking and prying about their children.

"Is there perhaps a maid who might be up to the task of assisting us?" The presence of a familiar female might move the process along. "I can assure you, Colonel Swan, if you let us do our job, your child will be treated with the upmost respect at all times."

Fraser was itching to examine the scene, to catalogue if the details were the same, or different from the previous case. His urge to begin his scene examination lit a fire under his feet. He shifted his weight back and forth, trying to cool his heels.

Another curt nod came from the grieving Colonel. "Her maid, Malloy. She's a country girl; she will want to see her mistress properly tended in death."

He waved over one of the footmen and instructed him to fetch the maid.

Dismissed, Fraser approached where the noble girl's body lay. He stopped a few yards away to survey the scene, to see what the choice of placement of her body told him.

Laid out in a grid of nine identical beds, tall yew hedges trimmed with military precision surrounded the garden. The trees were silent, verdant sentries, standing at attention around the fallen girl. The slain daughter occupied the central square of garden. Her form fitted diagonally within the frame of bright green buxus, encircled by roses on either side. Someone had draped a sheet over her, shielded her from prying eyes and further distressing the household. Bright red rose petals dusted the sheet, nature's blood spilt in sympathy.

*Why here? What is the significance of the rose garden? How did the killer place her here, and no one saw him?*

Fraser was ready. He lifted the corner of the sheet. Her expression was serene, her eyes closed, the muscles in her face relaxed. She looked like she simply fell asleep, except for her unusual pallor. Laid out as though for a viewing, with her hands crossed over her chest, the shaft and bow of a brass key jutted out from her heart. A slice in her gown allowed the ornate bow of the key to protrude.

"Bother," he muttered, dropping the sheet. Dealing with a murderous, jilted suitor was one thing; a deranged killer of noble daughters was an entirely different nightmare. And not just for the toffs who would panic about the safety of their loved ones. Fraser was about to be on the receiving end from his Superintendent if he didn't catch the killer, and promptly.

He frowned, and picked up the corner of the sheet again. Something niggled in his brain. There was an echo, more than just the key. There was

something else about this case that reminded him of poor Jennifer Lovell. His mind compared and discarded the facts of the two cases, looking for the other point of similarity.

He paced over the gravel as his mind flicked from this crime to the previous one. Mentally, he put each scene under a microscope and compared the two images. He knew what bugged him. *The gown looks similar, possibly identical?*

Although it could be pure coincidence; he had no experience with the night attire of noble girls. His experiences were of a lower, and more salacious, level, where nightgowns were not required. For all he knew, the slip of linen could be a standard garment for debutantes.

The crunch of another set of feet on the path arrested his pacing. Turning, he saw a maid in the uniform of black gown and long white apron. With dark brown hair tucked up under her white cotton cap, a trailing tendril was the only indication of her rush to make herself presentable.

"Sir?" She dropped a hesitant curtsy.

"Malloy?" Fraser thought she was holding up well. Her eyes were red, but she had scrubbed the tears from her face before venturing out to the garden.

"Yes, sir." The tendril bobbed back and forth, as she nodded.

He gestured for her to come closer. "I need your assistance with your mistress. I realise you must be terribly upset, so I will keep this short." He lifted the corner of the sheet. "The nightgown your mistress is wearing, I need to know how long she has owned it, and if possible, where the garment was purchased. It may be important."

He dropped the sheet once the maid took a measured look at the garment in question.

The maid shook her head before raising wet brown eyes to his. "It's not her gown, sir. I've never seen it before, and I know all her under things."

"Oh?" *Not one clue, but two. The gown is supplied by the killer.* He jotted down a note to ask Lady Lovell's maid if the gown was a normal part of

Jennifer's attire. *It may be a clue as important as the key.*

A uniformed bobby approached with a small metal bed on wheels, and coughed to attract Fraser's attention. It was time to remove the body. Doc would be waiting to tend her in the morgue.

"Malloy, would you mind doing one last thing for Lady Swan? Could you assist moving her body? We want to ensure the correct level of propriety is maintained."

"Of course, sir."

He left the maid and the uniforms to lift the dead girl gently onto the gurney and to wrap her in a sheet, safe from prying eyes watching from behind curtains.

Fraser had matters to discuss with her father. A silent footman showed him through to the ground floor library. Colonel Swan stood at the window, staring out at the street, a brandy in his hand at ten o'clock in the morning. The drink didn't look like his first one of the day, not that Fraser could blame him under the circumstances. He cleared his throat to attract the older man's attention.

"If I might have a moment of your time, Colonel Swan?" Fraser stepped farther into the room, waiting for a nod before continuing. "Malloy is seeing to her mistress, and I can assure you our doctor will accord her full dignity. But I need to ask about your daughter's last few days, and did she have a particular suitor?"

Colonel Swan tossed back the last of his drink. "There was only the one fellow courting her, polite young man, Bartholomew Clark. They live just along the street. His father's a good sort; we served together. When she went missing three nights ago, we assumed they had run off together. I stormed over there, only to find him more confused than me."

Fraser noted the suitor's details in his notebook, while Colonel Swan dropped his empty glass onto the sideboard.

"We were trying to keep it quiet. Clark said she had been cool on him the

last week or so. Since Abigail wasn't with Clark, her mother and I assumed she met some new beau, who turned her head. I sent out discreet enquiries; we just wanted to bring her home before word spread of her foolishness. That sort of behaviour ruins a girl's prospects, you know."

"Who was he, the other fellow?" Fraser had an itch running down his spine, the one that told him he was onto something, but he was going to have to dig hard to uncover the lead.

Colonel Swan rubbed his forehead. "That's the thing. We don't know. Even Malloy doesn't know any details." He swung to face Fraser. "Did he kill her? This new chap?"

Fraser kept his face impassive and his words non-committal. With two dead girls under similar circumstances, his gut told him a peer hunted amongst the daughters of the aristocracy.

## CHAPTER 9



*THURSDAY, July 4*

Cara spread papers over a desk in the public library as she pored over her father's notebook. Deciphering his coded entries was laborious work. He had codes and red herring codes, and she didn't know if she used the right one until half way through any passage. She thought selling off the artifacts would be a quick and easy job, and she'd soon be on an airship somewhere else.

*Anywhere else*, she sighed.

Her father's paranoia showed in his meticulous notes. It took days to figure out where just one artifact resided, let alone the entire collection. She couldn't fathom why he took such extreme precautions, but then, she couldn't understand most of what her father did.

Her brain finally called a halt to the morning's work and chased her outside in search of coffee. She headed down the main steps, toward St James Square, as a voice hailed her.

"Miss Devon?" a clipped accent called. She recognised the voice and turned to find two official-looking individuals at the bottom of the stairs. The voice belonged to a man in a plaid overcoat with friendly grey eyes peering out from behind spectacles. Inspector Fraser. Cara thought he looked more like a trustworthy physician and wondered how many people dropped their

guard and said too much around him. Today, he had an enormous companion who wore the dark blue uniform of Her Majesty's Enforcers. He wore an armoured and weaponised gauntlet and a utility belt with a multitude of dangling pouches and gadgets. He looked more like a mountaineer intent on tackling Everest than a street enforcer.

*What have I done now?*

"Good morning, Inspector Fraser." She stopped in her tracks, waiting for him to reveal his purpose.

He nodded his head politely. "Would you mind accompanying us to headquarters?"

"Yes, I would mind." She stopped one tread higher than the inspector.

He looked taken aback. "I'm afraid I'll have to insist, miss."

Cara let out a sigh. She rolled her head to release the tension in her neck from the morning bent over the desk, and spied the carriage and mechanised horses across the road. Three days previously, she had run, confused, from his study. She watched her back, vigilant for any sign of Jackson following her. How did he know she was at the library? She wondered how long he sat there, watching for her to leave. She didn't need to see his impassive face to know those eyes were trained on her. A flush crept up her neck as she remembered Nathaniel's touch, his lips brushing hers, his tongue exploring her mouth in a slow, sensual dance. Her body demanding more than her brain could handle.

"Miss Devon?" The inspector repeated, trying to gain her attention. Cara shook her head, trying to dislodge the memory that haunted her, whether asleep or awake.

"Yes. All right, then." She sprang off the last step and fell in beside Fraser.

The Enforcers had a steam-powered carriage, painted the same deep blue as the uniforms they wore. As she stepped up into the dark interior, she caught a brief glimpse of the mechanical horses across the road being urged

forward.

The carriage jostled, bumped, and belched smoke on its way around the corner to headquarters in Whitehall Place. The odour of the coal fire permeated the body of the carriage. Cara sniffed and wrinkled her nose. She could see the advantages to money and cleaner forms of transport. Fraser, appearing oblivious to the smell, tried to engage her in conversation about the weather and the latest developments in airship travel. She resisted his attempts during the short carriage ride, her mind darting around as she tried to figure out what he wanted with her.

*What has he dug up about my father now?*

They stopped outside the imposing, four-storey brick building of the Enforcers Headquarters. Inspector Fraser jumped out of the carriage first and extended his hand to Cara, which she duly ignored.

She jumped free of the stuffy confines and looked up at the building. With a minimal number of windows, high surrounding walls, and patrolling guards in hissing exoskeletons, it looked more like a prison.

"If you would follow me, Miss Devon?" He sounded like he was escorting her to a tea table, albeit a tea table in an isolated interrogation room.

He mounted the steps and crossed the dark slate floor of the atrium. He took a stairway on the left. Cara followed behind. His sergeant, Connor, flanked her, perhaps ensuring she didn't turn tail and run back to the street. Impending dread settled in her stomach.

Fraser led her into a small office, every surface crammed with files, papers, and books.

Connor quickly uncovered a chair and held it out for Cara. She sank into the threadbare seat, while the inspector went to stand at the window. She was in his domain, so waited for him to lead off. To distract herself, she stared at her fingernails and contemplated luxuriating in a hot bath, if only her small rooms had one. She hated dressing like a girl, but she loved to bathe like one.

"Have you thought any further as to who might want to harm your

father?" Fraser asked.

Why would he haul her in to talk about her father? There was something deeper at play here. "No. I had no contact with him over the last seven years, except through my grandmother. I'm sure you came up with a much better list than I could."

Cara watched his posture by the window. He appeared distracted, gazing out onto the street, but his eyes kept flicking to her. "Is this solely about my father's death?"

His placid grey eyes were full of warmth and understanding, as he turned them on her. "In a way."

She held her tongue, waiting for the kick to his statement. She wouldn't let his personable nature fool her.

"You have perhaps heard that two young noblewomen have been murdered?" He sounded almost apologetic for broaching such ugly news with her.

"Two? I saw the newspaper article about Jennifer Lovell. I vaguely recall her from years ago." Cara's brain tried to leapfrog over Fraser and see where he was heading.

He moved from the window, halting next to his desk. "There has been another. Lady Abigail Swan. I'm sure the newspapers will be full of her sad demise by this afternoon. She was the same age as you. Did you know her, also?"

Cara turned the name over in her head. Abigail Swan didn't trigger any but the vaguest memories. She certainly couldn't conjure up enough to put a face to the name. She shook her head.

Fraser spread his hands wide. "There is a . . . tenuous connection to your father."

"Oh?" She was all ears, wondering what he saw in the disparate deaths.

He dropped his hands to clutch the back of his chair. "As you are aware, your father was killed by an Egyptian asp."

Cara remained silent, though alarm bells sounded in the back of her head.

"The two women were wearing an undergarment made of Egyptian linen." He looked embarrassed to discuss night attire with her. "From my enquiries, such a robe is not available here, in London, but must have come direct from Egypt."

A laugh burst forth from her throat. "Are you seriously telling me you think the murder of these women is somehow related to the death of my father because of a chemise?" The inspector's theory was too incredible to give the idea any credence. "So what is your hypothesis? That someone imported a load of Egyptian linen, containing an asp to murder my father, and then, what? After killing my father, did he cast around, looking for ideas of what to do with his surplus garments?"

He spread his hands wide and shrugged. "I don't like coincidences, particularly when they concern non-accidental death."

"And if you don't believe in coincidence, what exactly do you think is the connection?"

"You." He took his seat at the desk, rummaging he came up with a small notebook and a mechanical pencil. He looked poised, as if anticipating some big break in his case.

Cara frowned. *What on Earth is he getting at?* "That's a bit of a stretch."

He flipped through his notes. "The women were a similar age and status to yourself, and, as they say, *in your circle.*"

"Circle?" She choked on the word. "I don't have a circle, in case you hadn't noticed. I was raped seven years ago and the ton consider me damaged goods. And that's putting aside the fact I've only been in London for a couple of weeks, hardly time to establish *a circle.*"

She crossed her arms over her chest, staring at him through narrowed eyes. He was pushing all her buttons today.

"Funny how society blames the victim, but Clayton walked free while his chums slapped him on the back. Out of curiosity, where exactly was the force

while I was being raped and beaten?" She threw her own accusation at him.

The anger welled up inside her. She tasted bile at the back of her throat with each shortened breath. Due to his high position, no one intervened or stopped Lord Clayton. He was never charged, or even censured. And now, she jumped to the top of the Enforcers' suspect list when girls of her age and status were murdered. No doubt he thought she harboured sour grapes that they got to do the season and wear pretty frocks, while she had to stick to the shadows. *Screw you society, I've had a gut's full.*

Fraser shuffled his papers and didn't meet Cara's eyes. "What happened to you was unforgiveable. But so is what is happening to these young women. They're not killed straightaway, you know. He keeps them alive for a couple of days; for what purpose, we do not know. Can you imagine their terror while they wait?"

She shuddered. She spent a week locked in a room, and knew exactly what it was like to be trapped. At the sound of footsteps outside the door, her heart would stop. She would freeze, balanced on the knife-edge of panic, as she waited to see if the doorknob turned, if the monster would enter. She screamed, but no one came to rescue her from the unending nightmare.

"Yes, I can well imagine their terror," she whispered.

"The link back to Egypt is too compelling to ignore, and you're the only connection I have who can answer my questions. The other three are dead." He held up his fingers, counting the digits as he recited the names. "Your father, Lord Devon, was the first. Then, Jennifer Lovell and now, Abigail Swan."

"So you think I'm on some sort of murderous rampage?"

He gave her a gentle smile. "I'm not accusing you of anything. But you certainly seem to be in the middle of something. Perhaps there is information you know, but are not sharing? Perhaps there is something that touched you and these girls? Some common occurrence, which may have originated with your father?"

He sounded like a psychiatrist, asking her to tell him about her childhood. He used a gentle, probing tone.

She'd be damned if she was going to wear the blame for the deaths, just because he couldn't come up with his own suspect.

*I should have stayed away. I should have taken an airship to America, or Australia.*

"If you have any evidence, charge me. Otherwise stay the hell away from me." She pushed her chair back so violently it toppled over.

"Don't go leaving London, Miss Devon. I require you to stay here until my investigation has concluded."

She shuddered; bile rose from her stomach and her fingers itched to hold her pistols. Without casting a backward glance, she stormed from the room and down the stairs.

Ranting at Fraser, she hit the street and kept on going. Pedestrians, sensing her mood, automatically parted for her, letting her cut through the traffic unimpeded.



FRASER REMOVED his spectacles and tossed them on the mound of paper. He rubbed his temples.

*Some days, I think I should have gone into banking, as mother wanted.*

"Well, that didn't go quite as planned." Connor piped up from his corner, where he tried to blend in with the bookshelf, although an elephant would have been as effective trying to hide in a small office. "Feisty thing, isn't she?"

"Hmm . . . might try a slightly different approach next time. I don't think softly is going to get us anywhere." He returned his specs to his face and left his chaotic desk.

"Do you really think she knows anything?" Connor couldn't see the

invisible path Fraser scented.

He gave his sergeant a surprised look. "I'm sure of it. I just don't think she has made the connection yet. Anyway, I'm going down to see Doc."

Connor held his hands up in horror. "You're on your own. Yell if you're heading out. I'll be down in the weapons range."

Deep in the bowels of the Enforcers' building, Fraser stepped into the chill air of the morgue, the hum of the mechanical water circulator comforting, like having a nanny hum as a baby drifted off to sleep.

Abigail Swan held the central position and Doc talked to her softly, as he went about his work.

"Tell me the bad news, Doc." He approached the central slab, with Abigail exposed from mid-chest upwards. A sheet concealed the majority of her slender body.

Doc looked up. "Same as the other poor wee thing, I'm afraid. Key looks identical." He paced to the workbench to retrieve the item.

Doc handed it over, and Fraser weighed it in his hand. The key found buried in her heart certainly looked similar, but a microscopic comparison would confirm his suspicions. "I've been interviewing locksmiths, but they all swear they've never seen the likes of this before. Although they tell me it wouldn't be terribly difficult to make; you just need some basic equipment, time, and patience." He gave a wry smile. "They all thought a loving hand crafted these."

He stared at the young girl, once so full of life and potential. Now her silent beauty would cause panic and unrest amongst the ton. Fraser waited to be hauled upstairs and grilled by his superintendent. He needed to find this mysterious suitor, quickly, before he stalked his next prey.

*If he hasn't already chosen her.*

Time for a change of tactic. "How long has she been dead?"

"A few hours, a day at most."

Fraser chewed his lip. "She'd been gone for a couple of days, same as

Jennifer Lovell. She spent two days with him, before he killed her. What do you think he does?"

Doc raised his bushy eyebrows. "That's a question for the living. I can only answer questions for the dead."

*This is going nowhere.*

The name Cara Devon nagged at him as he made his way back upstairs.

## CHAPTER 10



*TUESDAY, July 9*

Cara leaned against her upper story window, sipping coffee as she watched the bustle of activity in the street below. Events from the previous few days played over in her head. Thinking about Nathaniel sent a shiver of electrical current skating over her skin, akin to playing with the light switches in her cantankerous house. He was as enticing as climbing out of her bedroom window late at night. Part of her brain knew she shouldn't do it, but another part is lured by the appeal of unknown adventures in the dark.

Doubts nagged at her. What were his true motives? He sent two men to steal her father's notebook and then attempted to make her hand it over. Was she playing into his hands? Cumulatively, the collection of artifacts was worth a fortune. Selling it would ensure her security and more importantly, her independence. The objects were a tempting fortune and she would have to guard closely their location, until they could be sold.

*No wonder father was so paranoid. A country estate would be much easier. You don't have to worry about someone nicking one of those in the middle of the night.*

She needed a distraction. Remembering her interview with the mad Countess de Sal, she retrieved her satchel and rummaged through the contents to extract the cream card. In a shaky hand, looking like a spider had

some form of epileptic fit while covered in ink, the countess had sprawled a name and address.

In a neat, pragmatic hand, Cara added her own name to the back of the card.

*Time to play tea parties with our dollies.*

She remembered pretending to make social calls as a child. She and Amy would line up their dolls on a manicured lawn and wait for other neighbourhood girls to visit. Although usually, Cara disappeared up a tree instead, armed with pockets full of pebbles she used to aim at the delicate porcelain teacups below.

She quickly swallowed the remaining coffee before dressing in the blue and brown taffeta outfit with the little feathered top hat. She twirled in front of the mirror, and adjusted the angle of the hat, then headed out the door into the warm, nearly summer day.

A newsboy on the street caught her attention with his cry of, "Beautiful debutante horribly murdered!"

People rushed to grab their edition and morning dose of titillation. Cara joined the mob and purchased a paper. She scanned the article as she walked. The details were scant and told her less than what Inspector Fraser revealed. The article stated Abigail Swan was found, murdered, in her backyard. Then there was a load of rampant speculation connecting her death to that of Jennifer Lovell. Not that they were wrong in their speculation, unfortunately.

*This will send a shiver through society. Brutal murder is so lower class.*

At least the newspapers hadn't yet got wind of Fraser's suspicion, that the murder of her father was also connected. Cara would be pursued more feverishly than the fox at the hunt if they caught that scent. She finished the article and tossed the unwanted newspaper in a nearby bin. She picked up her pace, keen to get the impending visit over and done with and discharge the obligation that passed to her with the small card.

The neat and tidy house teetered on the edge of Mayfair and Soho.

Clipped topiaries stood guard on either side of the door. She hoped the orderly exterior was a reflection of the residents and she would be met with polite civility. Her skin still crawled when she remembered the scene in the restaurant.

She rapped on the door and almost simultaneously it swung open at the hand of an efficient butler. She extended the card and a terrible silence loomed between her and the servant. The butler raised his eyebrows, but remained silent. He gestured, indicating she was to wait; he left her standing on the porch with only the topiary for company. She was thinking about bolting back down the stairs when he reappeared, waved her inside, and ushered her into the parlour.

Cara stood on the threshold and blinked. Several times.

*Whoa, there must be a lot of women in this household.*

She wondered what sort of household she had stumbled into this time. The parlour was resplendent in shades of pink, purple, and cream, from striped wallpaper to cushions looking like enormous sweets and swagged curtains in the same bilious shades. Cara felt a headache coming on just looking at the confection surrounding her.

A petite woman bustled into the space, practically invisible but for her frantic movement, camouflaged against the candy cane walls with a dress the same vertical shades as the wallpaper. Her pale hair was devoid of its own colouring, instead reflecting the purpleness of whatever she stood near.

"Countess de Sal sent you?" Her eyes darted around the room, and she licked her lips. She closed the parlour door, cutting off Cara's exit from the screaming girliness.

"Yes. I'm Cara Devon. The countess believed I could be of assistance to you." Cara progressed cautiously, not sure what lay ahead and trying to watch her step.

The other woman gave a start on hearing Cara's name, as though she hadn't paid much attention to the card. She looked Cara up and down.

"Everyone is talking about how you have returned to London. You're so brave to come back, after . . . ." She gestured futilely with her hands, before dropping one to her hip, and pressing the other to her forehead.

Cara arched an eyebrow.

*What's that supposed to mean? Is it solidarity, or is she about to die of embarrassment that I might be seen here?*

"I think Lord Clayton is the brave one, if he ever dares come near me again."

The other woman's eyes widened. Cara wondered if Isobel knew of her tendency for roaming the streets with her pistols for company.

"Yes, well, good for you. Shows them at least one of us has teeth." Isobel ran a hand down the purple drapes, flicking at invisible dust spots.

*Solidarity, then.*

"I find myself in an awkward situation. And I cannot turn to my family for help." The young woman abandoned the curtains to torment the folds of her skirt, wrapping the fabric around her finger and pulling tightly. Her digit turned the same shade of purple as the enveloping taffeta.

Cara waited for Isobel to continue.

"I have written some rather foolish letters to a young man, which I want back. I believe you may be able to assist in retrieving them?" Hopeful expectation flushed her face.

"I require the gentleman's name?" Cara probed as politely as possible; this wasn't really her calling, but a part of her said the simple task was easy money. How hard could it be to play postman?

*Particularly if Nathaniel delivers—*

"Joshua. Joshua Denver. He lives in Whitechapel. He works as pit crew at one of the airship hangars." She released the skirt and turned her attention to fluffing up the already oversized cushions. "I have asked. Repeatedly. But he is refusing to hand them over. Naughty boy."

The way Isobel breathed *naughty boy* spoke volumes. Cara resisted the

urge to raise her eyebrows and mutter *tut tut*. Now she wondered what was in the letters.

*My money is on Isobel writing something rather saucy to naughty Josh.*

"I have a fiancé now, you see." She blurted out the words, unnerved by Cara's continued silence. "And it wouldn't do for him to know the intimate details of my friendship with Joshua. I was so much younger, and impetuous. I did things without fully thinking through the consequences." Isobel wasn't one to hold anything back, apparently.

"Of course," Cara murmured.

*So she slept with Joshua, but wants the fiancé to think he is buying a pristine product.*

"It shouldn't take too long to have the correspondence back in your hands." Given Joshua worked at the docks, she could probably have the letters by dinnertime. Or, she could let Isobel stew over how foolish she had been for a bit longer.

Isobel let out a sigh of relief, no doubt glad to hand over the recovery of her dirty laundry to someone with an equally grubby past. Her family, and more importantly, society, would remain none the wiser of her behaviour. She resumed darting around the room, straightening pillows she encountered in her path.

*Isobel needs to get out more, she's all pent-up energy.*

"Is it true? About these girls being killed? Jennifer, and now Abigail?" She pummelled a delicate throw pillow before dropping it back on the sofa.

Cara frowned at the abrupt change in the topic of conversation. "Yes. Though I'm sure the Enforcers have it well in hand."

She omitted to mention Inspector Fraser believed she was central to the unfolding tragedy, and through her, linked Lord Devon's death to the other two. God help her if that titbit ever got out. Society would erupt in a frenzy more spectacular than a warehouse of Chinese fireworks hit by lightning.

Isobel dropped on top of the freshly plumped pillow. She looked younger;

her eyes brimmed with tears. "I'm so worried—"

Emotion spilled over and she sobbed into her hands; large heart-felt tears rolled down her face and escaped between her fingers.

Cara looked around, hoping someone would spring to the rescue, perhaps a pink-clad knight lurking amongst the gay wallpaper. She had no experience of tearful women, and Isobel didn't look the type to respond to a punch in the shoulder and being told to buck up.

She decided on a more diplomatic approach.

"Whatever is the matter?" Her brain screamed at her, *don't ask and don't get involved*. If only she knew, when she held out her hand for the small package Nathaniel needed delivering, she was stepping into an infinite vortex that would keep sucking her down.

Isobel extracted a handkerchief from within her bodice and blew her nose loudly in a key that would make any trumpet player proud.

"She's run away!" She sniffed.

The hair on the back of Cara's neck prickled in warning. "Who? You need to give me a bit more detail, if I'm going to be of any help to you."

Another heartfelt sob and blow into the handkerchief, which was doing a sterling job, all things considered. "It's my friend, Beth. I'm sure she's just done something stupid. But she's been gone since yesterday. She swore me to secrecy. And then, the newspaper article today—" Her fingers clutched the brave hanky as it withstood another onslaught. "I'm ever so worried."

*God, I hope I've got an alibi, if this goes where I think it's heading.*

"Was she seeing anyone?" Cara wondered how to get herself out of the rabbit hole she appeared to be wedged in.

Isobel nodded with sufficient force to dislodge the soft bun at the back of her head, tendrils of blonde hair tumbled around her ears. "She wouldn't say who. He was ever so secretive. That's why I'm sure they've just run off for a week of passion and fun before settling down. We all do it, don't we?"

She tried to laugh, but it rang hollow.

"Isobel, what's Beth's full name?"

"Beth Armstrong. And she's not a high-ranking noble. Her father is only landed gentry, and they say the killer is only after peers, so I'm sure she's all right." She tried to convince herself, but didn't do a very good job of it.

Cara had no words of comfort to offer. "First things first, I can certainly retrieve your letters for you. And I'll put word out about Beth. Let's see if we can find her naked and covered in honey with her lover in some pub in Cheapside."

She tried to cheer the other woman up and was rewarded with a weak smile.

"Covered in honey," Isobel repeated with a breathy sigh.

*I think I have an inkling of what's in those letters now.*

"Thank you." Isobel pressed Cara's hands to her bosom before wiping away her tears and pinning her escaped hair.

Once again, Cara was out on the street with information ricocheting around her brain. Where to turn? Nathaniel or Inspector Fraser? Certainly Nathaniel would be able to lay his hands on the missing letters; that was a simple matter, and probably what Countess de Sal intended. But what to do about the missing girl? How was she caught up in this?

*Maybe I should just jump an airship and leave this mess for Fraser to sort out. But that would mean running. Again.*

She wandered down the road, mulling over her options. Her gaze caught the unmistakable hulking mass and dark blue uniform of an Enforcer. Fate provided at least one solution, and Cara bee lined for him.

"Can you get a message to Inspector Fraser?" She accosted him before she had a chance to change her mind.

He looked around behind him, unsure whether she was addressing him or not.

*Lordy, they must employ them based on mass, not intelligence.*

She snapped her fingers in front of his face to attract his attention back to

her. "Inspector Fraser? Can you contact him?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am. I can. We have an aethergraph in the wagon." He gestured to the steam-powered carriage idling at the end of the street.

"Good. Tell him to meet Cara Devon as soon as possible, in Trafalgar Square, by the monument." She gave him a push in the direction of the wagon and headed off. Trafalgar Square sat halfway between her current location and the Enforcers' headquarters. If the uniformed Neanderthal lurched into action, and passed along the message promptly, Fraser shouldn't be too far behind her.

The large square held as many people as pigeons. Both species rushed about their business, congregated in groups, and squawked when surprised from behind. Cara threaded her way to Nelson's Column and sat on the stone step. Nelson kept watch on the horizon far above her head. She toyed with passing the time by chewing her fingernails, but suspected if she ever started the nervous habit she wouldn't be able to stop.

"Miss Devon? You're obviously still in London."

"You told me I couldn't leave. Or did you think I would slip aboard one of Lyons' airships?" She turned to face Fraser, the sun ringing him from behind, caused her to raise a hand to shelter her eyes.

"Well, I appreciate you didn't take the opportunity. I have heard you've been seen out with Viscount Lyons. I would caution you about him, but I suspect you didn't ask to see me urgently to discuss your social calendar?"

"No." She chewed her lip, wondering how much Fraser knew about Nathaniel. "You have a problem, and I suspect it's about to get bigger."

He arched an eyebrow at her; his eyes burned with curiosity behind the glass lenses. He seated himself next to her, so she no longer had to squint, but ensured he was not so close he would encroach on her personal space.

"Oh?" Another polite noise.

"I have learned of another missing girl. Beth Armstrong. Her father is

landed gentry, not a peer. But—" She couldn't explain the way the hairs rose on the back of her neck when Isobel mentioned her missing friend.

"But?" Fraser removed his specs and extracted a small cloth from his pocket. He busied himself cleaning the lenses while she gathered her thoughts.

Cara exhaled slowly. "It's too similar to Jennifer and Abigail to dismiss. She was seeing someone new, someone secretive, and now she's up and vanished. Her friend thought she had run off for a week or two of pleasure. But, with the news of Abigail's death hitting the streets, she's not so sure."

"Ah." He replaced the cloth and hooked the ends of the frames around his ears. He was keeping up an excellent line of non-committal, monosyllabic noises.

"And after our conversation yesterday, I don't want this one pinned on me."

He laughed. "Perhaps I might conclude you are trying to throw me off the scent by delivering this information."

She shot him a look; she didn't see the humour in his comment. Perhaps she should up and leave.

"When was the young lady last seen?"

"Yesterday. The information was passed to me today. Her friend is worried about the similarities."

He stood. "Thank you, Miss Devon. I'll start enquiring as to the young lady's whereabouts. Let's hope she is found safe, but slightly embarrassed."

He gave her a polite bow and headed back across the square.

## CHAPTER 11



*THIS ONE HAD TAKEN him longer. She was jumpy and suspicious. He had needed many days to orchestrate the accidental meetings. The gentle brushing of their hands in bookshops and cafes. He hunted her like a cat stalking its prey. Silently, patiently. He knew he had won when her breath hitched when she saw him. Her heart fluttered, in anticipation of his touch. She leaned into his caress.*

*Getting her away from the watchful eyes of her family had taken planning. The ton was shutting down, daughters under strict parental supervision, as fear rippled through the upper classes. They didn't understand his work. They didn't understand what he sought. Their minds were too small to comprehend him. Their fear wasn't their fault; they were simply inferior. He would be benevolent when he ascended, when he held their small lives in the palm of his hand.*

*This little one knew. She understood. She crept out her bedroom window in the heart of darkness. Knowing he would catch her. She ran to him. She was the one. He knew it deep inside. He tried to contain his excitement.*

*"Nefertiti," he murmured, brushing her hair away from her face. "Love me once more. Make me immortal."*

*Black, terrified eyes stared back at him, the whites in vivid contrast to the wide pupils. Her head shook violently from side to side, rubbing against the*

*restraint over her forehead. She made little mewling noises against the mouth gag and a single tear welled up and rolled from her eye.*

*His hand reached out to the small, wheeled trolley. He picked up the key, and lovingly stroked the length of its shaft. He raised the object to his lips and kissed the cold brass reverently, before replacing the key on the trolley amongst gleaming surgical blades.*

*His hand reached for the bottle, which he held up to the light. The glass was a dark amber colour, making the contents look like mead for the gods. He unstopped the bottle and held the cloth over the neck. He tipped the bottle over and back, before quickly replacing the cork.*

*He draped the cloth over her mouth and nose. She flailed back and forth, making gurgling noises against the cloth biting into the sides of her mouth. Tears streamed from her eyes, ran down her temples, and disappeared into her hair. The tang of urine hit his nostrils, as she lost control of her bladder. Her desperate protest became weaker and fainter and then stopped altogether.*

*"I know you're excited, little one." He stroked her cheek, removing the tears, wiping away the stains with the cloth. "Soon we will be together, as we were meant to be."*

*Dropping the cloth onto the trolley, he picked up a stethoscope. He inserted the earpieces and pressed the trumpet end to her skin. He listened, and made minute movements with the instrument, until he found the right spot. With a pen, he made a mark on her chest. He worked quickly and efficiently, as he sliced through flesh and muscle with the scalpel. The necessary incision was only a small one, but its placement was pivotal. He cut deeper, revealing the ribs he needed to avoid. He took up the key and guided the slender shaft into the incision, turning the blade so the teeth fitted through the gap. Closing his eyes, he let sensation guide him. The gentle pulse of her heart resonated along the key's shaft when nestled close to its objective. He smiled; the two were in perfect unison with each other, beating*

as one.

*Breathing a sigh of relief, he closed the wound with small, delicate stitches. He knew women were particular about their appearance and he wanted the scar to be as small as possible. He didn't want her to fret about an unsightly mark on her body.*

*The waiting was the hardest part. He occupied himself by tidying away the bloody cloths used during the procedure. He cleaned her body, wiping her limbs clear of the waste evacuated in her excitement. He dressed her in the simple linen shift she always favoured in the dry heat of Egypt. The gossamer fabric bunched around her leg restraints. He carefully drew the bow of the key through a small cut in the fabric. She was perfect, like a porcelain automaton, waiting for him to turn the key and awaken her.*



THE SUN WAS WELL PAST its zenith by the time Cara went in search of Nathaniel. She had changed clothes and grabbed her pistols. Drawn by the scent of danger around him, she exercised caution by donning the matched handguns, her definition of carrying protection. She hadn't seen him since running from his study a few days previously and was unsure of her reception.

His Mayfair house sat devoid of his presence. His staff informed her he was working at the docks. With a growing sense of agitation, she headed back to the main road and hailed a hansom cab. Her journey took her past an enormous hole in the ground, as though London suffered an attack by a monstrous mole. Workers laboured in the earth to build the new underground railway transport system far beneath the streets.

Cara alighted at Tower Hill and walked the remaining distance to the Lyons hangars. An airship tethered to the dock rocked as the mechanical claw removed the last of her cargo and dropped it onto the waiting trolleys. Cara

paused at the edge of his territory, watching the well-oiled bustle of activity. One hand fingered a pistol on her hip, before she dropped her coat back into place, and moved closer. She spotted the ever-vigilant Jackson leaning against a stone wall, smoking a cigarette. He flicked the stub into the gutter with his good hand as she approached.

"I don't know what you've been up to, darling," he called out as she neared.

"Why?" She halted, and noticed he no longer wore a bandage on his hand. An angry scar showed where her bullet went through his palm, but he didn't appear to have suffered any permanent damage.

"He's been like a bear with a sore head the last few days. He's in his office at the back of the hangar, but tread lightly." He headed down the path to the airship.

A stone settled into Cara's gut and the constant fear climbed on top of it.

*What the heck am I doing? Maybe it is time to get out of London. I could leave the solicitor to collect the artifacts, if I trusted him with the job.*

She stepped into the dimly lit hangar. Scents from around the world flooded her nostrils while she waited for her eyes to adjust to the interior. She inhaled lemon grass, curry, and chilli. She could recognise them all from her travels, each one bringing back distinct memories of times spent in China, India, and America.

Boxes, crates, and urns of marvellous shapes and sizes were stacked in row after row, awaiting either delivery or dispatch. Men laboured back and forth, their efforts reducing some rows and enlarging others. Keeping out of the way of busy workers lumbering in exoskeletons and the fast-moving mechanised carts, she made her way to the office at the back of the hangar. From inside, lights blazed through the glass on the top half of the windows. Wooden shutters covered the bottom half, and the light contorted into silvers to escape the confines. The shutters obscured the office's occupants, though Cara could hear muted conversation through the wall.

She tapped lightly on the closed door.

"Come," an unfamiliar voice barked.

She slipped through the door and pressed it shut behind her.

Nathaniel stretched back in his chair, his long, booted legs propped up on the desk. His cream shirt lay unlaced to half way down his chest, and the exposed tanned skin drew Cara's eyes. In one hand, he held a cigar; in the other, a glass of brandy. Opposite him lounged his pirate captain, his hands similarly occupied with cigar and brandy. They exuded the casual camaraderie of old friends, catching up on events since their last meeting.

"Why, if it isn't your bollard bird," the pirate commented to Nathaniel.

"Cara." Nathaniel dragged on his cigar, tilting his head back to blow smoke at the ceiling. "I thought you were busy with Inspector Fraser today."

"Are you following him or me?" Annoyance briefly flared in her face. She thought herself adept at losing the tails Nathaniel put on her. He very seldom sent Jackson now, changing faces to try to throw her off what he was doing. Though, Cara was confident he still hadn't succeeded in discovering her new residence.

"I've learned the wisdom in keeping track of the inspector's movements. You're proving a more challenging prospect." Another draw on the cigar; smoke circled the high ceiling from the two men.

The pirate laughed at some private joke. He had sandy brown hair draped around his face, and piercing black eyes set in a tanned angular face. Stretched out beside her, his body was long and lean, like his face.

Nathaniel waved his brandy in the pirate's direction. "This is an old acquaintance, Captain Lachlan Hawke."

*Fitting—a bird of prey, raider of the skies.*

He rose and took her hand. She pushed down the urge to panic. Even though her body started to relish Nathaniel touching her, this was someone unknown. Her brain screamed a danger warning and she stiffened as he kissed her skin.

"Loki, to my friends." He released her hand, watching her reaction as he sank back into his chair. A waft of salty air drifted over her, tangy and pleasant, making her think of sitting by the ocean, with the sun warming her back.

A smile came unbidden to her face, as her body relaxed. "Loki? God of mischief? I think I might like you."

He gave her a dark wink.

She swung her attention back to Nathaniel and promptly wanted to drown in his eyes. A crystal, clear blue today, they invited her to immerse herself and let him wash over her. With a sigh, she tried to drop her eyes downward, and ended up fixated on his lips. She remembered how they travelled down her neck to the base of her throat, sending ripples of pleasure through her body.

He coughed and Cara blinked. She resisted the strong urge to pummel her fist into her forehead.

*I need a better distraction. Whatever I'm doing, it's not working.*

"Joshua Denver," she blurted.

Nathaniel's face remained impassive. "And the relevance of this gentleman is . . . ?"

*Oh, hell.*

"He has some rather intimate letters from one Isobel Johnson. The young lady is rather anxious to have them back. The young man is not co-operating. Countess de Sal thought you could help and asked me to act as go-between." The words came out rushed and garbled, but she managed to get the message across.

Nathaniel sat silent for a measured moment. "I'll send word out. It won't take long to track them down. She'll have them back within a day or two."

"Thank you. He works at one of the hangars, so he shouldn't be too hard to find." Cara flicked her gaze back and forth; two sets of predatory eyes watched her intently. Her brain advised her the time had come to get the hell

out, before she ended up as dinner, being fought over like a downed zebra with a couple of lions hanging off her rump, intent on ripping out her entrails. She backed toward the door.

"Care for some entertainment this afternoon?" Nathaniel changed the subject and halted her backward movement.

Curiosity flared within her. She swallowed, wondering if he was going to suggest something involving all three of them.

"I've had enough paperwork for the day. Loki and I were about to head downstairs to the Pit. We thought a spot of sparring would burn off some energy. Are you game enough to join us?"

She cast her gaze from Nathaniel to his captain, sure that there was some undertone at play, but not able to place her finger on it. She brushed her coat aside and unconsciously rested her hand on the pistol butt. She traced the design carved into the ivory with a finger, while she turned the prospect over in her mind.

"You did say you could box?" Nathaniel placed his empty glass on the desk and scrunched the cigar into an ashtray, waiting for her reply.

*Maybe that's what I need. To beat something and burn this distracting taint out of my blood.*

"All right. It's been awhile, but I'm game to go a few rounds."

He nodded and shared a look with Hawke, before the two men rose from their places. Nathaniel led off, while Cara followed. At the back of the hangar, Nathaniel pulled on a shelf of small boxes. The shelf swung outward, revealing a dark and narrow staircase. Hawke and Jackson trailed them.

Far beneath the ground, the small stone hallway opened into a large and softly lit room.

She understood why they referred to it as the Pit. Large carved blocks of stone fashioned the walls. Given how deep they were under the ground, she suspected the room was completely soundproof. The electric lights gave off a muted glow behind their heavy glass coverings. Tiny iron bars covered the

glass and Cara wondered what happened in the room, that the lights needed protecting. A large, square, black padded mat dominated the middle of the room. The walls of the room held aloft swords, daggers, and staves. Weapons or instruments of torture were used as decoration in nearly every available space.

The wall opposite the entrance contained a double steel door. The already imposing frame bore multiple rivets from the attachment of extra layers of steel. Two large bolts at top and bottom secured the doors to each other. Two equally large padlocks secured whatever lay behind. Given the Pit was far below ground, hidden behind a secret staircase and already soundproof, Cara could only imagine what lay behind the reinforced door. Her curiosity finally found a line it refused to cross. The chill down her spine told her she didn't want to know what the door hid.

Punching bags hung from the ceiling in one corner. Four of Nathaniel's men either sparred or watched. She headed to a wall with a gleaming wooden bench and a row of coat hooks. She quickly removed her jacket and unslung her gun holsters, hanging them above the bench. The men turned to watch the impromptu striptease. She saw raised eyebrows as she unlaced her corset and draped it over the bench. Raised eyebrows turned to slack jaws, as she pulled her shirt loose, and undid the bottom few buttons. Grasping the two ends, she slid the fabric up her back, before tying it tightly beneath her breasts, exposing her midriff.

Jackson approached her with a roll of white cotton, and methodically bandaged her wrists and hands to protect against repetitive blows. She flexed her fingers and took a couple of jabs. She rotated her neck, wondering who she would be fighting, as she moved onto the mat.

*One of the smaller men—*

She gulped. Nathaniel had stripped to the waist. Her eyes widened, and her gaze roamed all over his naked torso. She drank up the hard flesh, finely etched abdominal muscles, and faint lines of long faded scars. A jagged,

angry stripe looked recent, as if a knife grazed his ribs not too long ago. A thin line of dark hair ran downward from his bellybutton and vanished into the top of his trousers. It took a monumental effort to drag her eyes up to his face. The ghost of a smile lingered over his lips at her intense examination.

"When you're ready." He raised an eyebrow.

*He's going to drive me loonier than de Sal if I don't clear my head soon.*

They circled each other on the large mat. Cara gave a couple of loose jabs at his head. He didn't even bother to defend, leaning away from her blows. She hadn't been serious, only judging his reactions, testing him. She didn't take long to ascertain he wouldn't strike at her; he only defended. She put more effort into each jab and uppercut, determined to make him react. He blocked efficiently, and she couldn't lay a hand on him. He batted her away as if she were a dragonfly hovering around his head.

They sparred for several minutes. Nathaniel absorbed each blow she threw, while Cara tried to clear her mind by achieving exhaustion. It didn't work. She bounced on her toes, thinking.

*Time for the unexpected.*

She spun and delivered a roundhouse kick to his torso. He blocked and rocked back, the power of her kick far greater than anything she could deliver with her fists.

His eyes narrowed as he reassessed her. An approving roar went up from his men present.

Their support buoyed Cara. Another lightning kick and she knocked him back again. A slow smile spread over her face. She might be a woman, but she knew a few things about using her legs.

Now Nathaniel worked harder, her blows more fierce than he anticipated. She alternated her jabs and uppercuts with front kicks. The moves faster, she was determined to show him what she was capable of, before she burnt through all her energy.

Another kick and he pushed past her leg, and then lunged as she spun

past. He grabbed her, and pulled her tightly to him.

"I think it's time to end this. I don't think it would do for my men to see you defeat me, or to even entertain the idea that defeat might be possible." His breath was hot behind her ear, his arm wrapped around her stomach, with a large hand spanning her naked flesh. His hard body pressed into her from behind, and a thrill shot through her at the strength of his hold. His thumb brushed the underside of one breast, making her bite her lip to stifle a groan.

He let her go. Jackson threw his shirt at him. Nathaniel shrugged on the garment while regarding her. "Well played. Perhaps I would place money on you."

His face was impassive, but his eyes devoured her. "Have dinner with me tonight. I'll take you to Bonnu." He threw out the name of the most exclusive dining establishment in London.

She wrinkled her nose. "No, thank you."

He arched an eyebrow. "Other women would be ecstatic to go there, to be seen. Would you rather go for a pint of ale, and to watch some sport in the East End or Whitechapel?"

Interest sparked in her face. "Yes. I wouldn't have to wear a fancy dress or worry about being snubbed by the other women."

Hawke burst out laughing. "If it's a lowbrow adventure with this little one, I'm definitely joining in."

Cara's eyes roamed the room, taking in the ever-watchful men. Their numbers had swollen while she and Nathaniel sparred. The air seemed stifling, hot, and sweaty, making her suck in every dry breath, the atmosphere charged, like before an electrical storm. The image of lions on the zebra fled her mind, replaced by a hungry pack of hyenas, with eyes glowing yellow in the dim light. She realised how deep she was in over her head, in a hidden room, surrounded by ravenous predators.

She pulled an edge of bandage and began to unwrap her hand, rolling the cotton as she went, buying herself time to think through her predicament.

"No, thank you, I have other plans for this evening. Another time, perhaps."

Hawke elbowed Nathaniel. "She said no to you."

"She does that a lot." He kept his position by her side as she finished rolling the bandage and tossed the bundle to Jackson to put away.

A commotion from the hallway caught their attention. She glanced up to see two miserable-looking men pushed through the door. With their arms tied behind their backs, and unable to put a hand out, they fell hard onto the stone floor. A group of men piled in behind them. Picked up roughly by their forearms, the pair of bound men were dragged to the middle of the room, rudely deposited on the mat, and forced to their knees. The pack scented fear in the air; men circled the two unfortunates. Tension rolled around the room, while they waited for a cue from their leader.

"Cara," Nathaniel breathed her name quietly. Her wide eyes flicked to him. "Gather your things and go upstairs, use my office to get dressed."

With one finger under her chin he kissed her lightly, his lips brushed against hers in a brief taste before he released her. "Go, now."

For once in her life, Cara fully intended to obey a command. She swallowed and complied, quickly skirting the growing crowd.

Nathaniel rolled up his shirtsleeves and walked to the middle of the room, Hawke at his shoulder. One of the downed men started sobbing, his tears falling onto Nathaniel's polished boot. The other whimpered *I'm sorry* over and over in a chilling litany.

Ice water ran down Cara's spine. Grabbing her pistols and the remainder of her clothing, she headed for the exit. She didn't run, in case she caught their attention, but adrenaline pumped through her legs, ready to be utilised in an instance if necessary.

Hitting the corridor, she heard a cry go up from those assembled. The hyenas bayed for blood, moments before tearing their prey to shreds.

## CHAPTER 12



*THURSDAY, July 11*

*He struggled to contain his anticipation as he went about his business. Interacting with people, he carefully hid his emotions behind a mask, until the moment he could return to her side. She needed time to gather her strength.*

*Two days had passed, and now he could interrupt her slumber. He stopped the slow drip of chloroform. He stroked her forehead. "Everything is all right. You're safe with me."*

*She stirred, disoriented, and turned her head. Relief written in every pore, she believed his words, until she locked eyes with him and knew the truth. He caressed the key.*

*"We'll be together for eternity. I'll not lose you this time, Nefertiti." He twisted the bow, once, twice, three times.*

*Her body arched up off the table; only the restraints held her in place. Her eyes widened, blackness wiped over them. The sob in the back of her throat changed to small gasps; the convulsions timed with the cries until she dropped back to the table.*

*He undid the restraints. His fingers were clumsy with his eagerness as he freed her. He called her name, waiting for her to sit up and greet him as her lover. His brow furrowed. Why didn't she sit up? He shook her shoulder and*

*called her name.*

*Brushing away the hair from her eyes, he looked into the face of his love.*

*Empty black eyes stared back at him.*

*"No!" He screamed his rage at the stone walls.*



*FRIDAY, July 12*

Despite the bright sunshine, fresh breeze, and cheerful company, Cara's thoughts dwelled in a dark, underground pit with hot, dry air and a naked torso her fingers kept reaching out to trace. She shuddered at the pack mentality of Nathaniel's men. She knew she courted danger, but for the first time, menace took a visible form and threatened to touch her. Nathaniel had sent her from the room before peril wrapped around her. The logical part of her brain urged her to flee before she got burnt, and another part wanted to move closer and embrace the heat.

Amy tucked Cara's hand under her arm, physically pulling her thoughts back to her present location. "I've missed having you to talk to."

"I'm sorry, I'm not very good company these days." She tapped the side of her head. "Too much going on in here. Everybody seems to be talking at once." She offered an apologetic smile and tried to concentrate on Amy's monologue about her wedding dress fittings and the finer details of cake decoration. Although her friend omitted all mention of her fiancé's name.

They strolled along the tree-lined paths next to the Serpentine in Hyde Park. Nannies pushed prams with enormous rubber tyres and spring suspension, to give a cushioned ride to slumbering infants. Other children rattled past in the new mechanical prams, clockwork movements powering the light, steel wheels. Governesses puffed to keep apace of the fast-moving buggies containing their charges. Cara liked the park with its ancient trees. It reminded her of her grandmother's estate and childhood summers spent

running barefoot through fields, or catching tadpoles in the lake.

A young man hurried along the path toward them, halting a few paces away, to tug off his pork pie. "Pardon, miss, but I have a message for you."

"Yes?" Cara had a pretty good idea who the message was from. "Miguel, isn't it?"

She was learning the faces and names of Nathaniel's men. Knowing the identity of who followed her made them easier to spot in a crowd. Two could play the intelligence game, and she did not intend to let Nathaniel gain the upper hand.

He tugged his cap again. "He has those letters you were wanting, if you are free?"

He gestured across the road, to where the carriage sat on Exhibition Road. With its blackened windows, no one could see inside. The mechanical horses gleamed in the sunlight, like precious objects created by some bizarre jeweller rather than a mechanic.

A chill shot down her body, as she wondered what became of the two men she encountered in the Pit. *I'm playing with fire while dousing myself in kerosene.*

"I won't be long, Amy. Why don't you go ahead and order us tea?" She gestured in the direction of the outdoor tea stand, their ultimate destination.

Amy hesitated and cast her friend a worried look.

"I'll be fine." Cara reassured her and gave her a gentle push. "Order sandwiches, I'm famished."

Amy laughed. "You're always hungry," she said, before strolling away.

Cara followed Miguel across the road. He held the carriage door open for her. Picking up her skirts, she stepped in, and took the seat opposite Nathaniel. His legs sprawled, his physical presence and personality dominated the small interior.

He held up a bunch of letters, secured with a bright pink satin and lace garter. "Rather racy. No wonder she wants them back. They would fetch good

money if she submitted them to a gentleman's magazine."

"You read them?" It hadn't occurred to Cara that Isobel's correspondence would be open to his scrutiny. Although, she had promised herself a tiny peek, just to confirm her suspicion about the contents. She rationalised the difference: she was a woman and would understand Isobel's emotional outpouring. Nathaniel would be looking for the business angle.

"Of course. The young man had intended to use them for blackmail, and I like to keep abreast of such things. Aren't you just a little bit curious?" He waved the package back and forth.

She bit her lip. Curiosity seemed to be getting her into a lot of trouble. Maybe the time had come to curb her meddling. Perhaps a better way to keep occupied would be to take up knitting or needlepoint.

"There's a particularly fascinating letter involving a swing, and a rather enthusiastic description of the young man's appendage, that is my personal favourite. Although I think Isobel engages in rampant poetic license in her writing." He levelled his eyes at her and a slow thrum pulsed through her body. "I could read the passage to you, if you'd like to offer your opinion?"

She held out her hand. "Thank you, but I don't need to know the intimate details. I'll drop them back to her today. I'm sure it will be a weight off her mind to have them returned."

He raised the letters higher, out of her reach. The tiniest smile twitched the corner of his mouth. "Two things. Firstly, tell the young lady she owes me a favour, to be repaid at my convenience."

"All right." She had expected some such arrangement from him. "What's the second thing?" Her heart crashed against the lining of her corset, waiting for the expected answer. He patted the seat next to him. Cara hesitated, knowing what he would demand. She made up her mind before changing sides, unable to speak with the blood pounding in her ears.

With his free hand, he reached out and cupped her neck, pulling her toward him. There was no gentle prelude or teasing. He crushed her mouth.

His teeth nipped her lips before his tongue drove into her mouth, seeking her out, giving her nowhere to hide. She couldn't even gasp as he sucked the very air from her lungs; her breath became his. His tongue slid over hers as he explored her mouth. When he released her, she collapsed against the side of the carriage. Her eyes closed as she caught her breath, her pulse rampaged under her skin. Once under control, she opened her lids to meet his pale gaze.

"The letters?" She held out her hand. The air crackled and sizzled between them.

He handed the small bundle over. "I enjoy doing business with you, *cara mia*." He turned her name into an Italian caress as his eyes lingered on her heaving breasts, highlighted and displayed by the cut of her corset.

She tucked the letters into her satchel and tried to appear business-like, while her fingers struggled to obey simple commands like *do up the damned buckle*.

"I get the feeling you don't trust Loki." He changed the topic abruptly.

Cara's head shot up and a frown creased her forehead. "I don't know him well enough to make that judgement. But my gut tells me not to trust the two of you together."

She compared them to plotting schoolboys, about to dip a girl's plaits in an inkwell, except, they were far more dangerous, and exhilarating.

"We have shared a woman before. But I have no intentions of sharing you." He held her gaze as his tongue ran over his lips.

Something deep inside Cara tugged and stirred.

"Is that supposed to reassure me?" A thrill shot through her body, regardless of what her mouth said.

He kept her eyes captured, holding her in thrall. "He's a friend. Come out with us."

"No," she managed to whisper. "What happened in the Pit the other night?"

His eyes flicked down briefly, releasing her. "Consequences."

"Care to elaborate a little more?"

He shrugged and stretched, a feline lethality in the movement. "My business dealings aren't always as pleasurable as this."

She was in deep water again, treading to keep her head from disappearing under a wave. "I have to go. My friend is waiting for me."

He kissed her hand before releasing her.

Cara stood on the path watching the glittering horses leave. Part of her brain screamed, *yield!* The other half yelled, *run!* Neither was winning. Not yet. She shook the thoughts from her body like a dog shaking off water after a bath, before striking down the path.

Amy had commandeered a table under the dappled shade of a horizontal elm.

Cara brushed the swallowtail of her corset aside, before dropping into her chair. She closed her eyes and leaned back. A gentle breeze stirred the leaves and refreshed the languid summer air around them.

"Do you want a lecture about the dangerous path you are on?" Amy's voice came from the other side of the table, accompanied by the clinking of china.

"No." Cara was doing just fine lecturing herself.

"Then drink your tea."

Her lids flew open and with a grin, she reached out for her teacup and a delicate cucumber sandwich. "I missed you. This. Having a friend."

Amy flushed. "Then don't you dare disappear for seven years again, or I might have to track you down."

Cara took a bite of the crustless sandwich. "Did you know them? Jennifer and Abigail, the two murdered girls?"

"Oh yes. We were often at the same parties. Jennifer was big game hunting, Abigail completely different. She only ever had the one suitor, and she seemed devoted to him, though he was rather dull." Amy picked over the delicacies, before selecting one to add to her plate.

"Were they friends?" She pushed for more information, trying to see the connection between them. She vaguely knew Jennifer, but had never met Abigail. *What does Fraser see, drawing us together?*

"Not that I ever saw. What is your interest?" Amy paused and looked at her friend. "You're starting to sound like that Enforcer."

She shrugged. "Speculating, that's all. I've been away for so long; I don't know who the players are anymore." She turned the conversation to the other girls they had played with as children, and Amy updated her on who was married and who had been shelved.

Afternoon tea finished, they decided to walk the edge of the lake before parting company. An angelic-looking man approached them. He was tall and slender, with soft, dark blond curls falling around his oval face and framing pale amber eyes. He quickly doffed his top hat and licked his lips several times. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down under his cravat.

"Miss Devon?" He stuttered over her name.

"Yes." Cara eyed him; he didn't look like any of Nathaniel's men, he had none of their brashness about him. Rather, an aura of bookish innocence clung to him.

"I'm Weaver. Weaver Clayton."

Cara recoiled as though struck. Involuntarily, she reached out and grabbed Amy's arm.

He held out a hand, as though to stop her from running away. "I'll only take a moment of your time, Miss Devon."

Cara glared at the young Lord Clayton, failing to see how he could have anything to say that would be of interest to her. "Say your piece quickly, Lord Clayton, I have no tolerance for your family."

Weaver shuffled from foot to foot and swallowed compulsively. "I wanted to apologise."

Cara's eyebrows shot up.

*He has to be kidding.*

No apology could ever make up for what his father did to her.

"Not for that," his words tumbled out, as though hearing her inner thoughts. "What my father did is beyond redemption, and he will have to reckon for his crime in the underworld. I wanted to apologise for not being home from Oxford that week."

"I'm not following your point."

"I believe if I had been home, I could have stopped what occurred. I owe you an apology for not being there, to save you." His large amber eyes darted around the park, as though expecting someone to intervene.

She cocked her head; no one had ever apologised for failing to help her. On the contrary, they looked at her as though she were culpable. He showed a certain amount of bravery in coming forward and approaching her.

"Thank you. You're the first person to ever say that." She meant it; for his part, he looked genuine.

The young man gave her a shy smile. "Thank you for listening to me. I have wanted to apologise for a long time. I'll leave you in peace." He nodded and replaced his top hat, before turning, and heading back down the path.

"Well," Amy said, confusion written all over her face. "What do you make of that?"

Cara let out a breath. "Gutsy move. If I had my Smith & Wesson handy, I would have shot him on the spot."

"You're unarmed?" Amy teased.

Cara laughed and patted her thigh. "Derringer. Damned nuisance to reach, though."

"Well, since you can control your itchy trigger finger, you are definitely coming to dinner with me tomorrow night. It's only a small gathering and you need to dip your toe back into the social pond."

"No, I don't." She was distracted and Amy saw an opening.

Amy pouted. "Well, come for me, then. John is busy working and the Ambrose family have acquired an Egyptian princess who I am dying to meet."

And I simply cannot go alone."

Cara resisted the urge to wail, *but I don't want to*. And possibly stamp her foot, for good measure.

"It's a small, intimate gathering. You'll be fine. And did I mention I will just die if I miss out?" Amy pleaded.

Cara laughed at her friend. "All right, I'll go. I guess I can't have your death on my conscience."

## CHAPTER 13



*SATURDAY, July 13*

*I hate you, wardrobe. But here is what's going to happen. I will close the doors, say a magic word, open the doors, and you will present me with a suitable evening gown.*

Cara shut the door and leaned her forehead against the dark polished walnut. "Work, dammit."

She flung open the doors, and stared at the same two dresses. The blue and brown striped, taffeta day outfit and the deep teal, velvet gown Nathaniel provided the night she dined with him.

*I wonder if I was supposed to return that? Too bad.*

She pulled the teal gown off its hanger and threw it onto the end of the bed. Formal clothes without an extra pair of hands became a personal battlefield. She struggled with the corset laces and the yards of fabric in the skirt and train. Eventually, she managed to encase her body to her satisfaction, which meant there were no obvious draughts. She would leave it to Amy to tighten and fasten everything on the way to dinner.

A short time later, she sat in the carriage, her back to Amy, as her friend laced her corset tighter and tackled the tiny black buttons holding the dress together. One-sided conversation washed over her, while she tried to figure out how the last few weeks had gone so catastrophically off course.

She had planned to be in London for a week, at most. Collect her father's artifacts, dump them with someone to sell and *bam*, be gone. Instead, she was drawn into a bizarre business deal with a viscount, in which he bartered for the right to touch her. Enforcers were circling her, thinking she was central to their investigation of three deaths. She had been corralled into helping noblewomen with their seedy problems by chasing a trail of little cream visiting cards. And now, she was laced into a gown to attend an evening soiree with a bunch of toffs she couldn't stand, all so her childhood friend wouldn't expire.

"Don't even think of escaping," Amy said from behind her.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?"

"You're twitching all over the place and your hand is edging to the carriage door." Amy tackled the last button and declared her friend fit for company. "Plus, I was your friend for fourteen years, before you disappeared. I learned a thing or two about you in that time."

Amy dropped a gossamer-thin wool shawl over her shoulders.

"For example, I know you are poking your tongue out at me."

From Cara's bolt-hole in Soho, they detoured to Isobel Johnson's home to deliver the bundle of letters into her thankful hands. She hugged Cara in gratitude, at having her saucy missives returned, her relief tinged with worry about her missing friend, Beth. Cara shook her head, having no news to impart. She left the woman with one problem resolved but another still pressing on her mind.

The carriage arrived at a Mayfair address. The two women alighted, and stepped into the plush mansion hosting the evening's entertainment. The butler escorted them through to the parlour, where the other guests drank champagne and exchanged small talk, while waiting for the call to dinner. Amy drifted over to gossip with the hostess. Cara stayed to one side, contemplating hiding behind the tall indoor palm. Her heart skipped a beat on seeing the darkly handsome man engaged in conversation across the room.

Tonight was a formal night, and her heart sank that he wasn't in pirate attire, but he was equally handsome in tails and waistcoat, with a cravat so sharp it could draw blood.

His head swung around and fixed on her, causing her to grab a passing flute of champagne a little too hurriedly. She looked down as a small amount of liquid sloshed over the rim with the sudden movement. She switched hands, wondering if she could risk licking the fallen alcohol off her hand when someone beat her to it.

Nathaniel had her hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed away the spilt champagne. His tongue snaked over her fingers, causing her to hold her breath. He lingered over her in an entirely inappropriate way. She fought the impulse to pour the expensive fluid down her décolleté and mutter *oops*.

"You've been avoiding me." He relinquished her hand.

"You've been crowding me." She couldn't think when he was near her. His presence made the blood pound so loudly in her ears, thought became impossible.

His eyes roamed the room before returning to her. "Nice dress. Suits you."

"I've been meaning to return it to you." Her hand stroked the lush fabric. The cut of the dress was so different from what the other women wore. Cara hated the crinolines the other women had under their skirts. They were iron prisons, hampering movement. The dress Nathaniel provided for her was more fluid, and she wore it with nothing underneath. The dress covered, yet revealed; with each step she took it clung to and displayed her curves.

"I could always take it off you tonight." He said it deadpan, no hint of emotion on his face.

A blast of heat burst through Cara, and he left her in a whirlpool of swirling emotion as the dinner announcement came. As one of the highest-ranking aristocrats present, Nathaniel walked through with the hostess. Amy and Cara linked arms; being at the back of the row of diners, they were

among the last to take their place.

When they approached the table, she found Nathaniel holding out a chair for her, before sinking down on her left.

"What are you doing?" she whispered as she took her seat. "You should be up by the hostess."

Nathaniel flicked out his white linen napkin. "I will not endure this evening surrounded by bores. With my reputation, I can sit wherever the hell I want."

She saw the discreet and furtive looks shot in their direction. "If the company is so boring, why on earth are you here, then?"

He caught her hand under the table and stroked her palm. "Because you are here."

She paused, not sure how to respond. *Damn him.* "Well, behave yourself, or I'll be forced to jam my fork into your thigh."

His mouth twitched. "I promise to be on my best behaviour. For dinner."

She did a double-take, wondering what he planned for after dinner. His thigh rested close to hers under the table and she could feel his heat through the velvet of her dress. True to his word, he was an entertaining, and thoughtful, dinner companion.

Once the servants cleared away dessert, the group passed into the front parlour, where an ancient sarcophagus dominated the room. Intricate hieroglyphics that described the life story of the occupant dominated the limestone exterior. The host told an outrageous story of how the coffin contained one of the most beautiful princesses in all of ancient Egypt. Cara doubted it very much. The final resting place of royalty was a secret guarded all the way to the underworld. Far more likely, the heavy coffin was the final resting place of someone middle-class.

Displaying artifacts was all the rage among the upper classes. They scoured the ends of the earth to find ancient and exotic mummies to display after dinner in a hideous game of corpse one-upmanship. The unravelling of

the poor unfortunate turned into a grown-up, and gory, version of Pass the Parcel. You never knew what lay within or whether you had a good prize or not. Paying top dollar for your desiccated corpse didn't always translate into the best entertainment.

Nathaniel stood at her side; his formidable presence deflected the curious looks and comments of the other diners, for which Cara was grateful. However, he also constantly inhaled her air, making her struggle with his proximity and a lack of oxygen.

Four footmen entered the room and took up positions at each corner of the stone coffin. At a nod from the host, two pushed and two pulled. A loud grating noise preceded movement, as the lid slid sufficient for the staff to wrap fingers around the edge and lift the heavy cover free. They leaned it against the wall, before silently disappearing, their work done.

Three women rushed forward, eager for the first glimpse of the long-dead princess.

Cara hung back. She had spent several months in Egypt. On her rides through the Valley of Kings, she saw the discarded corpses left by the tomb robbers. She did not need to rush and be titillated. She once stood in their defiled tombs and saw the beautiful stories illustrating the walls in rich, vibrant colours. She had no desire to disturb someone's long slumber. The story of the woman's life was far more interesting than her body, a mere dry husk, discarded millennia ago.

The women diners gripped the edge of the coffin with eager fingertips as they peered into the depths, and promptly gave a range of ungodly screams. Two fainted straight away, hitting the floor before anyone could intervene. The third staggered backward to swoon into the arms of a convenient suitor.

*Screaming and fainting? I have to look now.*

Inquisitive as ever, Cara stepped over the minefield of lesser constitutions littering the floor. Nathaniel held her hand, his eyebrows raised as chaos erupted around them. The host called for water to revive the fallen. Their

bodies were cradled into sitting positions, like giant porcelain dolls, handled by the men in the room. Amy stood wide-eyed and out of the way, fanning herself frantically at the unfolding excitement.

Approaching the sarcophagus, Cara looked over the edge and into the last resting place of someone who walked the Earth before Christ rose and died. Except it didn't contain the body of a princess, or even a middle-class lass. Not even the body of someone who had been dead for three thousand years. Perhaps closer to three days.

A crude attempt had been made to mummify the girl. Multiple layers of fine linen, wrapped around her limbs and body, skimmed the edge of her face, leaving her identity exposed. Her eyes were closed, her lips tinted blue and eerie against her pale skin. Black hair swirled around her face and tumbled down her shoulders. She could have been Sleeping Beauty, awaiting the kiss of her prince, except for her hands clasped over her chest. The bow of the key protruded from amongst her fingers, as though she held it in place. A red stain crept away from the brass shaft.

"Beth Armstrong, I presume," she whispered. This was the third one, but the first so publicly displayed. "How did you end up in there, I wonder?"

"You know her?" Close behind her, Nathaniel caught the name on her lips.

"No, but I was told she had gone missing. Somebody better contact the Enforcers. Fraser will be all over this one. And me, when he finds out I'm here."

After a single glimpse from the host, no one else dared approach the sarcophagus. Accustomed to obedience, Nathaniel took control and issued orders. He sent the host to the library to call for the Enforcers and Inspector Fraser. Other men led the women from the room, to recover from their shock away from the fresh corpse. No one touched Cara. One look from Viscount Lyons made it clear no one was to interrupt her thoughts.

In the unfolding chaos, she stood calmly, contemplating the dead girl and

her gruesome end. A life taken far too soon. Something nagged, and refused to sit in the back of her mind, discordant words that belonged together. Her eyes widened.

*Egypt. Heart. Key.* The words jumbled in her brain, crashed into each other, and fell back, making a perfect mosaic. A picture she recognised from long ago. She gasped and took a step back, straight into Nathaniel.

"What is it? Have you seen something?" He caught her before she toppled over, his strong hands wrapped around her shoulders, steadying her.

"Yes and no." She shook her head. "The elements. I've seen them before. They spark a memory."

Nathaniel spun her around to face him, and she fell silent.

"Not here," he said, glancing around them at the men still present, watching their every move.

He drew her through to the empty dining room and closed the doors behind them. He grabbed two clean wine glasses and an abandoned bottle of white wine. He poured the golden liquid into the glasses, letting his silence indicate she should continue with her train of thought.

Cara clasped and unclasped her hands, waiting for the tangle in her brain to settle. "What the killer is doing, the keys in their hearts, the reference to Egypt, it reminds me of an artifact called Nefertiti's Heart."

He raised an eyebrow and handed her a glass. He took a deep drink from his own glass.

"It's an artifact from the reign of Akhenaten. He ruled Egypt in 1,400 B.C. Some say he was the first messiah, since he preached there was only one true god and that all others were false gods. He proclaimed himself son of the true god. At Akhenaten's side ruled Nefertiti, the most beautiful woman in the world. Only he held the key to her heart. Legends say possessing her heart made him a god and gifted him with immortality."

Cara took a long drink. Letting the liquid settle in her stomach, she contemplated the stirred memories. They were happy ones, for a change. She

rode fast Arabs across the desert, revelling in the movement of silken muscles under her body. She explored tombs and ruins, running her hand in wonder over hieroglyphics thousands of years old. She spent hot, languid days swimming in cool green waters with local children. Her father, preoccupied with finding the artifact, left her free to roam.

"Going to Egypt was the only trip father took me on. We spent over six months there, while he tracked down Nefertiti's Heart, and then he stole the artifact from its resting place. He squirrelled the thing away somewhere in London." At times, she wished they'd never returned to England; the brief spell of happiness was over too quickly.

"It sounds like the killer, with his keys in women's hearts and the obvious Egyptian touch." Nathaniel picked two leftover chocolates off the central plate. He offered one to Cara and popped the other into his mouth. "Do you think the killer is searching for his Nefertiti?"

Cara took the sweet, lingering over the contact with his fingers, before chewing the chocolate. "No. I think he's a whackadoodle. But throw in the asp that killed my father, and it's too much of a coincidence. I think the killer, whoever he is, knows about the Heart. And that should narrow the field of potential murderers down considerably."

"Do you know anything else about it? Why would he be so obsessed with it?"

"I don't know. I'm scratching for memories. We went to Egypt eight years ago, and I was more interested in the horses and swimming holes, not old relics. I need to go through father's notebooks and read his notes. I have no idea where the Heart is, or how the killer knows about the artifact." She threw her hands in the air in despair.

The doors slid open, interrupting their conversation. Inspector Fraser regarded them, his demeanour calm, as always. Deep blue uniforms moved behind him, and the hulking mass of Connor, his sergeant, stood at his shoulder.

"Fraser," Nathaniel drawled. The temperature dropped considerably.

"Lord Lyons. I'd like to talk to Miss Devon. Alone," he added, seeing Nathaniel showed little inclination to move from her side.

"Why don't you interview the other guests first? We haven't finished our conversation." Nathaniel flicked the tails of his jacket aside as he perched on the edge of the table, his manner dismissing Fraser.

Cara sucked in a breath; a frosty history lingered between the two men.

Fraser flicked his eyes to Cara, before he nodded and shut the doors again.

She breathed out a sigh. "You did that on purpose. I could have spoken to him now."

"He needs to learn his place."

"And I've told you before, don't make assumptions on my behalf." She put down her wine glass and opened the doors. Inspector Fraser turned on hearing the movement and she beckoned with one finger. He muttered something to Connor before walking toward her. She retreated into the dining room.

She waited until the doors closed, before asking her question. Something nagged at her, since gazing down on Beth Armstrong's serene face. "How did she get in there? It took four men to remove the lid."

Fraser removed his small notebook from a pocket before answering. His eye flitted to Nathaniel. "An interesting question. I will be following the sarcophagus and its movements."

"I'll save you some time, then." Nathaniel ran his fingers down Cara's arm in a caress before moving to the doorway. "The coffin came in on one of my airships, just over a week ago."

Fraser arched an eyebrow. "I'll need the manifest of the shipment it came in on, and details of everyone who had access to the sarcophagus."

"Of course." Nathaniel gave a sardonic smile and Cara wondered if the information he gave Fraser would bear any resemblance to the truth. He

slipped into the parlour and closed the doors, leaving her alone with the inspector.

Fraser directed his full attention to Cara. "Imagine my surprise on finding you here."

"Really? Because you don't look surprised."

"No." He frowned and looked flustered, actions out of character for him. "I was trying for irony. Obviously, it fell flat."

She filed his reaction away to examine later and moved on to more pressing issues. "I assume the girl is the missing Beth Armstrong?"

"I will have to ask her family to be sure, but the description fits. How did you come to be here, Miss Devon?"

"My friend, Amy Hamilton, was invited. I came as her plus one. I didn't volunteer to come." She would rather pull her toenails out with a pair of pliers than rub shoulders with the ton, but she did what she had to, to make her friend happy.

He wrote in his little notebook with an equally petite pencil.

Cara drained her wine glass and wished for Nathaniel, and not just to top up the glass. She had a desire to lean against him, and have him fold his arms around her, and make everything else disappear.

"So why did the killer utilise this gathering to display his latest victim?" The inspector voiced his internal dialogue.

"So you don't think it's me?" She grasped the tendrils of hope in his statement and use of the male pronoun.

His calm manner washed over her. "I never said I did. But I still believe this is drawing around you. If you would only confide in me."

"Why here?" She changed tack, uncomfortable with the intimacy Fraser sought to establish between them. "The other two were found in their homes. Why change, all of a sudden, to something so public?"

Fraser looked at her steadily, as though trying to see through her soul with his pale grey eyes. "Perhaps the killer is trying to get your attention."

His words cut through her. "I never asked for this," she whispered.

"I have other guests to talk to. Please excuse me." He left her alone.

Her mind raced. Amy entered the room at some stage. Cara didn't know if she had been turning events over for minutes or hours.

"I'll ask for the carriage to be brought around. We can go now. They are done with their questions," her friend said, rubbing her arms to dispel a non-existent chill.

She nodded and followed Amy back through the house to the entranceway. Amy sidled up to the butler to ask for their carriage. Cara leaned her back against the wall, closing her eyes, trying to remember her trip to Egypt as a child and any detail that may now be relevant.

Nathaniel approached her, and stepped close, one arm resting on the wall by her head. His warmth and musky scent enveloped her. Opening her eyes, she found herself partly trapped. She could duck to one side, if she wanted to.

"Tomorrow night, *cara mia*?" He drew his knuckles down the side of her face, and she leaned into the caress. Her body ached for the physical contact.

"You'll have to try hard to top tonight's entertainment. Murder. Screaming. Fainting. Police brutality. What are you offering?"

His lips twitched in his almost-smile. "Me, Loki, beer, and boxing."

The offer sounded fun and distracting, if only she could trust him. If only she could trust herself. She decided to go with her gut and told her brain to be quiet for once. "Bring Jackson as chaperon and I'll say yes."

"You trust Jackson but not me? You remember he works for me?" He looked amused, and curious at her logic.

A smile touched her lips. "I've shot him. We have a working relationship now."

"Tomorrow, then. Come to the house, since you won't tell me where you lay abed at night." He dropped his tone to something husky; the words caressed her body.

"Does it worry you, where I lie to sleep?" She gently teased.

"Not where, as much as *how* you sleep." With each word, he leaned closer to her.

Cara trod a knife-edge, remembering that playing with Nathaniel was Russian roulette.

"Naked. Does that ease your curiosity?" she asked, fanning the fire growing between them.

A low groan escaped his throat. He dipped his head, his lips millimetres from hers, as their breath mingled.

She closed her eyes and waited, the slow tingle spread through her body in anticipation. After a moment stretched into an agony of longing, she opened her lids, and locked gaze with him, his eyes a cloudy day of drifting blues and greys.

*Damn you, kiss me already.*

Unable to wait any longer, she stood on tiptoe and stretched up, brushing her lips against his, needing to taste him. The urge to have his skin pressed against hers grew with each encounter. He slid his lips over hers, the kiss languid and unhurried. Their tongues played, brushing one another, chasing back and forth.

He pulled back and lifted his head fractionally. "Your carriage is waiting."

He inclined his head in the direction of the doorway, where Amy tapped her foot and drew her stole around her shoulders, waiting for her wayward friend. He didn't move, but let Cara slip away from under his arm and out the door.

Fraser stopped her on the steps, just as she and Amy headed out into the darkness and their awaiting carriage. "Lyons is not the man to trust, Miss Devon. If you would listen to my humble opinion, I would advise you to tread very carefully around him."

She flicked her gaze beyond Fraser to where Nathaniel stood immobile in the entranceway, waiting for his own carriage. Too proud to admit Fraser

might be right, she did wonder who to trust?

## CHAPTER 14



*MONDAY, July 15*

Yet again, the wardrobe door hung open as Cara considered her choices. Beer and boxing with two pirates. She would need something she could run in. And possibly climb fences. Preferably, a robust fabric, with a dark pattern, to hide any bloodstains.

*Or whatever else the two naughty schoolboys get up to tonight. What am I doing?* She berated herself. Her brain argued with her instinct. One told her to stay home and stay safe. The other yearned for the danger. Her skin tingled at not knowing what the evening would bring, and she was utterly alive at the prospect.

She dressed carefully. Pants, lace-up boots, brown and grey collared corset with a cream shirt underneath. A tailored, grey wool jacket went over the top, with a small Derringer tucked into her boot, *just in case*. She paused before she headed out the door, rethought several potential scenarios for the evening, and went back to the wardrobe. She re-emerged several minutes later, a short blade strapped to her upper arm and hidden under the fall of her shirt. Feeling prepared, she stepped out into the cool of the evening.

Full dark had descended by the time she jumped up the steps to the Mayfair house. The doors swung open before she reached them. Brilliant yellow light illuminated the stairs and half the driveway, from the enormous

chandeliers hanging in the entranceway. Miguel was on door duty this evening.

"Evening, miss. They are waiting for you in the parlour." He gave an impeccable impersonation of a majordomo.

The next set of doors swung open on the taupe-coloured parlour where Nathaniel had first kissed her. The men stood at the fireplace talking; their heads turned as she entered. They were both dressed casually, tall boots, buckskin pants, simple waistcoats over plain shirts, and no cravats this evening. Nathaniel wore dark tones of grey and blue, Loki in earthier tones. Hungry eyes raked her body from top to toe and Cara belatedly thought perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all, the three of them pressed into a carriage. Not that the Lyons carriage was small, but Nathaniel hadn't kept his hands off her in one yet.

"Shall we?" he enquired, one sardonic eyebrow raised, as though he read her thoughts.

*Or perhaps I should stop staring at him like a lovesick puppy.*

Heading outside, relief washed over her when Nathaniel entered the carriage and decided to take the seat opposite her, leaving Loki to sit next to her. Though, her relief was short-lived; Nathaniel fixed his eyes on her and his gaze never deviated, for their entire journey. By the time they reached their destination, every pore in her body hummed like they were all playing little harmonicas.

Loki jumped out first and stood, with a roguish look and hand extended, to help Cara out. She hesitated, before curling her fingers around the outstretched palm for the few seconds it took to step down from the carriage. Not that she needed any assistance, but curiosity barged to the surface and wanted to touch the pirate, to gauge what her gut would say of the encounter. He lingered over her, earning him a scowl from Nathaniel.

*Warm. And beguiling,* her instinct reported. Cara looked down the street and saw a tall monument in the middle of a busy intersection, where multiple

roads converged. The footpath teemed with life, while the gutters stank of death. She turned her gaze to Nathaniel.

"Seven Dials?" She arched an eyebrow.

"I thought you wanted somewhere far from the strictures of society." His face remained passive, but Cara caught the hint of an amused twinkle in his blue eyes.

The pub was small and cheerful; blazing lights and raucous laughter drifted from within. The sign over the door declared *The Prick & Rose* in colours that would be gaudy in the daylight. Cara's stomach constricted and did a flip-flop.

*Make up your mind, do you want this or not? Do you want excitement or quiet nights with a banker, like Amy?*

Nathaniel stepped forward and took her hand, and then he squeezed her fingers gently. "Nothing will happen to you. We'll keep you safe." He gave her one of his breath-stealing smiles and a wink.

*I don't want safe, I want excitement.*

She made up her mind, and damn the consequences.

The inside of the pub was a seething mass of primarily unwashed bodies. Cara noticed a few better-dressed patrons seeking their entertainment in the riskier section of the city. A boxing ring took up the central position in the middle of the establishment. The mat, a dirty, off-white shade, showed multiple clean splotches where bloodstains were washed off at the end of the evening. Two rows of ropes hung around the mat, all that would contain the opponents and separate them from the eager spectators.

They found a table close to the ring and the upcoming matches. There were no chairs, the tables of a height to lean on. By unspoken agreement, the men placed Cara in the middle, Nathaniel on one side, Loki and Jackson on the other. A few eyes were cast in her direction, but there were sufficient women circulating the crowd to keep interest away from her. Moreover, she was overdressed; the other women present wore only corsets and tiny bustles.

The skirts barely touched mid-thigh, the expanse of their legs fully exposed at the front, the bustle dropping to knee height at the back. Their garters highlighted an enticing area of flesh between skirt and stocking. The corsets amply displayed what the women had on offer, and Cara saw coins change hands, and men led away to cheers from their companions.

Jackson disappeared for several long minutes, and reappeared with a tray laden with dented, tin mugs and pitchers of beer.

"Food's on the way," he said as he laid out the items and politely filled Cara's mug first.

She had no intention of getting drunk and every intention of making the one drink last all evening. She listened to the warning from her pragmatic brain, which told her letting alcohol drop her guard, and impair her reactions, would be a fatal error in this situation.

A waitress dropped bowls of hot chips and fish bites on their table. Cara caught her arm and ducked under Nathaniel for a quick conversation with the woman. The call came for opponents in the first match, a fight for the women. Loki gave Cara a speculative look as she returned to the table.

She scowled at him. "Don't insult me."

She poked him in the ribs.

The women competitors wore corsets and hot pants, the fight designed to have the men ordering more beer, as they sought to whet their thirst. The women grappled and grabbed each other in a display more erotic floorshow than fight.

"If I said please, would you join in?" Loki's hungry eyes swept from the scantily clad women rolling on the mat to Cara.

She bounced a hot chip off his nose in response, earning her an earthy chuckle from the airship captain. "Perhaps later? A private show for just me and Nate?"

Bantamweights were next, and still she took small sips of her beer and stayed quiet. She wanted a hard fight, to push herself to the edge of her

limits. These fighters, mere youths, did not look even old enough to have stubble darkening their chins. The roar and cry of the men washed around her as they placed their bets and screamed when they won, or lost.

"Next round," the ref hollered. "Lightweights."

She took a slurp from her beer and waved her hand.

"Me!" she challenged. The room fell silent for a moment as the crowd took in her slim form, barely bantamweight, and no match against the larger contenders. She shrugged off her jacket, and nimbly unlaced her corset, passing her clothing to Jackson. He wore his usual amused grin as he held her discarded clothing. The crowd went mad; a hundred voices yelled as they placed frantic bets, for and against Cara.

Nathaniel put out his hand, stopping her at his side. "Do you know what you're doing? You're fighting way above your weight class."

"Don't worry about me. I have a few tricks, remember?" She gave him a cheeky wink.

She finished tying her shirt tightly around her middle and pushed through the ropes into the ring. Her opponent grinned, imagining an easy victory. He turned to his friends and raised his hands, eliciting a roar in response.

She raised an eyebrow and let one of the staff tape her hands and wrists. This would be a tough bout. Her opponent, heavier, taller, leaner, looked scrappy, with a hungry glint in his eye. She didn't expect any leniency for being a woman. If she wanted an easy round, she would have joined the farcical women's fights at the start of the evening. Or even the bantamweights, comprised of juveniles burning off the extra testosterone of puberty. She needed to go hard, for her muscles to burn and ache, and to take a punch or two.

Cara knew she had to get a certain distance into the bout before using her feet, particularly if she wanted to earn a tidy profit from asking the waitress to bet on her. She had slipped the woman money, and instructions, earlier.

The other fighter threw his opening punch and she dodged under, relieved

to discover his reflexes were slower than hers. He overextended, and she ducked close to deliver an uppercut. It landed, but he sneered at her effort. He whipped out his own shot, missing his mark by the tiniest margin and his bound fist grazed her cheek.

They each got in a few more blows before she decided to mix it up. Plus, she was enough of a girl to not want her face smashed. She bounced and a slow smile crept over her face.

*I know something you don't know*, she sang in her head.

She spun and delivered a roundhouse blow to her opponent's torso, knocking him back against the ropes. The spectators went wild; frenzy ripped through the assembled masses. Now her opponent looked pissed off; the idea of losing to a girl didn't sit well with him. *Luckily*, Cara thought, *angry fighters make mistakes*. He lunged violently with short, punchy jabs. Only a couple hit home on her torso, as she ducked and weaved and followed her first kick with two more. A straight kick to his face flung him over the ropes, grasping the coil for balance as he spat blood onto the floor.

*Come on, come on*, she taunted in her mind, waiting for him to turn. He leapt from the ropes straight at her, hoping to catch her off-guard, thinking she would lower her defences if she scented victory. He was wrong. He ran straight into her booted foot. The blow to his head sent him backward and to the mat.

The crowd erupted into louder jeers, catcalls, and whistles as the ref held up her hand, declaring Cara the winner of the match. She ducked under the ropes. The fallen man's friends dragged him over to the side, patted his face, and pushed a mug of cold ale into his hands. She made her way through the press of bodies as hands patted her on the back and offered congratulations.

On reaching their table, Nathaniel reached out one hand and grabbed her nape, his fingers pressed into her hair as he drew her into him. She went to him, willingly, excitement pounding through her body. He kissed her fiercely, stamping his possession on her for all in the bar to see. She entwined

her hands in his hair, increasing the approving roar from the crowd. When he went to pull back, she held him, diving into his mouth. Her victory made her bold as she sought him out, drawing him into her.

For the first time in her life, Cara took what she wanted from a man.

Breathless, she pulled back. His eyes blazed, but he didn't let her go, keeping her within his grasp.

Grabbing the mug of beer, she took a quick swig, the malty fluid adding much needed moisture to her mouth and throat. Her eyes shone; she would have a few bruises along her ribs in the morning, and an impressive one on her cheek, but the exhilaration was worth the aches. Life pumped through her veins, painful memories retreated and became faint line drawings in her mind. She breathed, she lived, and her actions reaffirmed her decision to seek out excitement, regardless of the risks.

"How much did you make?" she asked Nathaniel.

"Enough to pay for more beer than you can drink."

He stood protectively behind her, one hand on the table, the other wrapped around her exposed waist, shielding her from the crowd with his body. Jackson and Loki on either side kept away the well-wishers and those with darker intent in their eyes.

She leaned into him, resting her head against his chest. The heat from the contact spread through her body, gradually replacing the heat from the physical exertion with something more primal. Need pulsed through her, threatening the long-held fear for control over her body.

"Who's next?" the organiser yelled over the noise of the crowd.

Loki jumped to his feet. "Me!" he bellowed in response.

"Can't let you have all the fun." He winked at Cara as he unbuttoned his waistcoat and tossed it over his chair. He fluidly pulled his shirt up over his head. Cara's eyes went wide, but it wasn't the golden rings through his nipples that caught her attention. A row of tiny scars dominated his right side, front and back, both sides covered in an identical, graceful arc.

"What gave him that?" she tilted her head and asked Nathaniel.

"Shark." He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers, testing her internal state of mind.

Curiosity rose to the bait. "How does a hawk get a shark bite?"

"Fishing where he shouldn't have been." Nathaniel's lips twitched in silent laughter at a private joke.

Loki strode over to the ring, his back emblazoned with his namesake, its wings outstretched over his shoulder blades. His skin darkened by years of living outside and scars showed it wasn't an easy life. Each jagged line made Cara wonder at the story or encounter behind it.

The ref barely stepped to the side when both men lunged at each other. The bout was fast and brutal. Blood flew in all directions as the two opponents pummelled one another. Cara winced every time Loki took a hit, his body absorbing the impact and rocketing back into action. Long years of fighting for his life were evident in every strike he made.

Equally matched, the fight drew on. Men cheered at fever pitch for their favourite. Cara found herself yelling Loki's name each time he landed a blow on his opponent. Finally, the other man fell backward over the rope, tumbling at the feet of a passing waitress. She squealed as his fingers laced around her ankle. She kicked him with her high-heeled foot and stepped over him, much to the laughter of the crowd.

Loki wiped sweat and blood from his face with the back of his arm as the ref announced him the winner. He returned to their table triumphant, although far more battered than Cara. He downed his beer in several thirsty gulps.

He thumped his empty glass on the table and gestured to the waitress to refill their pitchers, before turning to Cara. "How does this evening compare to last night's entertainment?"

She munched on a deep fried fish bite, a stark contrast to the prime fillet served the previous evening. "Not as many people have died."

Jackson laughed. "Not yet, but give them time."

Tempers were starting to flare around them, as those who won on the fights taunted the losers. Small skirmishes erupted here and there, most quickly broken up by other patrons and the few large bouncers circulating. Cara could well imagine more heated disputes were settled outside in brutal fashion.

"Did you know her, your fresh mummy?" Loki asked.

Cara shook her head. "No."

"But you're on the trail of something, yes?" He cocked his head, looking from Cara to Nathaniel behind her.

"I think so. This killer is driving keys into women's hearts, and last night he left Beth in a sarcophagus. The image reminds me of something my father retrieved from Egypt, a relic called Nefertiti's Heart." She unconsciously rested her hand on Nathaniel's arm, playing with the cotton of his shirtsleeve. "I think it's connected somehow. I just don't know how."

She saw the path her mind wanted to follow, but didn't know how to get there, the missing route beyond her reach. "But how do you research something that was created three thousand years ago?" Cara let go of Nathaniel's sleeve to clasp her beer mug and stare into the amber depths.

"What you need is a reference book, like they have in the big libraries, where you could look up Nefertiti's Heart." Loki joked as he popped the last chip into his mouth and licked the salt off his fingers.

Connections jolted in her brain.

"That's it." She slammed down her drink. "Loki you're a genius!" On impulse, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek. His dark eyes flashed and he raised his fingers to where her lips touched him.

"That's enough of that," Nathaniel said. "Or he'll start getting ideas." He bent his head close and whispered in her ear. "Remember what I said about not sharing."

His arms tightened around her waist. A blush crept up Cara's neck and she fought it down. Loki's comment triggered an old memory.

"There's a book. I remember my father talking about it now. He used to mutter about it at night." A frown creased her brow, her mind trying to draw the tendrils of memory nearer. "I just have to figure out how to find it."

"Give us some sort of clue about the type of book and we might be able to point you in a direction," Nathaniel said.

She concentrated on a long forgotten conversation. "It's old, possibly medieval? It contains oral histories and legends of many artifacts. I know father tried to get his hands on it, to complement his collection, and was thwarted."

Nathaniel rested his cheek next to hers. "You want a rare book dealer. If such a book came back on the market, they would hear about it. There are only two or three who would carry anything medieval. I can give you names in the morning."

"Thank you." She gave an unexpected yawn. The excitement of the last few days had exacted a toll. The adrenaline of the fight slipped from her body and left fatigue and aches in its wake. "I'm going to leave you boys to it."

Nathaniel tightened his grip around her. "I'll have you taken home."

"No." She broke free from the circle of his arms and collected up her discarded clothing. "I'll grab a cab."

"Are you going to constantly defy me?"

"I will, if you word it like that. You don't own me." Sleep called her name and shortened her temper. Touching her didn't give him the privilege to dictate how she lived her life.

A dark eyebrow shot up. "Then I'll walk you out, at least, and see you safely in a Hansom cab."

They wound their way through the other people. She approached the exit and their waitress caught up with her.

"Your share, love," she said, thrusting a wad of notes into Cara's hand. "Find me if you ever want to do it again." She gave Cara a wink before disappearing back into the crowd.

Nathaniel gave her an amused look as she pushed the money down the inside of her corset. Cara gave him a smile as they headed out into the night air.

## CHAPTER 15



*TUESDAY, July 16*

A quick visit to Mayfair the next morning and Cara held a list of three rare book dealers to visit in the greater London area. The first one was a dismal failure. The owner gave her a haughty look and treated her like an imbecile for not knowing the name of the book she sought.

*I thought they were called rare books because there aren't many of them. You should have known which one I meant.*

She trudged through the dark and narrow back streets of Soho to find Goslett Yard and the second on the list. The little shop was ancient, the timber façade blackened by centuries of grime and filth from the London streets. Soot coated some of the uprights; scars showed the building survived its battle with the Great Fire while the flames razed other structures to the ground. The glass of the windows was so thick, light ended up distorted and refracted on the journey through the panes.

She pulled open the heavy door and stepped back in time. Candles burned in wall sconces, shedding little light and a gentle, warm radiance. The smell of melted beeswax, books, and lavender oil permeated the air. The ceiling soared higher than the width of the shop, making for a strange visual illusion, as though she stood at the bottom of a book-lined well. Surrounded by the words from a thousand pens, peace settled over her. The rows of books

enticed, and she longed to run her fingers over their spines in a whispered caress.

She reached out a hand; her finger hovered over a tiny gilt hummingbird. A sharp memory stilled her hand. Her father had always been angry when she touched his books, berating her about their worth and complaining about the oils and dirt on her hands. She turned her hands over and stared at her fingers, then risked a stroke. She caressed the little bird, indulging in the contact with the unusual, small tome.

Emerging from the tall stack of books, she approached the counter. An elderly man perched behind a high desk, a peacock feather quill in his hand, as he laboured over an illuminated manuscript. A pot of liquid gold paint stood open in front of him. A small electric lamp lit up his workspace, the only modern concession in the shop, the book too precious to risk an unguarded candle so close to the fragile paper.

*Looks like the original shop owner.*

She cleared her throat, and he looked up at her with a gentle smile on his deeply etched face. His eyes were milky with cataracts and she wondered how he fared in a bookshop, or how he could labour over repairing a book. Or, perhaps his love for the written word drove him onward, despite the impending blindness.

"I'm looking for a book—" *And I'm incredibly stupid*, she thought as he immediately smiled indulgently at her.

"It's oral histories from the ancient world. It's a very old book, possibly mediaeval in origin." She had no idea what she was doing. Her father's notes were frustratingly vague and her memory hadn't been particularly helpful. Not that she ever paid much attention to her father's work; she was too busy keeping out of his reach. Here she was, assuming a bookshop owner would know exactly what she was talking about. She wracked her brain for any more detail. "There were particular myths from Egypt, and items of power . . ."

He cocked his head; she had a brief mental image of a much smaller version of him running around in his brain. The miniature version opened, and then slammed shut hundreds of filing cabinet drawers, looking for the correct piece of information.

*"Magycks of the Gods,"* he said.

Cara exhaled a sigh of relief. She wasn't mad; it did exist. "Yes. Can I purchase it please?"

He shook his head. "No."

*Oh, hell.*

He looked wistful, as though remembering a favourite student from long in his past. "The book went to a new owner some years ago, I'm afraid."

*Double hell.*

"Are there any other copies? Reprints, perhaps?" She grasped for straws; the book was from hundreds of years ago and related stories thousands of years old. It probably hadn't been serialised in any of the newspapers.

He gave his indulgent smile again. "No. There is only the one. And the book did not want to be copied."

The warning chill shot down her spine at his last statement.

*The book didn't want to be copied? I should introduce it to the house that doesn't want any occupants.*

"Could you at least tell me who purchased it?"

He gave the same slow shake of his head. She resisted the urge to kick her toe against his desk in frustration. "Thank you for your assistance."

At least she knew the name of the book. She just didn't know where to find it. She headed back out the door, as a figure slipped from between two of the shelves and followed her. He hailed her on the deserted pavement outside the shop.

"Miss Devon?"

Cara froze. Weaver Clayton. She didn't like to be reminded of his family, or to find him creeping around behind her.

"Yes, Lord Clayton?" Her tongue struggled over the surname.

He quickly removed his black silk top hat.

"Weaver, please. Let's avoid unnecessary unpleasantness for both of us."

He gave her a shy smile. "I often spend my mornings here; rare books are something of a passion. And I couldn't help but overhear you are looking for a particular old volume."

"Yes." She was unsure how much to reveal. "I'm doing some research and my father used to mention the book. I would love to read the old stories. A shame it's gone."

"Well it is, and it isn't." He tormented his hat while talking to her, his fingers nervously reshaping the brim. "I may be of some assistance to you."

"Oh?" She was prepared to listen to him if he had information.

"I studied ancient literature and civilisations at Oxford, you know." The way his fingers tortured the expensive silk hat, it might soon be beyond redemption. "I became aware of that particular book myself."

She held her place, despite her brain urging her to run away as fast as possible. Curiosity would get her into trouble one day. *It already has*, she chided herself.

"I believe I know who purchased the book some years ago."

*Bingo.*

"And you're willing to share this information?"

"Yes, if only to be of assistance to you." He nodded, eager to please. He was a wee puppy trying to earn favour in its new home, desperate for a kind word or look. Given what Cara knew of his father, she wondered at his childhood; they might have more in common than interest in a rare book.

"It would be of a great assistance to me." She waited for him to fill in the vital details.

"I'm not sure how co-operative the new owner will be. You see, the book was acquired by Countess de Sal."

Cara's face fell. *That means another visit to crazy country.*

"Thank you, Weaver." Her thanks were genuine, but she was loath to be indebted to him.

He gave her a small bow and replaced his deformed top hat, before walking in the opposite direction.

Cara struck out for a dishevelled house in a once well-maintained street in Belgravia.

She rapped on the door several times and waited so long she wondered if she was too late. Perhaps de Sal had moved on, to either another address or another dimension, or maybe the ancient butler expired before he made it across the entranceway. Succumbing to her vice, she reached out a hand and tried the doorknob. The door gave and swung inwards, revealing the elderly majordomo.

His hand outstretched to the door, he peered at her in a somewhat confused manner. "She's not receiving anyone."

"It's important." Cara figured the normal rules of house calls didn't apply. Making use of her age advantage of at least ninety years, and fully functioning knees, she slipped past him into the entranceway.

He looked around, somewhat confused, and closed the door. Turning on creaking legs, he gave a start to find her behind him.

"She's not receiving."

"Yes, we have had this conversation already," she muttered. "Is she upstairs?" she asked in a louder tone and pointed to the floor above.

"Yes," he replied automatically. Then his brain caught up with his tongue. "No, she's not receiving."

Too late; Cara was already halfway up the stairs.

She stood at the top, wondering which way to the master suite, when she heard an odd crooning noise. The hair on the back of her neck rose, but she followed the sound anyway. She crept down the threadbare carpet, floorboards creaking under her weight. Paintings of grim ancestors lined the walls. They all stared down elongated noses with looks of haughty disdain.

Some had round holes in their foreheads, Cara leaned closer to inspect one and discovered it was a bullet hole.

She drew away from the executed portraits to track down the singing. The lullaby came from behind panelled double doors that stood partially cracked open. *Like me. I'm cracked for being here.*

She rapped lightly with the back of her knuckles. "Countess de Sal? It's Cara Devon."

No answer. She knocked louder, then slid the doors apart.

Countess de Sal sat up in an enormous four-poster bed. An ancient tapestry of earth tones hung around the bed and dropped down in swags at each corner. Embroidered leaves, vines, and tree branches clambered over the tapestry. The countess lay surrounded by numerous cushions of matching shades of brown and green. She cradled a pug dog dressed in a green gown, as she sang a lullaby. The dog looked as desperate to escape as Cara felt.

The countess looked up and stopped singing. "You."

"Yes, me." Cara's eyes swept the room. The heavy drapes were closed against invading sunlight. Coal burned brightly in the large fireplace, despite the fact they were fast moving toward July. The fire heated air already overwarm and stifling.

The countess captured Cara's attention again with a thump.

"Have you slept with Nate yet?" She burst into laughter, and wagged her finger at Cara. The dog took its opportunity the loosened grip afforded, and shot from her arms like a cannon ball from the barrel. In a blur of green taffeta, the little canine was out the door and gone. Without missing a beat, the mad woman picked up a cushion to clutch to her bosom instead. She stroked the tassels, as if the cushion was a longhaired cat. "A little birdie tells me you are resisting his charms."

Cara thought certain little birdies needed shooting, if she ever found out who they were. "I need to talk to you about a book. Not my love life."

"And not about love letters, for I hear they have been returned to Isobel's

hands. If you change your mind, I could lend you books on love. I have many illustrated ones on the physical aspect. I'm sure Nate would prove a most enthusiastic tutor." Laughter rolled from her, thick and fast, the crazed sound too loud in the stuffy bedchamber.

Cara needed to get the conversation moving in the right direction, before she dwelt on what exactly Nathaniel could teach her. "I'm here about a book. *Magycks of the Gods*. I believe you purchased it some years ago?"

The countess threw her head back on the pillows and stared at the ceiling. She remained immobile for so long, Cara worried she would have to reach out and give her a quick poke, to see if she still breathed.

"Why do you want it?" her voice sounded calmer, less strident.

"Call it research." Her eyes roamed the room, lingering on the small wooden box with brass corners on the bedside table.

"I need a better answer than that, if you want me to part with a valuable mystical book."

Cara blew out a snort of air and took a punt. Anything to escape the melting heat; sweat tried to trickle down the inside of her tightly-laced corset. "I think there's something in the book that is connected to the murdered girls."

The older woman sat bolt upright, the corpse struck by lightning and springing to reanimated life.

"Really? Why didn't you say that first?" She leapt from the bed and grabbed her dressing gown off the floor.

"Come on." She beckoned, stuffing her arms through the gown, then vanished out the bedroom door. The gown trailed behind her, swirling with the movement as though on unseen winds. She looked like an apparition, haunting her own home, moving silently on bare feet.

Cara didn't need to be told twice. She bolted out the door as fast as the little pug. The countess drifted down the stairs, disappeared off to the left, and headed along a dark corridor. Then she vanished, slipping through a wall.

Still several paces behind, Cara was relieved to see a door and she wasn't chasing a spectral entity down into the pits of Hell. Rather, over the threshold, she found a thoroughly modern heaven—a well-outfitted library.

Two dark brown, leather wing chairs occupied the central space, sharing an overstuffed ottoman. The walls were floor to ceiling books of every imaginable shape, thickness, and colour. A gleaming brass rail ran around the entire room, supporting a narrow library ladder on wheels, secured by its casters. Soft electric lights lit the room, turning it into a secluded cave, where anyone could escape the harsh realities waiting outside the front door.

The countess stretched out her arms and spun round and round, absorbing the comforting atmosphere of the library. When she opened her eyes and looked at Cara, she seemed calmer and more lucid. Rubbing her hands together in anticipation, she stalked to the shelves. She peered at the book titles, hands ran along spines, as she muttered words under her breath.

"You want to know, don't you?" The question was unexpected and directed at Cara.

"Yes." She knew it wasn't polite to pry, but screw it, she really wanted to know how the other woman had spiralled into madness. Cara thought her behaviour was more than the effect of the pox on her mind. Part of Cara hoped she would learn enough to stop her taking the same plummet off the deep end.

"Curiosity killed the cat." De Sal watched the play of emotion over Cara's face.

"And satisfaction brought it back." *Or, at least, let it die with a smile on its face.*

She went back to examining the books. "I was his mistress for nearly twenty years."

Cara frowned trying to connect what few facts she knew. Nathaniel was approaching thirty, and unless he was a very precocious child, they were talking about someone else.

"His uncle. I was a girl of fifteen, escaping France, when he introduced me to the pleasures of the flesh and took me as his mistress." The countess gave a small sigh, and reached above her head to pull out a dull grey book. The covering on the spine had come loose and it dangled free, like a flap of skin exposing the vertebrae beneath.

"The Lyons family closed ranks and protected their own. Nate's father knew his brother had the pox, but no one stopped him, or warned me. He had already infected his wife and child. And they let him take up with me. Then, after twenty years as his faithful lover, he simply walked out on me. He left me to fester in my own rampaging symptoms, with only the mercury to comfort me."

An awkward social situation loomed before Cara, one never covered in etiquette class. She certainly would have remembered the day they practiced *What To Do when someone reveals a lover infected them with the pox, dumped them after stealing their youth, and left them alone to slide into insanity*. She chose silence as the more appropriate response.

"I was there when Nate was born and watched him grow up. We were close once. Then he changed. He shut his emotions away and became like them. He did promise me revenge on his uncle. And he honoured his word." She held out the book, *Magycks of the Gods* stamped in large black letters across the front.

Cara took the book. "What was he like? As a boy?"

A broad smile split her face. "As charming as he is now. But so open. As he grew older, he threw up his defences, to protect himself. His relationship with his father was not a happy one."

She snorted. "I know what that is like."

De Sal tilted her head. "You are not so different."

Her fingers trailed along the shelf, stopping at a large red spine.

"Are you sure you don't want a book?" She drew her nails down the spine, revealing one ornate letter at a time. K. A. M. A. S. U.—

"I know that book." Cara halted the finger's progress; heat climbed up her throat. "I have spent time in India."

The countess clapped her hands together, delighted with the gem of knowledge. "Excellent. You will be a surprise to Nate, then."

*And somehow, we have detoured back to my love life.*

She tapped a fingernail on the ancient book in Cara's hands. "Let me know what you find. I expect to hear all the gory details. I like your visits. No one else is brave enough to cross my threshold, apart from my little songbird who trills information. You must call me Helene. I have been too long without a real friend."

Dust motes rose off the old cover. Helene flicked a hand to brush one away, and grazed her nose. She gave a startled cry as the organ slid down her face and hit the carpet. Wide eyes looked at Cara. Two metal prongs glinted, showing the exposed artificial nose attachments. The pox had eaten away all the gristle, and left a gaping, open hole in her once beautiful face.

A flash of green and the small pug dog dove on the nose and darted from the library with its trophy.

"Minnow!" Helene shrieked and ran in hot pursuit.

## CHAPTER 16



*WEDNESDAY, July 17*

Three keys sat on the corner of Inspector Fraser's desk. Amongst the chaos, they were a sliver of order, with space neatly cleared around them. Each key was an identical distance from its companions. Teeth faced inward; ornate filigree bows touched the outer edge of the desk. Through the bows, and attached with twine, cardboard labels dangled over the side. Inscribed in black ink on each label was the name of a girl. A dead girl. Three lives locked, never to be opened again.

Fraser stood and touched the closest key with his fingertips. *Beth Armstrong*. He walked with leaden feet up the stairs to the superintendent's office. Taking a deep breath, he rapped sharply on the door.

"Enter," barked an order. The super occupied an entire corner on the top floor, with a picturesque view of the city. He stood at his window, a dispatch dangling from his fingers. He looked up at Fraser's entry.

"Ah, Fraser, what progress have you made?" Clipped tones indicated another military man. A colonel in a former life, he was used to having his orders obeyed and never questioned.

Fraser halted in the middle of the room and coughed to clear his throat. "I believe I am starting to discern a pattern among the victims—"

"Starting? You're *starting* to discern something?" His superior swung to

regard him, a thick red vein pulsing in his temple. "We have three dead young women. Gentlewomen, Fraser. Do you understand? Three dead ladies, not your common street tarts. How many have to die before you find him?"

Fraser hated this bit. The victim's place of birth should have no influence over how much effort he expended to find the killer. Street girl or noble, they both deserved the same level of attention from him. Although given a choice, he would rather seek out a street girl for comfort than any highly bred, nervous creature. "I'm sure you appreciate, sir, we need to examine all the clues to find the monstrous person responsible."

"I need you to appreciate that I want to be able to enjoy a quiet brandy in my club without being accosted by anxious aristocrats!" the superintendent bellowed. "London is in an uproar, we have some chap stalking and killing the daughters of the nobility. You cannot begin to appreciate the pressure I am under, or how many irate questions I have to field while at my club." His voice rose and fell with his anger, his cheeks and nose turning beetroot red.

Fraser remained calm; he had weathered such storms before. Better to let the superintendent's rage buffet about him, bend under the pressure, and remain standing in its wake.

"I believe we have a strong lead with Beth Armstrong. The sarcophagus she was found in came from one of Lyons' airships." He stood with his hands behind his back. Threads were beginning to draw together, the picture revealing itself.

"Viscount Lyons? Be very careful of your facts before you go after him. Just because the coffin passed through his hangar doesn't mean he's involved. Any one of his crew could have had access to it." The superintendent tossed the dispatch on his desk and sank into his upholstered leather chair. "He's one of us. Be sure of your evidence."

"Quite," he agreed with his superior. *But not only did he have access to the sarcophagus, he also fences valuable and exotic items, and has a strong interest in Cara Devon.*

The superintendent waved his hand, dismissing Fraser from his presence. "Let me know if anything else comes up. Otherwise I expect progress by the end of the next week."

He bowed his head and remained silent, lest he say something out of turn. Today was Wednesday; his super expected him to solve the murders within the next ten days.

Back in his office, he flung himself into the chair and stared with unseeing eyes at the chalkboard that covered one wall. To one side was the name Lord Devon, and next to it the names of the girls, their addresses, and what slim correlations he could find among them. Arrows and question marks flew back and forth, but none hit their target. He was so close, if he reached out his hand, he should be able to grasp it, yet when he opened his fingers, his palm was always empty.

Connor appeared in the doorway carrying a mug of steaming tea. As he approached the desk, he passed too closely to the chalkboard, his massive shoulder brushing one of the names.

Fraser uttered a groan of frustration. "You rubbed out her name."

Connor plonked down the tea and looked from chalkboard to his sleeve.

"Aw, she's all over me." Using one meaty hand, he brushed the remnants of Abigail Swan's name from where it clung to his dark blue jacket.

Rubbing his hands over his face, Fraser looked up at the chalkboard, now minus one surname. He was running out of leads and accumulating dead girls.

Connor cast around, looking for a piece of chalk. Finding one, he approached the board.

"Names, names, and family names," Fraser muttered, contemplating the lonely Swan, bereft of its forename. Now, instead of representing a beautiful young debutante, it could mean her family, her estate, or her father. *Click*. A cog turned in his brain, a wheel fell into place, and a previously hidden door swung open.

"Stop!" he cried.

Connor froze. Fraser once saved his life by halting him as he was about to step on a land mine. Now he stopped instantly whenever Fraser used a certain tone of voice. Connor's eyes rolled downward, as though expecting to find something deadly attached to his leg or under his foot.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"It's the names." Fraser pushed himself away from his desk.

"What?" Connor dared a look over his shoulder, a frown creasing his normally smooth brow.

"I've been looking at the names all wrong." He pounced on the small duster sitting on top of a filing cabinet. "You can move now, preferably out of the way."

Connor exhaled and gingerly stepped backward three paces.

Fraser took his place in front of the board and rapidly rubbed out Beth and Jennifer. He left only three surnames—Lovell, Swan, and Armstrong. Above the surnames he wrote *Lord*, *Colonel*, and *Sir*.

Now the board read *Lord Devon*, *Lord Lovell*, *Colonel Swan*, and *Sir Armstrong*.

He turned to face Connor, the chalk still clutched in his fingers. "We've been trying to connect the girls back to Devon somehow. But what if the connection isn't the girls, but their fathers?"

His sergeant blinked. "They're of an age. Seems the four chaps would have more in common. They probably socialised at the same clubs."

Fraser nodded. His excitement building, his skin itched for him to move, hunt, to follow the scent. "Exactly. What if he selects the daughters because of their fathers? Maybe the killer is trying to send a message."

Connor was not blessed with Fraser's intellect. He struggled to keep pace with his superior. "What about Cara Devon? Why is she alive then?"

Fraser frowned. "That doesn't make sense to me either. Except she hasn't lived in London for seven years. Only the death of her father brought her

here."

"So why doesn't he go after her now?" Connor scratched his close-cropped head.

Keen intelligence lit in Fraser's eyes. He was on the brink of solving the puzzle. As he suspected, Cara Devon was proving the linchpin. "An interesting question, is it not?"

Stepping back from his handiwork, Fraser took a drink from his tea, spat it out—the liquid far too hot—and abandoned the mug. He grabbed his bowler and jacket from their stand behind the door. "Come on, Connor. We need to revisit the grieving fathers. This time we need to ask them what they knew of Lord Devon."

THEIR FIRST STOP was the home of Lord Lovell. Fraser stared up at the imposing, cream brick, multi-storeyed façade.

"Better you remain here, I think, Connor." He politely informed the sergeant, as he grabbed his bowler. The other man blew out a snort and climbed into the front seat next to the driver, leaving Fraser to tiptoe delicately through the social minefield awaiting him.

He politely enquired of the butler if Lord Lovell could spare him five minutes of his time.

The butler looked put out to see him at the front door, making it clear he thought Fraser's sort should be using the back entrance.

Unperturbed, he refused to budge from the front step, forcing the butler to usher him in so he could close the doors on the ever-watchful neighbours.

The butler disappeared down the wide hallway and then silently reappeared, thanks to soft-soled shoes. "His lordship can spare *five minutes*, Inspector."

Fraser smiled and followed the butler down the darkened hallway. He imagined the servant would have his pocket watch out as soon as he crossed

the threshold into the study.

The tense atmosphere in the study hit him the moment he entered.

"I hope you are here to inform me of an impending arrest." Lord Lovell bristled with anger. The passage of three weeks had done nothing to diminish his anguish at the loss of his daughter.

"Unfortunately, no," Fraser was forced to admit, doffing his faithful bowler. "But I am following a promising line of enquiry."

Cold, hard eyes regarded him, questioning his ability.

Extracting his notebook, he launched straight in, not wasting any of the precious minutes allotted to him. "Did you know Lord Devon?"

Lord Lovell straightened under the question, his eyes narrowed. "Yes, we were acquainted."

"And Colonel Swan?"

A long pause, before he answered. "I am also acquainted with the Colonel, and with Sir Armstrong, before you ask. What exactly are you getting at, Fraser?"

He trod carefully with his next words. "Might I enquire as to the nature of your association?"

"We attend the same club, share a few drinks, cigars, and talk as men do." Watchful eyes and measured words; there would be no full disclosure here.

"Is that all?" He knew he faced a tough incline ahead of him. He needed to get to the root of their association. Nobles always guarded what they did behind closed doors, even if it ended in murder.

"I'll tell you if I recollect anything relevant." A dismissal, his five minutes up.

Fraser sighed. He was on the right path now, he only had to undermine them to find the information he sought. Lord Lovell halted him at the door.

"There is one thing, which we believe requires an answer."

He turned. "Yes, milord?"

"If this all ties back to Devon, why is his daughter, Cara, still alive? She's

damaged, that one. No one would miss her. Why didn't the killer go after her and leave our daughters alone?" His words betrayed the men had discussed the connection to Devon.

A frown touched Fraser's face. "Unfortunately, I don't yet have a satisfactory answer."

## CHAPTER 17



*THURSDAY, July 18*

Tired of the silent and gloomy library, and her cramped apartment, Cara took the pragmatic step of invading Nathaniel's luxurious home. Armed with a satchel full of books and diaries, she commandeered the ornate conservatory, the staff too startled to stop her. When Jackson appeared, he simply told them to leave her to it, after they provided a pitcher of lemonade and a plate of scones.

The conservatory was the closest she could get to Egypt, yearning to immerse herself in the brief happy time and entice the last few memories to the surface. The room had soaring indoor palms and a humid interior. She hoped the atmosphere would put her in the right mood for her work. Small mechanical butterflies swept around the space of all different iridescent hues. They flew from palm to palm, before resting in the sun's rays. Their brightly enamelled wings pulsed back and forth, catching and deflecting the sunlight. They were beautiful and an unexpected touch of whimsy to the house of a criminal overlord.

A white, painted daybed covered in brightly striped calico stood under one expanse of glass. Lined up with military precision along one side were numerous cushions. Cara threw herself upon the daybed. She extracted *Magycks of the Gods* from her satchel and dropped the leather bag back on

the floor. A maid entered and deposited the tray of refreshments on the wrought iron table next to the daybed. She gave Cara a wordless curtsy before retreating.

She lay on her stomach, pulled several throw pillows around her, and read in the bright light. Rays poured in through the glass and lit up her body, as she reclined with the medieval book propped up on a cushion. Today, she wore a halter neck corset, with her chemise pulled down her shoulders, leaving an expanse of her back naked. The scars became silver chains in the sunlight; running between her shoulders until they disappeared under the rich, brocade fabric of the corset. She looked like a larger version of the petite butterflies, radiant beams dancing over her body.

Cara spent the previous week searching amongst her father's notes for any references to Egypt and Nefertiti's Heart. Although he went to great length to describe his chase and ultimate possession of the artifact, he clammed up when it came to saying what he did with the relic. Much to Cara's dismay, the Heart appeared to be the only object without a definitive resting place. She had compiled a list of banks, security houses, and a few country estates to visit to amass the remainder of the collection.

The book from Helene proved slow going. The ancient English and tiny script gave her headaches after only a short time of study. She read a passage numerous times before the words slowly made sense. Flicking through the pictures at least yielded the correct section to read.

She heard Nathaniel's boot heels as he entered the lush garden room. The daybed dipped as he sat. With an arm on either side of her, he leaned over to trail kisses along her exposed shoulder blades. His kiss was a sensual greeting, far superior to any handshake or polite bow. A shiver ran through her body, followed by a deep sigh.

"You're blocking my sun." She rolled onto her back to stare up at him. He trapped her within his arms, his eyes locked on hers. Heat spread over her torso and her breath hitched in anticipation. The fear in her gut stretched and

extended a sharp claw, reminding her it still dwelt inside. She wondered what she would do if Nathaniel lowered himself onto her—panic and knee him in the groin, or dissolve into a puddle of gooey longing?

He brushed a fingertip over the blue-black bruise on her face, courtesy of her bout in the pub earlier in the week. The tiniest fragment of worry flickered behind his eyes before it disappeared. "You seem to have made yourself at home."

"I thought I would save Jackson or Miguel from sitting outside the library all day. I figure if I'm here, you know exactly where I am."

"How's the research going?" He sat up, breaking eye contact and rendering her internal question hypothetical, at least for the moment.

"Slowly. According to the oral histories, when Nefertiti died, her heart was removed as part of the normal mummification process. Instead of the expected organ, they found a gem." She clutched the ancient book to her bosom like a protective talisman. "The legend says the purity and strength of her love for Akhenaten was such that her heart turned into a diamond. Showing their love was eternal, enduring forever, like the gem."

Nathaniel raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Sounds like a cold sort of love, if she had a diamond instead of a heart."

She blew a raspberry at him. "Men. Obviously the romance of the symbolism is lost on you."

"Not at all."

His low tone vibrated through her body. She dropped her eyes back to the book, which proved rather ineffectual as either talisman or shield.

"Then what happened?"

"Anubis was touched by the strength of their love. He said he would release Akhenaten from the Underworld, and if he could find Nefertiti in the next life, he would grant them life, eternal as the diamond heart. He offered Akhenaten immortality."

Nathaniel trailed his fingers down her arm. "So where do the keys fit into

all this?"

Cara exhaled a held breath, while trying to marshal her thoughts, a difficult task with Nathaniel so close, and stroking her.

"The heart is part diamond, part mechanical, with gold cogs and gears. Lapis lazuli and heliotrope veins run through the middle. From what I remember, father could never get it to work." She tapped the closed book. "According to this, Akhenaten is Nefertiti's true love. Only he possesses the key to her heart, which will allow him to claim their immortality. He must unlock the heart, which, I assume, requires some form of a key."

"But it's just a story, an oral folktale." He took the book from her grasp and set it on the daybed, leaving her with nothing to shield herself from him.

"I've seen the Heart. I wouldn't have a clue if it really is a diamond or not. Gemmology didn't interest fourteen-year-old me." At fourteen, she had more immediate concerns, like how to escape her weekly beating. She saw the artifact the week before her father gave her to Clayton, occupying pride of place on his desk in the library. He would spend hours staring at it, trying to figure out the mechanism. Cara thought it gruesome; who would want to fashion a gem into an organ? The Heart sat on his desk that final day, when everything faded to black.

"I wonder if it truly is a diamond. A gem that size would be worth a small fortune, without the added provenance of the murders." The treasure-hungry pirate glinted in his eyes. "You'd be a very wealthy woman. Have you found it yet?"

"No." She chewed her bottom lip. A diamond the size of a fist, and she couldn't find a single clue to its whereabouts. "Given the thing was stolen from its original owner in Egypt I would need to use your services to offload it. And I assume you'd still want your seven percent? So you stand to earn a tidy sum as well."

His eyes roamed over her reclining form. "You could try to haggle me down to five if you want?"

"What would it cost me?" She could barely ask the question, before the answer blazed in his eyes and singed the clothes from her body, leaving her exposed. "Nathaniel—"

He bent his arms on either side of her, lowering himself, but keeping his weight on his hands. "Nate. I want you to call me Nate."

"I thought that was only for intimate acquaintances?"

"Perhaps it's time we fixed that?" He bit her bottom lip, making her gasp, before dropping his head to cover her mouth. His kiss was unhurried, slowly possessing her, letting the heat build between them. His tongue explored every surface of her mouth, claiming its territory.

She curled her fingers deep into the calico cover of the daybed, clutching handfuls of fabric as his tongue danced with hers. She was scared if she put her hands on him, touched him, she wouldn't be able to stop.

Releasing her mouth, he moved to her throat, licking and kissing the delicate skin down to the base of her neck. He followed the line of her collarbone with his mouth, gently nipping the bone.

"Nate." His name became a cry on her lips. She arched her neck off the pillow, the heat he invoked pooling in her centre. One of his hands stroked up her side, reaching for the underside of her breast, but frustrated by the thick brocade and boning of her corset. The fear stretched within her.

Nate stopped and sat up, surveying the damage he wreaked on her self-control.

Cara breathed hard. *Guess the answer to my question is, dissolve into gooey puddle of longing.*

"How is it you have travelled the world without a chaperon? You move about London with no one to watch your every move." The change of topic gave her a chance to catch her breath.

"You've tried, remember?" She chided him of his attempts to tail her. "My grandmother always gave me a considerable amount of autonomy. And it's not like we have to worry about my reputation being ruined."

"I only watch you to ensure your protection, same as any chaperone, and to ascertain if you have any suitors." He sat next to her so composed, but she noted his chest rose and fell faster than usual.

As much as he created turmoil within her, she affected him too. She tucked the titbit of knowledge away as she stroked the cover of the ancient book. "I don't need protecting. Or any suitors, I'm not the marrying kind of girl."

External dangers didn't concern her, except for the one right in front of her, capable of stealing her breath. She'd made up her mind days ago to follow her fascination for him, regardless of where the allure led her. She had shut herself away in a tower for too long. "My father tried to marry me off in absentia once, not a hugely successful endeavour for him."

A smile twitched the corner of his mouth. "Who was the poor unfortunate you scorned?"

"I have no idea. It was a couple of years ago. I was in America when Nan forwarded his letter. I refused to return to England. Apparently the solicitor wouldn't proceed without some indication of consent from me." A mischievous glint shone in her eyes. "Or perhaps he forged my name, and I am married, but just don't know it?"

"And now? Don't you want to regain your place among the ton?"

She threw up her hands; a darting butterfly settled on her outstretched limb. The insect's red and gold wings glinted and winked before it took flight, heading back to the protection of the shrubbery. "I'm twenty-one and my father is dead. Countess de Sal said I was free and I intend to remain that way. Besides, no man would dare try and claim me."

"I would dare." His face was dead calm, with no hint if he joked or was serious.

She held her breath. Her stomach flip-flopped at the thought of him in charge of her life, of waking every morning to his intense gaze over the breakfast table, or finding his head on the pillow next to her. "My

grandmother would never agree. Nice try. You won't get your hands on the artifacts that way."

"You still think that's my motive? I thought I was plain in my attempts to get my hands on you? Perhaps I need to be more obvious." He made to lean toward her again and she gave a yelp and sat up.

Their attraction wasn't a line of conversation she wanted to pursue. Certainly not while she lay on a bed in the sun, breathless from his passionate kiss. An idea chewed its way through her brain. "What if these artifacts aren't just ancient objects?"

"What else would they be?" He rose from the daybed and moved to stand amongst the greenery, putting physical distance between them.

She watched him lean against a palm so tall its fronds pushed against the glass roof of the conservatory.

"What if they actually did the things the oral histories purport they do?" She voiced the thought that itched in the back of her brain for days, ever since taking possession of the book.

He frowned. "That would be impossible."

"Is it? What if Boudicca's Cuff really does give the holder success in battle?"

Nate was silent, giving the idea some thought, rather than dismissing her out of hand. "Business is a type of battlefield. I can enquire as to the investment success of the person who purchased the cuff. It will be easy to chart the course he has taken and whether he won or lost."

A small measure of relief crept into Cara. The effect of the cuff was something they could quantify. The note from her father gnawed at her: *careful, they are not what they seem*. Cara initially thought he referred to an enemy, perhaps the person who delivered the asp. A friend or acquaintance who masqueraded and hid their true intent. But with each passing day, she became more convinced he meant the artifacts.

"Maybe that's why my father was so paranoid. He knew. It would explain

the extraordinary lengths he took to acquire the artifacts. And the layers of security he maintained over where he hid them." She still didn't know where to look for the Heart, his prized possession and his biggest secret.

Cara packed away the books in her satchel, her mind too fragmented to carry on with the intense study. Something else ate at her, something tied to the brutal deaths of three girls. "What if Nefertiti's Heart really can confer immortality?"

He let out an appreciative whistle. "Then it's not just incredibly valuable, it's priceless."

"How do you tell if someone is immortal?" she whispered.

"You kill them, and see if they get up again," he answered, always pragmatic.

## CHAPTER 18



*SATURDAY, July 20*

The small millinery shop had called Cara's name from the very first day she strode past its window. Numerous gaudy hats in riotous colours stocked the bay window. To one side of the display hung an elegant little dark green number; it looked plain and unadorned next to its excessive companions. Unlike the other hats, some of which sported at least half a chicken, this one had only three peacock feathers curling over the large brim. She didn't normally succumb to girlish frippery, but, very occasionally, the need for something pretty crept up on her. Today, she finally gave in to temptation and entered the store.

The shop buzzed with a multitude of women trying on hats, stroking feathers, and playing with chiffon ribbons while keeping up constant conversation. Cara eyed the little felt hat in the window, wondering if the colour would reflect the tint in her eyes. The hat had a restrained style. A wide brim gave quite a different feel from the bonnets or miniature top hats, which covered every surface in the store. Cara reached out a hand, about to lift the hat off the hook dangling from the ceiling, when a hiss from behind froze her fingers.

"My daughter would be alive if not for you," a loud voice accused her.

All thoughts of the hat fled her head. After a brief check of her mental

armour, she turned. A tall, angry-looking woman glared at her. Four women surrounded her, and nodded their heads. The group was all draped from head to toe in black, indicating recent loss and full mourning. They gripped a variety of black hats with thick, concealing veils, and all eyes narrowed to examine her.

"Excuse me?" Her eyes swept the small shop. Along with the group dressed in black, the other shoppers turned to gawk. Cara hadn't expected a showdown at the milliner's; she wasn't dressed for the occasion. With the advent of the warmer weather, she'd left her jacket at home as well as her shoulder holster and hip belt. A Derringer nestled against her thigh, but she would have to lift her skirts to reach the tiny gun. The only other weapon on her was the blade concealed under the fold of her sleeve. Knives were messy, and she hated to splash blood on her corset.

"These murders only started when you came to London. Our daughters would be alive if you had stayed away." The woman's tone climbed toward hysteria. Her friends patted her arms and made agreeable noises while shooting Cara deadly looks.

"I think you have me confused with someone else." Cara kept her tone calm. She never suspected hat shopping would be so fraught with tension. No wonder she normally avoided the girly occupation; this could turn her off shopping for life.

"The Enforcers say you are involved. They have been asking questions about you and your father. My daughter died a matter of days after you appeared." The woman swayed on her feet, and grabbed her supporters. They lowered her onto a seat placed behind her.

She placed the hysterical woman now: Lady Lovell. Her daughter Jennifer was the first victim of the mysterious killer. Or second, if he started with Lord Devon. The Enforcers' interest in Cara was now out of the bag. A shiver ran down her spine. *And so it starts, the stares and taunts and outright hostility.*

"Beth Armstrong was found in a stone sarcophagus that took four strong men to lift the lid. If I am responsible, how do you think I achieved that on my own?" Cara thought it funny how hysterical people ignored logic. However, they obviously decided as a group she was the scapegoat. She got the distinct impression the only way to prove her innocence to these people would be to get herself murdered.

"You're not wanted here. You're an unwelcome taint in the air." Lady Lovell narrowed her eyes and shot her words like bullets.

She hoped the woman's grief spoke, but she saw the nods and murmurs of agreement from the other noblewomen in the shop. She straightened her back and maintained her dignity. She refused to crack in front of them. She would never give them the satisfaction of knowing how deeply they cut her. "When they catch him, you will realise how wrong you are."

"We're not wrong about you."

Cara refused to debate her suitability as a murder suspect, and slipped out the door. She thrust a sob back down her throat. Eyes downcast, she all but ran along the pavement.

She burst through the doors to the Mayfair address before she knew what she was doing.

Jackson gave her a startled look.

"Is he free?" she demanded.

"No. But he'll see you, darling." He gestured with his head and another imposing bodyguard swung the study door open to admit her.

Nate looked up from his desk at the intrusion. Brief curiosity crossed his face at her obvious agitation.

She paced in front of his desk.

"I thought you didn't need my protection, but you look like you wished you had it today."

She halted mid-pace and scowled. *Damn it! I've run straight to him.* He was a magnet and she was a piece of metal. In her distress, it seemed natural

to run in this direction. She needed his calm presence to wash over her and soothe her anguish.

"Weren't you toying with leaving London?"

"Inspector Fraser told me I'm not allowed to leave until he has completed his enquiries." She waved her hand, trying to dismiss Fraser and his investigation from her mind.

He made a discreet snort, which sounded like disdain. "I can put you on an airship. Where do you want to go?"

She was sorely tempted; she could go anywhere. With a pirate at the helm, an incredibly handsome pirate. An idea crept into her head and erased the unpleasant encounter she endured in the hat shop. A sly smile spread over her face.

"Where's Loki headed next?" She tried to sound nonchalant.

Nate blinked and laid his pen down. She had his full attention now, his jaw clenched and unclenched. "Perhaps not with him."

She shrugged; she saw the reaction she was after. He appeared impassive, but she was learning to search his face for minute changes and clues to what was going on behind those pale blue eyes. "Does your offer of an evening's entertainment still stand?"

"Of course. What has happened?"

"I've just been accosted in a milliner's shop and accused of murdering those girls. I'm tired of two-faced nobles who throw baseless allegations about me." She resorted to more pacing, waiting for her agitation to run its course. Worn out, she placed both hands on his desktop. "I'm tired of hanging in the shadows, keeping out of their way and skulking as though I have done something wrong. It's time I confronted some demons head-on. And I think you're just the person to have my back."

The corner of his mouth twitched; she longed to see him smile again and was curious about what it would take.

An impulsive idea bubbled to the surface of her mind. "Will you take me

to Su-Terré?"

She licked her lips as she spoke the name of the illicit underground club. As a child, she heard the name, whispered by adults in the same hushed, excited tone children used to talk about presents on Christmas Eve. The club only had one currency—escape. You went there to either procure it or provide it.

His eyes narrowed. "Not yet. To go there, you have to answer a question for me. Are you mine, or willing to be traded?"

*Mine.* His words washed over her. *Are you mine?* Her nipples tightened against the stiff fabric of her corset at the idea. She parted her lips, needing to moisten them again. His eyebrow shot up, waiting for her response. She let out a heavy sigh; she wasn't ready, not yet.

"I have some business to conduct tonight at Savage's. I can escort you there, if you wish to accompany me?" He offered Savage's, instead, a legitimate playground for the wealthy in fashionable St James, containing a ballroom and several gaming rooms.

"At the gaming tables, I assume?" She wondered who would be relieved of their fortune tonight by choosing to sit opposite him. It would be interesting to watch him play.

"No. The ballroom. It's a far better place to hold a civilised conversation, saves all sorts of unpleasantness from sore losers."

She was taken aback; the ballroom was a far more crowded venue than the quieter poker tables. She turned the idea over in her head. Most of society would be there tonight; they sought safety in numbers, and with high summer approaching, the season was nearly over. The next week or two would see them leave the city for country estates. It would be a very public stand. She wouldn't just be coming out from the shadows, she would be standing under an airship searchlight. "All right."

One black eyebrow arched. "So you'll be dancing?"

She stiffened; she hadn't considered that proposition. She thought to

simply watch and annoy the ton by breathing or stealing the last smoked salmon canapé. Dancing meant being held. Close. The monster inside her stirred, and lifted its head, but held its place, Nate's touch becoming something she craved, rather than feared. She didn't have to go. She could turn and retreat back to her rooms, forget she ever mentioned confronting the ton. But she'd spent years running and she grew tired of it.

"Bathe and change while you think about it. I have a dress you can wear for the occasion."

"Show me." Her voice was hesitant. "Here, now. What would it be like?"

He rose from his desk and approached her in slow motion. The blood rushed through her veins and pounded in her ears so loudly it drowned out his carriage clock on the mantle. He stopped inches from her. He picked up her right hand in his, holding it high. He slid his other hand around her waist, his fingers resting in the small of her back. His gaze never wavered from her eyes as he drew her to his chest.

Cara gasped at the intimacy of the embrace.

"It's scandalous to dance so closely." She tried to make light of the anticipated panic. Her breasts grazed his chest. She wanted to close her eyes and surrender herself to his touch.

"Good. It will give society something to be jealous about." His voice was low and throaty next to her ear. With her so close, he could skim her neck with his lips.

She held her breath, waiting for the monster to protest, waiting for the fear to force her to flee, but it had diminished in size over the last few weeks and remained silent. Instead, laughter welled up. She thought how jealous the other women would be, if he did this in the ballroom. They would never dare to step into his arms. They could only press their thighs together and dream of his lips tasting their bare skin.

She smiled; she trusted him, at least this far. "Let's do this."

He kissed her, his lips as gentle as his embrace. She leaned into him, the

hunger becoming more insistent, as she pressed against his body. Her growing need openly challenged the fear residing within her for dominance, and need was winning.

He withdrew and placed her at arm's length.

"Go change, or you might not make it out of my study." His voice was thick with his desire for her.

She realised how close she danced to danger and scampered from his arms. She flashed him a smile before ducking out the door and up the stairs.

The bath was luxurious, with its combination of steam and exotic oils. She could have soaked all evening, letting the hot water leach away her cares and the ugly confrontation in the shop. She poured the fragrant oil into her palm and slathered it over her body, watching her skin absorb the tiny beads.

All too soon, the maid coughed politely and held out a towel. She toyed with disappearing beneath the water, and pretending she wasn't there, but didn't want to risk Nate coming to retrieve her. *Not tonight, anyway.*

Once dressed, she twirled in front of the mirror. *What am I doing?*

She couldn't fathom how Nate commissioned the gown and had it completed so quickly. Breathtakingly unconventional, the dress was made to be worn with no crinoline, heavy petticoats, or bulky drawers. The delicate, grey, silk chiffon was scattered all over with tiny, silver embroidered stars, and a diamante winked in the centre of each one. Apart from the dress, he provided a diamond choker to encircle her slim neck and a diamond-encrusted pin to nestle amongst her hair. The maid threw her hands up in despair at Cara's closely shorn locks. She finally decided to slick it back, making Cara's hair sleek like an otter pelt, before tucking the jewels behind her ear.

She paused at the top of the stairs, taking a moment to stare down the stairs at him, conferring with one of his men. He was handsome in his formal tails, the jacket tailored to his broad shoulders and narrow waist. His waistcoat gleamed the same pale grey as her dress, also sprinkled with

embroidered stars. They would complement each other this evening.

She tried to analyse the tug deep in her gut whenever she saw him. *Is that the appeal, purely his attractiveness? Or is it something deeper?* Love was the sort of thing a girl would discuss with her mother, if she had one. Hers had died in childbirth, giving her life for Cara's. There was a hole in her life, in her heart, where her mother should have resided. *I need to talk to Nan.*

With one hand on the balustrade, she stepped off the top stair.

Nate's head shot up on hearing her light tread. His eyes drank in every move she made in the sinuous dress, as she descended. He moved to the bottom step, to take her hand, raising it to his lips while his eyes locked with hers.

She held her breath. He made the formal gesture into something far more intimate. His lips brushed the back of her hand, a promise of so much more to come, if only she dared reach out and take it.

## CHAPTER 19



THE CARRIAGE CAME to a stop under the portico to Savage's, on King Street. Aristocrats of all different levels poured into the large entranceway, eager to commence their night-time entertainments, despite the growing fear of a madman stalking amongst them. Cara closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Are you ready? Or would you rather go somewhere quieter?" Nate asked from her side. "Boxing, perhaps?"

In high society, a woman's reputation was everything, the only jewel she possessed, and it had to be closely, and vigorously, guarded. Cara's reputation was permanently ruined. She never debuted. She wasn't fit to be seen with the chaste daughters who were once her childhood friends. She travelled for seven years, learning about herself, and now she would step into the centre of their territory and challenge their views openly.

She opened her eyes, wide and full of defiance. "I'm ready. They can't shun me anymore or gossip behind my back. Let's see if they are brave enough to do it to my face."

He leaned in and kissed her bare shoulder, sending a ripple down her spine. "I've got your back."

He helped her from the carriage.

A newsboy stood on the pavement, waving the evening paper, yelling in his clear voice, "Enforcers clueless in senseless murders!"

Some of the men stopped, tossed the boy coins, and took papers from his outstretched hand. She could hear the murmurs running through the crowd, repeating snippets from the article. Murder of the lower classes was entertaining news; murder amongst their set sparked discord and fear. Three murders of eligible girls put a dampener on the Season. Cara could see fathers and brothers closely watching their daughters and sisters. No one would slip unnoticed from the ballroom tonight.

She entered Savage's on Nate's arm. On the entranceway floor, terra cotta red, navy blue, and cream tiles spiralled ever outward in an intricate pattern. Overhanging the centre of the pattern, an enormous chandelier, several tiers high, threw light in every direction. Cara picked up the corner of her skirt as they descended the red-carpeted stairs into the lavish ballroom. Chandeliers hung every few feet; the crystals picked up each light and threw it back to play with the diamonds and jewels adorning the women. They sent rainbows of colour whirling around the room. The deep blood-red walls heightened the emotion of the room and projected it back on the occupants.

Mechanical waiters glided through the patrons, serene, like swans. Their movements were perfectly fluid so as not to disturb the trays of champagne flutes and canapés attached to their metal limbs.

Heads swivelled; opera glasses and pince-nez raised as the dowagers present sought to identify Cara's face. They tried to ascertain who got the jump on their precious daughters by appearing with the much-sought-after viscount. Murder aside, marriage was a serious business, and Cara, an unexpected intrusion. Nate was notoriously cagey. He never courted anyone openly and he was fast approaching the age all good heirs were expected to tie themselves down. The titter of gossip rushed through the crowd like a wave approaching the shore. The wall of chatter crashed against the sand, turning to gasps of shock, as the handsome couple descended farther into the room.

The light from the chandelier caught and played with the diamantes sewn

onto Cara's dress. The stars glittered in the refracted light of the ballroom, clothing her in an early evening sky. The sensuous fabric clung to her slender form, the front a simple drape dropping straight to the ground. Sleeveless, the skirt spilled into a sinuous train behind her. The back cut scandalously low, a silver chain holding the two sides together across her shoulder blades. The effect highlighted the scars running over her spine and made them part of the dress design.

Society enjoyed gossiping about violence committed behind closed doors, but they didn't like to be openly confronted with the results of abuse. Or to see brutality as headline news. But, no one could deny what had been done to her, not when Nate so elegantly framed her scars.

The press of people surrounded them, and Cara saw the effect of the unsolved murders ripple through the ballroom. Daughters were closely guarded, potential dance partners scrutinised by male family members before releasing a delicate hand. Fathers prowled the edges of the floor, watching with eagle eyes and swooping down to reclaim loved ones once the dance concluded.

"Dance with me," Nate whispered. "Since they are all going to gossip about us anyway, let's make it completely scandalous."

The orchestra occupied one end of the cavernous ballroom, the music amplified and circulated around the room. As the opening refrain of a waltz played, he swung her into his arms. He held her far closer than acceptable, his chest millimetres from hers. His hand spanned the flesh at the small of her back. His fingers gently stroked her exposed spine.

She wanted to close her eyes and bask in the sensation as they moved to the slow music.

*This must be what a cat feels like, lying in front of the fire and having its fur stroked.*

A mental image flashed through her mind. She lay naked in front of a fireplace, the heat from the flames settled over her like a blanket. Nate ran his

hands up her body, igniting an inferno. She flung her eyes open before she became lost in her daydream, to find his cool gaze washing over her face.

He drew in a sharp breath. "Whatever are you thinking about? I hope it's us doing something naked, because your eyes have changed from hazel to green, as they do when I kiss you."

She dropped her eyes, trying desperately to cool the heat rising up her neck. She looked around for a distraction, searching for an inane topic of conversation. They waltzed past a waiter circulating with a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

*Canapés? Oh, hell.* Her mental picture changed to one of his dark head bent over her as he licked a trail of caviar off her stomach. His tongue probed into her bellybutton, lapping every trace of the expensive delicacy from her skin, as fire stabbed through her core. She moaned and arched her back under his touch. She fled from the image; her mind returned to the ballroom and Nate's intense gaze.

The corner of his mouth twitched, as he held in his laughter. "Perhaps I'll torture the details out of you later. It certainly looks worthwhile, to know what occupies your thoughts and makes you blush."

She changed the topic, to save her sanity. "Any word about the person who bought Boudicca's Cuff?"

"A little. A business deal no one thought would succeed reaped him unexpected rewards. I intend to probe further this evening. Tongues are looser in this sort of environment." His eyes scanned the room, seeking out those he would subject to his scrutiny later.

As they danced, her line of sight caught a face burned into the back of her brain, a visage that had given her nightmares for more years than she cared to remember. The colour drained from her cheeks and she faltered.

Nate tightened his grip, lest she fall. Spinning her, he cast around for what caused her to miss a step.

"Remember who you are," he whispered. "You're a survivor, a fighter."

Her eyes narrowed, she remembered the dig Amy's fiancé threw at her in the restaurant. Clayton justified his behaviour by claiming she wasn't a maid. The implication clear—she either deserved her fate, or worse, invited his brutality.

"What's getting you angry?" his voice brushed over her ear.

She gave a start. Either he read her far too easily, or she was flashing her emotions conspicuously this evening. "Let's see how well you remember your history lessons. The Romans promised they would never throw a virgin to the lions. Do you know what they used to do, to ensure that?"

His eyes flicked to where Clayton stood laughing with his cronies, obviously sharing some joke amongst them, as they flashed looks in Cara's direction. His attention returned to her. "The Romans had their guards rape all the women first."

She nodded. "Exactly. So they could loudly proclaim no virgin was torn apart by the predators."

"Who?" The dance ended and he drew her to the side of the ballroom.

She tightened her grip in his hand, remembering. Clayton could make his loud boasts because he had had someone else defile her first. "His valet."

She shoved the memory back down again. "I need some air."

There were far too many people in the ballroom and not enough oxygen. Even though she ditched the corset this evening, she found her breath coming in shallow gasps.

They walked down the side of the ballroom, to where the doors to the wide balcony folded back upon themselves. Her tormentor moved, ensuring their paths would cross.

"Well, well. It's little Cara Devon," his familiar voice checked her step. "Haven't you grown into something rather interesting?"

Time froze. Those in the ballroom, riveted to the spot, could only swivel their heads to watch the confrontation. Every voice silenced so as not to miss the exchange; every syllable and nuance would be repeated a thousand times

in parlours over the weeks to come. Cara had spent seven years trapped in a cold, black nightmare; she wanted to embrace the light. She needed a cleansing fire to exorcise him from her soul.

*I want to be free.*

She used Nate as her touchstone. He radiated power and she drew on him. She drank in strength through his touch. Once full, she untangled her fingers from his, and approached her rapist.

She looked him up and down coldly. "Don't dare to presume you have any right to address me."

He laughed. "But we're such intimate acquaintances." His words a taunt, he threw down the gauntlet, to see how she would react.

She toyed with wrenching an arm off the mechanical waiter and spearing the limb through Clayton's torso. She enjoyed the mental image of watching him writhe with the animated fingers waving from a gaping chest wound. His blood would spill over the floor, the colour mingling with the deep red walls.

"Old age has addled your brain. You're a rapist of children and no acquaintance of mine." Her voice strong and sure, determined this weak old man would never touch her life again.

"I'd watch this one, Lyons, she has teeth." Clayton laughed nervously. "I'd recommend the liberal application of the lash to bring her into line."

"You seem to have mistaken me, sir. I don't need to force a woman. Nor would I ever inflict violence on a child." His words were icicles, each one tossed at the older man with lethal accuracy.

Cara leaned close to her tormentor. "You're pathetic, trying to pretend you are something. You couldn't even get hard unless your valet had his hand on your shrunken member, and couldn't finish the job without his finger up your arse. You're a failure, both as a man and a rapist."

A titter ran around the room, as her every word was relayed. Titters turned into snorts and suppressed laughter.

Anger flashed in Clayton's eyes, but he couldn't silence everyone present.

He leaned on his cane, his need for the assistance obvious in his awkward movement.

A cruel smile crossed her face. The blow that enabled her to escape years ago had caused his disability.

The colour drained from him; he stood before her in shades of grey, revealing his frailty.

"I maimed you when I was only a child. Touch me now, and I'll kill you." She turned her back to him, and holding her head high, she strode out to the balcony. Conversation rose behind her.

The evening air was cool, after the humidity of the ballroom. The gentle breeze refreshed her agitated skin, brushing over her in a soothing manner. She wanted to bathe in the dark, to wash away the memories and release them up into the night sky, leaving her cleansed. And whole, at last.

Nate approached her from behind; his arms slid around her waist as he drew her back against his chest. She leaned into him, absorbing his steady heartbeat, letting her own slow to match his pace.

"Are you all right, *cara mia*?"

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh, one she had held in for seven years. "Yes. It's done. He's a weak old man and has no power over me."

Silence. There was no need for words and she wondered about the nature of the strange relationship weaving itself around them.

*What am I doing?* She chastised herself.

*Feeling, at last,* a long-buried part of her answered.

"Cara?" The query came from Amy, seeking out her friend.

"Yes," she replied from within her cocoon of Nate's arms.

He kissed the base of her neck and she held in a cry, brief caresses no longer enough.

"I have some business to take care of; I'll leave you with your friend. I'll find you shortly." He released her and gave the briefest nod to Amy.

She kept her eyes fixed on the night-time streets of London. Small circles

of light danced around the street lamps, but they were too far apart to join hands and push back the darkness. She tried to peer into the empty spaces between; somewhere in there dwelt a killer. Or was he prowling the ballroom, unseen amongst them, disguised as one of them? Even now, did he kiss a hand and waltz with his next victim? Cara had drawn blanks in her search for a clue, to where her father hid Nefertiti's Heart, and she wondered if finding the gem would stop the killer, or attract his attention.

Amy watched Nate return to the ballroom, her eyes wary, before turning on her friend. "Oh, Cara, what are you doing with him?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Her eyes were still miles away and she had to drag her mind back to Amy's side.

"Viscount Lyons. He's so cold." Amy shivered, rubbing her hands up and down her arms.

Cara shook her head. She could never think of Nate as cold, not with the level of heat he provoked within her. "No. He's controlled. Don't mistake that for being cold."

"Well, he's . . . a criminal," Amy dropped her voice to a whisper, as though she thought he might overhear them.

That aspect of his reputation and business dealings didn't concern Cara. On the contrary, she found his underworld involvement made him more approachable, more open-minded. She merely kept a weapon handy.

"I think possessing both a title, and a fortune, trumps such a minor detail." She knew how society operated. A man could get away with anything, as long as he was wealthy enough, and a peer. "And besides, he doesn't hold my past against me."

Amy flushed, embarrassed by previous events.

"Did Clayton do that?" Amy gestured to Cara's back and the silver scars glistening in the subtle evening light.

"Yes." She closed her eyes, remembering how the lash ripped through her young body. She arched her back against the pain. Instead of making her

compliant, each blow added to her resolve to survive, to fight back.

"Let's go have supper." Amy held out her hands, not knowing what else to say.

Cara smiled. She was hungry. She fought a battle and emerged victorious. "Let's find some champagne," she said. "When we were little, we were inseparable, and then our lives took wildly different paths. Let's celebrate burying the lost years and moving forward."

The two friends made their way through the buffet tables and laughed over long-forgotten memories. They snatched champagne from the passing mechanical waiters and toasted renewing their friendship.

Cara became an object of curiosity to the other men. She was free and unrepentant in her refusal to bend to society's expectation. She displayed her backbone figuratively by standing up to Clayton, and literally in the body-hugging gown. Spirit and beauty were a heady mix for some of the young bucks; she was an exotic creature amongst them.

Two separated from the pack, approached, and asked her to dance. She politely declined, although she found the attention flattering. They refused to budge from her side and she gave a frustrated sigh.

Across the room, she saw Nate look up sharply, then break away from his conversation and head in her direction. A foolish individual stepped into his path, and tried to engage him. The look he shot the man was more effective than any knife blade; the man fell to the side as though dropped by a physical blow. Nate reached her side, his mere presence shutting down the other men.

"You're out of your depth," he informed them, as he took her by the arm and led her away.



CARA STARED out the carriage window, her back toward him as she watched the pedestrians. He liked her short hair; he didn't have to sweep it out of the

way to kiss her neck. There was something about a woman's throat that he found infinitely appealing. He didn't know if it was the curve as it rose out of their shoulders, or knowing how extremely sensitive the skin could be. And she was constantly exposed to him. Leaning over, one hand on the side of the carriage for support, he kissed her nape. His lips followed the vertebra from her hairline down. She tasted of jasmine, the bath oil he laid out for her. He thought of her naked form rising from the water and suppressed his groan. He had been so patient, but every encounter tested him to his limit. Her mere presence heated his blood to boiling point. He often resorted to fisting his hands until his short nails dug into his palm, to stop himself from claiming her.

The dress revealed all of her spine to the small of her back. A sigh ran through her body, making her shiver and ripple like silk. She grew accustomed to his touch, no longer the bolting horse when he reached out a hand. Now she responded to him.

He longed to follow each scar with his tongue, to turn them into a map of desire coursing over her back. To watch them writhe under his caresses until she cried for a release only he could deliver. Her scent wrapped around him. She filled his mind, as he wanted to fill her, and his arousal strained against his trousers at the thought. His lips had progressed only halfway down her back, before she turned.

A seductive half-smile played across her carmine lips. "Nate." She breathed out his name as a sigh.

Resting her head against the back of the carriage, her eyelids were heavy as she tilted her chin to him. A subtle invitation for him to claim her lips, which he could not refuse. He covered her mouth, his tongue demanding as it sought admittance. A soft moan escaped her throat as she parted her teeth, allowing him entry.

His arms snaked around her waist. His hands brushed the naked flesh of her back as he drew her, unresisting, to his chest. For the first time, he truly

held her, hard against him, as his fingers ran up her spine. His mouth crushed her lips, their tongues fighting for dominance that was part dance, part joust. She was mead, and he wanted to become drunk on the taste of her.

He picked up the hem of her skirt and reached under. He followed the contour of her leg, gliding over the silk stocking. With one hand on her knee, he pulled her onto his lap, so she straddled him. He ran both hands up her legs, bunching up the gossamer thin skirts, allowing him access to stroke the velvet skin of her thighs. Her moan became more insistent.

"What are you doing to me?" her voice husky with desire as she caught her breath.

"I'm setting you free." He pulled her head back down to his mouth, claiming her, wanting her. Her hips moved against him. He groaned and ached to be free of the impediment created by the layers of fabric. She was so close, the silk knickers no barrier; he had only to open his trousers. He could only think of being buried deep inside her and satisfying his burning need.

She froze, her breath hitched. "No." A sob of fear came from deep in her throat.

He had pushed too fast and demanded more than she could give. He bit back his frustration and lifted her off his lap and back on to the seat. Both of them breathing hard. A tear rolled down her cheek from between tightly squeezed eyes.

He caressed the drop away with his thumb. "I gave you my word. You are safe with me. I won't demand something you're not ready to give."

He pressed his head against the blue velvet of the carriage interior and rolled his eyes behind closed lids, not wanting her to see how close he was to the edge. Grabbing his cane, he rapped on the carriage roof. There was a slight jerk as their progress halted.

"Jackson will see you home safely, but I have to go." He slipped out into the night, needing to find his own release before he lost control.

## CHAPTER 20



*SUNDAY, July 21*

Strong hands and scorching kisses gave Cara a troubled night. Nate was a man of deep appetites, and she showed herself incapable of satisfying them. Waking before dawn in sweat-drenched sheets, she did something she vowed never to do again.

She ran.

Scant little belongings went into the ever-present satchel. She scooped her father's notebook from its hiding place, hooked the tiny Derringer under the brown string, stuffed in *Magycks of the Gods*, and fled.

She headed to a nearby livery and hired a horse. She briefly contemplated catching a train, but didn't want to be confined. She needed action. Sitting on a train was too passive. Horseback gave her freedom, despite the fact it would take her longer. She needed to ride hard, for her muscles to ache and strain with the effort, to gallop every stride with the horse until her mind pushed beyond exhaustion into blissful nothingness.

The flow of London traffic oppressed her, and hemmed her in on all sides and kept their pace to a walk. She thought she would scream with the effort of reining in both herself and the gelding.

Once they reached open road, she kicked the horse forward. She rose in her stirrups and urged the gelding onward. She pushed him, mile after mile.

Her brain burned despite the cool wind battering her face. The horse's flanks heaved as he cantered. Cara dropped back to a walk only when she felt sure no one followed, either on the road by carriage, or above by airship.

She paced the horse, not wanting him to drop on her and leave her stranded by the roadside. When the sun reached the highest point in the sky, she found an inn off the road. She sat outside with the horse and ate lunch, sharing her bread with the hungry equine. She lay back in the grass and stared at the pale sky, while the gelding grazed. The swirling grey clouds kept turning into a pair of blue-grey eyes, penetrating her, questioning what she was doing. Unable to stand the silent inspection by spectral eyes, she threw the gear onto the horse once more. Back in the saddle, she urged him forward. The road stretched in front of them and Cara ran toward oblivion.

Dark rolled above her as she trotted up the green, rural lanes of Leicester. The muscles in her thighs burned from the daylong ride. Her back ached and her fingers cramped. She longed to drop into bed and let sweet unconsciousness carry her away. It beckoned to her from the edge of exhaustion. *Soon.*

The impressive Georgian mansion dominated its landscape. Lights blazed from the lower levels of the house. A footman walked the circular entrance driveway as she rode up. He paused in his task of lighting the gas lanterns. He extinguished his flame and hurried up the stairs, shouting the arrival of the lone rider.

More lights flickered and appeared in the windows and soon figures clustered on the top step, eager to greet the unexpected guest. Cara released the reins as a groom rushed forward. The gelding dropped his head, exhausted, but having faithfully completed his task.

"Good boy," she murmured, scratching his wither in thanks before leaping to the ground.

"You scandalous girl!" A voice shrieked from above her. An older woman pushed to the forefront; the staff peeled apart to make way for her.

"The entire village is talking of nothing but your outrageous behaviour in London."

Cara dropped her eyes as she walked up the stairs to the doorway; she halted when she was level with the formidable matron. The older woman was as tall as Cara, with the same erect carriage, although the years had added a few more pounds to her frame.

"Come inside at once." She grabbed Cara, then flung her arms around her in an affectionate hug. "You must tell me every teeny detail at once. I am desperate to know if this viscount is as cold and delicious as they say."

"Hello, Nan." She leaned forward to kiss her grandmother's cheek. "And he is. Like Michelangelo carved him from the finest marble with pure lust guiding his hands."

"Good lord," her grandmother whispered, a hand going to her bosom. "Nessy!" she screamed back down the hallway. "Tea and biscuits. The little scamp is here with oodles of juicy gossip."

She turned back to her granddaughter. "Oh, do tell me it's juicy. It certainly sounds it."

She gave a wink as she drew Cara into the house and guided her toward the warm and welcoming parlour.

Cara laughed and cast her gaze downward again, at ease to be home. "You're not supposed to be encouraging me, you know."

She crossed the parlour and threw herself on an overstuffed chaise in lurid brown and orange paisley. She raised her weary legs and stretched out on the sofa's accommodating length.

Nan gave a snort of laughter. "My dear I'm past sixty. Encouraging you is the most exciting thing I get to do anymore. I understand the whole of London is talking about your tiger stripes. The aethergrams have been flying back and forth all day."

Nessy, her grandmother's long-time companion, bustled into the room with a tea tray. She deposited it on the low table and found herself a spot on

the sofa, eager to hear all the news.

Cara screwed up her nose. It had been Nate's choice to expose her scars in such a public fashion, not hers.

"Fitting, though," her grandmother remarked as she poured tea.

"What do you mean?" Cara sat up and took the proffered mug. She cupped her hands around it and inhaled. The tea gave off a welcoming smell and a cautionary sip confirmed her suspicion. Nussy had laced the pot with rum. She sighed. *Home*.

"It would take a tiger to walk next to the lion."

"I don't think I'm walking next to him, Nan." She stared at her tea, hoping the amber liquid would hold all the answers to her questions. *What the hell am I doing?* "I'm so out of my depth, I'm drowning. I need you to throw me a lifeline."

"Oh, child, you never did take the easy route in life." Worry etched lines on her grandmother's face. "And you're certainly gambling with dangerous odds."

"Well, I did manage to stick it to Clayton. He was at Savage's last night, looking old and frail, so I kicked his cane away. He won't be haunting my dreams anymore."

"Good. Sounds like you have someone much younger and more virile chasing you at night," her grandmother innocently remarked, as she dunked a biscuit in her tea. Nussy snorted by her side.

"Nan!" Cara laughed at her grandmother. Nan and Nussy, in their youth, were far more scandalous than anything she could accomplish. The head gardener still blushed in their presence, even forty years after whatever the pair of them did to him. Heading into their sixties, they refused to tone down their antics, and still managed to horrify the locals.

"I've leased the house out." She changed the topic, before her mind lingered on what happened in the carriage. "The lawyer said he's a scholar of some sort, and loved the library. Hopefully he stays long-term, and we don't

have to think about the house again."

"And your father's trinkets?"

"Nate will sell them as we require."

"Nate?" Nan's eyebrows shot up at the informal contraction of his name and she nudged Nussy.

Cara caught her breath, too tired to spar with her egregious grandmother. "Not tonight, Nan. He's sold Boudicca's Cuff and the cash is with the lawyers. I'm trying to find Nefertiti's Heart now."

She chewed on her lip, unsure how much to reveal about the Heart and her suspicions. She didn't want to burden the older woman, or worse, make her a target.

"Is it true you are tied up with those horrible murders?"

She shook her head. "Yes and no. I have Enforcers on my tail. I think the Heart is linked somehow and the killer is after it. I need to go over father's ledgers he left here. I'm coming up blank trying to find where he hid the gem."

"Popular girl," Nussy muttered, elbowing Nan with a wink.

"Inspector Fraser thinks it all links back to father, and I think the connection is the artifact." She grabbed a hard biscuit to drop into her tea, watching the hot liquid crawl up the savoury morsel.

"I never did approve of your mother marrying Devon."

"If she hadn't, she would still be alive." Cara would have loved the opportunity to know her mother, knowing nothing except the stories her grandmother told of a headstrong and impulsive girl.

Nan reached out and took her hand. "And then you wouldn't exist. And who would keep me entertained with scandalous tales?"

"I'm exhausted, Nan. Can we leave the rest until the morning?" She placed her tea mug back on the small table.

"Of course, dear. I'll schedule the interrogation for after breakfast. Nussy and I will sort out the questions tonight, so we'll be ready to start as soon as

you rise." The older woman gave her a warm smile, as Cara kissed her cheek. "First on the list will be what has you so spooked you ran all the way home."

Cara groaned. She might yet have to give all the intimate details of her late night carriage ride, and how Nate stole into the darkness when she proved unable to satisfy him.

She slipped from the parlour and climbed the stairs to her rooms at the back of the house. Exhaustion threatened to overtake her, so she dropped her clothes on the floor and climbed between the sheets naked. A weight dropped on the blanket next to her.

"I wondered when you would show up." She reached out a hand. A large, ginger tomcat rubbed himself against her outstretched fingers. A locomotive engine started deep in his belly. He circled twice before settling in her armpit, his head resting on her chest. His eyes closed in contentment as her fingers automatically stroked his fur while her brain tried to settle.

Despite the deep ache in her body, sleep was in no hurry to claim her. She listened to the cat's rumbling purr. She could only replay events from the previous evening. She felt lighter, free of Clayton and the fear he planted deep within her. A frown creased her brow. She was still a prisoner, though; her brain played gaoler. She longed to surrender to her body's need for Nate. She had been so close last night, but when he pressed against her, she panicked and froze. Her brain remembered only pain and battled her body, to shelter her from the anticipated agony. A tear rolled down her cheek.

*What will it take to be free?*

## CHAPTER 21



*HE WATCHED her leave the shop, her pale pink parasol raised against the unrelenting rain. She waved to her chaperone inside, perhaps indicating she would only be a moment, her eyes drawn to the haberdashery next door. A riotous display of ribbons, silks, and veils in a variety of shapes and colours filled the shop window.*

*The other one had gone. He had been so close, his hand reached out for her, but he grasped only air. She vanished into the night. This one would be a poor substitute. He feared in his gut it wouldn't work; the other called to him and invaded his dreams. But he had to try. This one's eyes were hazel, too. Hope flickered within him. The eyes were similar. Perhaps, when he gazed into their depths, he would find what he sought and she would know him.*

*The street was empty. The unexpected summer downpour scattered the few hardy shoppers. No one wanted to linger and risk being drenched. People raised umbrellas and pulled hats down low. Eyes kept down to avoid the rain, few people took any notice of their surrounds or the other pedestrians. He pulled the brim of his hat down farther, before stepping off the pavement toward her.*

*"Madeline?" he called softly, halting her progress.*

*She swung around to see who hailed her.*

*"Oh, hello," she replied. Her eyes lit up on seeing him, a good sign. "I*

can't talk for long. Molly is watching from inside the teashop and I just want a quick look next door. We're heading off to father's country estate tomorrow, and I want some ribbon for my new bonnet." She indicated the haberdashery display attracting her attention.

"Of course," he murmured in agreement with her. "I understand. Terrible business, what has happened, and we need to keep you safe. We can't be too careful." He walked with her a few strides along the street. "I'll not hold you up. It's just that I have a gift for you, and I wanted to give it to you before you leave."

Interest sparked over her face. What woman didn't love the prospect of a gift? He watched an internal battle rage across her features. To stare at the ribbons and parasol handles, or the prospect of a surprise present?

"I'll just fetch it from the carriage, if you don't mind terribly waiting?" He dangled his bait and turned. He walked toward his waiting conveyance.

She trailed behind him, curious.

He opened the carriage door and peered inside, reached for something that should have lain on the seat.

"Bother," he muttered over his shoulder. "It seems to have fallen down the back of the seat. You know what those little boxes are like." He gave a quick smile and hopped up in the carriage, his hand diving down between the seat cushion and the plush lined side.

Her eyes widened. A small box indicated jewellery. Everyone knew that.

The fish bit down hard on the bait.

"I'll help you look for it." She quickly offered and stepped up into the carriage. The door swung shut on them.



MONDAY, July 22

Cara stretched languidly in bed, arms over her head and pushed her palms

against the quilted silk headboard. The sun peeked through muted red and orange curtains, illuminating her childhood room. The items on her dresser remained exactly as she had left them on her last visit. Nobody ever disturbed her room, ensuring she had one small slice of constancy. The ginger tom still slept hard against her; then he opened one eye, daring her to move.

"Sorry, boy, my stomach demands I get up. And knowing you, you'll want feeding, too." She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The cat meowed and gave his own feline stretch before moving to the end of the bed. She prowled naked to the large window, while the cat took care of his own ablutions with meticulous care.

She flung open the curtains. A clear blue sky greeted her, and the clean, green vista of her grandmother's estate. Her room looked out over the rear gardens and potager. The river curled past the orchard boundary; ancient trees draped their limbs over the lush meadows. Her heart lightened; she loved it out here. Time away from the frantic motion of London would help settle her mind and allow her to sift through her thoughts.

She dressed lightly in a simple cotton shirt and high waist skirt. The day was already warm outside and she planned to go exploring. She wanted freedom to run, climb, and chase like the thirteen-year-old in her demanded.

"Come on, you." She picked up the cat and tossed him on her shoulder, where he curled himself around her neck, regarding the world from his accustomed perch. She padded down to the kitchen on bare feet. Life was casual at the Leicester estate; the family often breakfasted at the large table in the kitchen, while the servants went about their day. Or even, quite scandalously, the servants joined them. Eating together kept everyone abreast of village gossip, and what was happening farther afield, and tightened the bonds of kinship that bound the close-knit household.

She greeted the household staff by name as she slipped into the warm and busy kitchen. Cook oversaw the baking of the daily bread, and the divine smell wafted toward Cara's nostrils. She dropped the cat off his perch on her

shoulder, and he made like an arrow to the plate of cream in one corner and the off cuts from the previous evening's beef.

She gave cook a bear hug from behind.

"The scamp has returned," the rotund chef boomed, as she turned to return the show of affection. "Take a seat; you look like you need feeding up. You're all skin and bone."

She pulled out a chair opposite Nan and Nesy. A plate of eggs, bacon, and hash dropped in front of her, quickly followed by a mug of steaming coffee. She inhaled the coffee fumes, letting the sharp aroma stimulate her brain, before she took the first glorious sip.

"Nobody makes coffee like you, Duffie," she said to the red-faced woman. "I searched the whole of London and nothing compares to your brew. I swear you are a magician with a coffee bean."

The cook beamed with pride, as she bustled about her domain.

Nan allowed her granddaughter one mouthful, before starting. "This is the moment where you spill what happened the other day."

"Me, Nate, and a steamy carriage ride I couldn't handle." She managed to talk between alternate mouthfuls of coffee and bacon.

Nan and Nesy exchanged raised eyebrows. "That's fine for a teaser. Now we require the blow by blow account."

Nesy giggled at Nan's choice of words.

Cara rolled her eyes, and spent the next half-hour telling her enraptured audience of the exchanges between her and Nate. Some points she glossed over, like how she straddled him in the carriage and froze when his erection pushed against her knickers. But she told sufficient detail to let her grandmother and Nesy help unravel the turmoil in her mind.

"You're young, you're beautiful, and he sounds ridiculously handsome. Enjoy what you have. If you don't jump him, someone else will." Nesy summed the situation up succinctly, to earthy laughter all round.

"It's not that simple." She appealed to her grandmother.

"I'm with Nussy on this one. Don't overcomplicate things. You're a smart girl, listen to your gut."

"You lot are incorrigible," she muttered as she left the table. "I'm heading out before you talk me into doing something even more stupid."



*"SAY MY NAME," he whispered, as he stroked strands of blonde hair from her face.*

*She murmured something; he leaned closer to catch the faint syllables.*

*"No, not that one. My other name," he insisted, growing angry at her ignorance. "Say my real name."*

*Her eyes widened, the whites glowing in the dim light. Her head moved back and forth, as she sobbed and tears trickled down her temples.*

*He placed his hands, palm down, on the slab next to her. His eyes raked over her form, as she trembled before him.*

*"Say my name," he insisted, louder, firmer.*

*She cried. Tears ran freely, the girl unable to form articulate words due to the sobs issuing from her throat.*

*An acrid tinge hit the air around him. Fear. Sharp and crisp in his nostrils. She wasn't right. If she was right, she wouldn't fear him. He expected the opposite to happen: she should love and welcome him.*

*Why was it not working? He was doing everything right. The problem lay with them. They closed ranks against him, whispering and tittering. They played the coquettes but never delivered on their promises. She wouldn't do that to him. She loved freely, unreservedly. Her love for him was pure and eternal. He should never have let her run. He should have taken her when he had his chance.*

*This one wasn't right. The one he wanted had slipped through his fingers.*

*"You're not right!" he screamed, the frustration overwhelmed and*

*overflowed within him. He picked up the key and slammed it into her body.*

*"Not right!" He yelled it over, and over. His arm rose and fell, keeping pace with the words. "Not"—hand up. "Right"—hand smashed downward.*

*Time wore on. Unaware of its passage, he worked out his rage. Finally sated, he thrust the key into her bloody chest and left it there. He gave a deep cry and slumped over her legs, with his arms outspread. Minutes passed in silence.*

*He pushed himself upright again.*

*He picked up a towel from the nearby trolley and wiped splatter from his fingers and arms. Methodically, neatly, he ensured each bright red drop disappeared onto the cloth. Calm and in control once more, he could have been wiping excess butter from the lobster off his hands.*

*She would come back to him. She had to return to London. She was drawn to him. They belonged together. Everything up to this point had been merely practice, the flexing of long-forgotten memories. He was complete and ready for her now. The time had come.*

*They had waited three thousand years to be reunited; he could wait a few more days.*

## CHAPTER 22



THE COPPER BEECH had stood guard over the Leicester countryside for hundreds of years. It watched houses built, pulled down, and rebuilt. The tree oversaw the building of the mansion and now stood vigil on the edge of the big house's orchard. It had long been a favourite retreat of Cara's; high above the ground, the fork of its enormous branches cradled her like a giant hand.

Looking up from her book, movement attracted her attention and she saw the airship appear on the horizon. It seemed to flit amongst the green canopy, as she watched its approach. She could think of only one reason why an airship would be travelling to this corner of the English countryside. The ship was a small, sleek model, built for speed and lightning strikes. All too soon, it hovered over the formal gardens at the back of the mansion.

Her heart gave a leap, unable to decide if she was pleased or terrified that Nate pursued her. She watched from her comfortable spot in the nearby orchard.

A line was tossed over the side of the airship and a black figure slid down the rope. As he neared the ground, he let go and jumped the remaining distance.

She climbed higher in the tree to watch. She saw her grandmother, followed by Nesy and two footmen, rush out to greet him. The conversation appeared animated. Her grandmother waved her arms, then turned and

pointed directly at the tree, hiding Cara amongst its boughs.

She saw Nate's head dip and kiss her grandmother's hand, before he strode in her direction. He wore black pants with knee-high, black boots. A short jacket with military frogging hung open, revealing the half-unlaced, white shirt underneath.

Cara gulped. *Hooray for pirate day.*

She climbed back down the tree to her previous spot and tucked herself against the coppery-grey trunk. She stretched her legs along the branch and took up her father's journal, hoping to appear nonchalant, while her brain tried to figure out what to do. Her heart raced; from her spot, she couldn't see how close he was without peering around the trunk.

He hailed her. "I know you're up there. Are you coming down, or am I coming up?"

*Prepare to be boarded?* The thumping in her chest became frantic. She realised hiding up a tree was a tactical error. She should have jumped down and legged it across the field instead.

She heard the scraping of boots against bark and moments later, his presence filled her eyrie. He radiated energy. Standing in the fork, with his hands on the branch above, he looked like a roguish pirate hanging from the rigging. His gaze swept over her reclining form.

*Barefoot, no stockings, no petticoats, there's my second mistake for today.* She felt naked under his scorching gaze, but refused to pull the skirt back down over her bare legs.

"I didn't pick you for the sort for a day out in the country." She pushed the journal into a crevice above her head and tried to engage in polite conversation. And ignore the fact she was scantily dressed and hiding up a tree, like a woodland sylph waiting to be ravished.

He tilted his head, and looked quizzical at her choice of opening statement, but answered politely. "I've lost something. I thought I would start my search in this area. How is your research progressing?"

He dropped down next to her. The branch was comfortable for one, and decidedly cramped with two. Cara inhaled as he settled, his side pressed to hers, making heat course through her torso. The aroma of warm male musk with the tang of citrus filled her nostrils.

"I believe I'm onto something. Father hasn't made a single reference to where he stashed Nefertiti's Heart, and I think it's because he didn't have to. He kept it near him. I suspect the gem is still in the house, somewhere."

He made a noise in his throat but remained silent. He picked up her hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed her palm. Further conversation shrivelled under the heat of his touch. She closed her eyes, the gentle touch of his lips a spark to her body, made of tinder. The slow burn headed up her arm, a lit fuse heading for her heart.

"You ran from me," he said.

"I needed to think. Where did you go, after you left the carriage?" A knife poised over her gut, ready to rip through her if he admitted to seeking out another woman to finish what they had started.

He stroked her palm. "To get drunk. Very, very drunk. I didn't realise until yesterday afternoon that you had gone."

"I can't give you what you need and I don't know what I want." She swallowed. The very air around them burned and scorched the inside of her mouth.

"I wanted you from the first moment I laid eyes on you, *cara mia*." His fingers stroked along her arm, feathering over the sensitive skin, causing her to inhale sharply at the stab of pleasure.

She shook her head.

"You wanted the upper hand in a business deal." She took her hand back, tucking it under a fold of fabric.

"No. I first saw you long before that."

"I doubt it. I left London when I was fourteen." She considered inching away from him, but that would put her perilously close to the edge of her

perch and the risk of plummeting out of the tree.

"I've never had anyone doubt my word before."

"You're a lord, not *The Lord*." She struggled to bring her body under control; she was inches from surrendering everything.

He leaned over and caressed the side of her face, brushing his thumb down her cheekbone. She couldn't meet his eyes, too afraid of what her own would reveal.

"The day I turned eighteen, my father took me riding in Hyde Park. He was on the brink of bankruptcy, and he told me I needed to marry money, and save the family title and estates. As we rode, he pointed out various fortunes in the carriages around us, discussing the merits of property and stocks that each held. I was expected to pick one and do my duty."

He dropped his hand. She wondered where his story would go, as she studied his long fingers.

"To me, those girls all looked like timid house cats. With their eyes downcast, they never risked a glance at the world around them. All so meek, doing as commanded. They were all so similar and bland. There was nothing to distinguish them. They were simply different hues and stripes of grey. The only difference among them was the composition of their fortunes."

Cara was getting hotter. She fixated on his hands, resting on his bent knee. She had changed her mind about wanting to escape, and instead tried to mentally command him to touch her.

"We saw people gathered under a large oak tree and we rode by to see what the commotion was about. High up in the oak tree, clinging to a branch, was a ginger striped kitten. She was caterwauling and spitting venom on those below. She also had excellent aim with an acorn."

He gave her one of his rare smiles and she knew she would drown in him. He was the ocean, and she was a mere raft upon it at the mercy, or rage, of the surrounding sea.

She laughed softly, sharing this part of his story. "I got my governess

right between the eyes, you know."

He grinned and continued his story. "The people muttered the child was out of control, but I admired her. No one was going to pin her down and turn her grey. She was fierce, spirited, and fascinating."

So many people gathered that day, to watch her shame her family name. She had no idea Nate was one of the youths on horseback, watching. *Has he always been watching me?*

"The spectacle helped me make a decision. I vowed to make my own fortune, so my path would always be my own. I wouldn't have a puppet master pulling my strings and determining the course of my life."

"Is that when you went off and became a pirate?" Cara hoped he was going to tell her tales of his adventures aboard the pirate airships. His eyes were serious as he wrapped his arms around her and drew her into his lap. She let out a sigh and lay back in his arms, her head against his chest as ripples of pleasure spread over her body wherever he touched her.

"I made another promise that day. When the time was right, I was going to find that ginger kitten and see what sort of woman she became." Cupping her face, he leaned down and kissed her gently, his lips tasting her, teasing, until she had to rise up against him and demand more. He smiled against her as he deepened the kiss, leaving her short of breath when he lifted his head.

Cara finished the story. "My governess quit on the spot, walked off, and left me up the tree. It took a few hours and three Enforcers to get me down." Her smile faded. She remembered the rest of that day.

"What happened afterward?" He nuzzled her neck, making it exceedingly difficult for Cara to concentrate on anything except the path his lips were taking and the liquid heat starting to pool at her centre. With one hand he worked at the buttons on her shirt, and pulled the soft fabric off her shoulder, exposing her collarbone to his caress. She gasped when his hand stroked lower and cupped her breast.

She continued her story, before rational thought fled her mind. "I

screamed blue murder all the way home. I knew what was coming. Father was not pleased that I publicly disgraced his name."

She remembered how she stood in the middle of his library while he removed his belt. She was riveted to the spot; her breath came in short gasps as she anticipated the blows to come. Only when Lord Devon had vented his anger did she crawl to her room and sob uncontrollably into her pillow. "I think that's why he gave me to Clayton. He thought, being my father, he was too soft on me, and that another man might beat the rebellion out of me."

Nate kissed her again, hard, his tongue probed her mouth as though he sought to find and destroy the painful memories contained in her head. "You are unique, Cara, don't let them turn you grey. Don't be a bland automaton like the others. Come back to London. Come back to me."

Her heart swelled and ached at the raw longing in his voice. "Won't it damage your reputation as the hardened crime lord, if word gets out you have a soft spot for treed kittens?"

Reaching down, he wrapped his fingers around her ankle, stroking over the bone, before progressing higher. She closed her eyes, on the brink of surrender; she luxuriated in his slow touch.

"Well, this is no kitten. This is something far more wild and dangerous. A tigress, reclining on her treetop throne." His hand reached her calf and headed for her knee, dragging her skirts up as he went.

Cara sucked in a breath, her head pressed against his chest. Her bones were melting under his fingers as he stroked the back of her knee.

"Which means you were never a treed kitten, but a tiger cub. I think being known as the man who dared to stroke the tigress will only enhance my reputation."

"You know I can't do this. The pain—" She ached for him and the emptiness inside her screamed to be filled. Her brain remembered only how much it hurt, how Clayton ripped through her young body, as tears of pain coursed down her face.

"You can. You just need to want it enough. You're like a steam engine without a pressure valve. Eventually, it will be too much for you to bear." His hands never stopped touching her. The one cupping her breast gently thumbed over her flesh until a moan broke from her throat.

She thought she would scream with her craving for more, already it was too much, her mind close to splintering with need.

"The desire won't let you go, but will crawl under your skin until need threatens to rip you in half. The agony will surrender to pleasure in your brain, and you'll have to seek release." His hand on her leg stole higher still and stroked her inner thigh, while his mouth claimed hers.

She moaned against him, the pressure within her skin intolerable. If she didn't have him, her heart would explode from the hunger.

"Not here. We can't," she whispered. *We're up a tree.*

The wicked smile touched his lips. "Can you think of any better place, than where you feel safe?"

He was right. The tree had always protected and harboured her from the world. This was her sanctuary, where nothing could hurt her. Turning, with a hand on the familiar ancient tree trunk for balance, she straddled him. Her knees were abraded by the rough branch, but she didn't care. He bunched her skirts up around her hips, as her fingers fumbled with the laces on his shirt. She was desperate to touch his skin, to run her hands over him. She wanted to trace the scars she saw when they had fought. Pushing the two sides of the fabric out of the way, she ran her fingernails up his chest. He inhaled sharply, and groaned when she leaned in to kiss his shoulder, her tongue darting over his flesh.

*He tastes as delicious as he looks, salty goodness.*

His fingers stroked her inner thigh and crept higher, pressing against the silken fabric of her knickers. She groaned and leaned into his hand, inviting the most intimate caress. He increased the pressure with the heel of his hand and her skin fractured, unable to contain the desire coursing through her. She

gasped as he caught her, holding her in place.

"I promise you, *cara mia*, no pain," he whispered against her cheek.

He pulled a knife from his boot, the steel a cold, hard kiss as he sliced the silk knickers from her body and tossed the slip of fabric aside.

Her hands shook as she undid the buttons on his trousers.

Free at last, his arousal rose up between their bodies and grazed against her.

Her body responded; heat and longing flooded her body and spread to her limbs.

With his hands on her hips, he guided her closer so he could press up into her. Cara cried out, teetering on the edge between fear and desire. Nate stilled and waited. He stroked her hair, his voice gentle as he reassured her, calling her *cara mia* as she fought an internal battle, and won. With a sigh, she sank down and her flesh yielded to him. The sob of fear turned to a cry of yearning, the emptiness inside her filled at long last. The last shackles in her mind fell away and she gave herself to him completely.

Her hips moved against him, over and over. She revelled in the feeling of him deep inside her, as the wave gathered momentum. He dipped his head and his tongue drew patterns on her breast. Then, greedy for more, she pulled his head up to kiss him, raw and hungry. Sensation overwhelmed her and the wave crashed through her body, the orgasm swept into every fibre as she cried out his name. Nate buried his groan in her neck. His arms wrapped tightly around her; his teeth grazed her skin as he was racked by release.

Cara pressed her forehead to his, trying to catch her breath. She was afloat on an ocean with a current buffeting her body. His arms held her, as tears ran down her face. She was finally free. She stretched, relishing the answering twitch from deep within her body. She held him captive, unwilling to release him, the sensation too delicious to relinquish. She gazed at him with heavy lidded eyes, her lips swollen from his kisses.

"If you keep doing that, we're going to have to be up here for a lot

longer," he said, running his hands over her body. "I'm surprised your grandmother hasn't come looking for you yet."

She drew her fingers down the centre of his chest, watching the way his muscles moved with an inhaled breath. "I think I have splinters in my knees."

"Next time there will be a bed, and a complete absence of clothing." His lips trailed along her collarbone, licking the thin sheen of sweat from her skin.

Cara sighed. "We should probably move, before Nan and Nussy turn up."

The sensuous smile on her face turned to a look of disappointment when he slipped from within her as they stood. She held the branch above, to give him room to stand, while they readjusted clothing.

His arm pulled her back to his chest and she sighed against him. His touch blew on the embers still glowing within her. "I have you now, and I'll not let you go."

## CHAPTER 23



NATE DROPPED out of the tree and Cara climbed after him, her father's journal in one hand. He grasped her waist and swung her down the last few feet. His arms enveloped her, pulling her to him as he kissed her throat. His lips skimmed her skin as he moved upward to claim her mouth again.

She pushed against him, matched his hunger. With the dam broken, her body yearned for more.

"What will you tell your grandmother we were doing?" His eyes sparkled.

Cara laughed. "I won't have to tell her a thing. She'll take one look at me and guess. Next time you visit, there will probably be a small commemorative brass plaque attached to the trunk."

They walked slowly through the orchard, his arm around her waist, keeping her close. They passed through the yew hedge, into the formal garden. Nate stopped and looked up at the small airship hovering above. "I can't stay, unfortunately. Urgent work calls in London; I have to take care of something."

A swift chill descended over her; a shadow passed over her soul, raising goose bumps along her arms. She quickly rubbed them away, remembering the two men down in the Pit and wondered if they were the sort of loose ends he had to tidy up.

"I'll be waiting for you." He drew his hand along her exposed shoulder.

She leaned into his fingers. "I'll be another day or two. I'm going through some diaries father left here."

She pulled back to wave the journal clutched in her hand. "And it's easier to think out in the open. I find you too distracting." Her heart still hammered against her ribs.

He nodded, satisfied with her answer. "Two days, at the most. Then, I come looking for you again."

He claimed another hungry kiss, and then strode off in the direction of the airship and the dangling line. He hooked his foot into a loop at the bottom of the rope and they hauled him back into the sky. She watched his rising form and gasped. Peeking from his pocket, her cream silk knickers hung, with the distinctive green embroidery in the corner.

*God, I hope Nan doesn't see that.*

She watched until the airship disappeared over the horizon before continuing up to the house.

Her grandmother waited for her on a swing seat by the back porch. "Where has your delicious pirate gone?"

Cara sunk down next to the older woman. She pushed off with her feet to set the seat in motion. "He gave his apologies. He had to go back to London, some business to deal with."

Nan reached out and took her hand. "What do you plan to do with him?"

"Why? Do you not approve?" she asked cautiously.

Her grandmother burst out laughing. "Approve? My dear, as if you ever needed my approval. But that's not why I asked. Nussy and I are going to wrestle for him, if you don't want him. We're not so proud that we'd refuse your cast-offs."

Cara laughed. "Well, you can't have him."

"Yes, perhaps not. But it certainly looks like you just have."

Blushing, she jumped to her feet. Her centre pulsed at the memory of clutching Nate deep within. "I'm going to the library, before you and Nussy

start hounding me for all the details."

"That's all right, my dear. We still have vivid imaginations; we'll fill in the blanks." Nan called out as Cara disappeared into the house.



*TUESDAY, July 23*

For servants, the day started hours before their masters and mistresses ever stretched a toe out from under their silk coverlets. The kitchen maid had been up for over an hour already, creeping out of her narrow cot while full dark still blanketed London. She warmed water and stirred in yeast, waiting for the gooey mixture to froth and bubble before adding in the flour. She lost herself in the rhythm of kneading the dough before setting her loaves to rise by the fire.

She glanced out the high window. The kitchen was below street level; the window slit showed her the feet and wheels of the London traffic above her head, once the city rose from its slumber. She could just make out the faintest hint of colour on the horizon, dawn about to break. The hooves of the milkman's horse clattered past her narrow view on the world only minutes earlier. She enjoyed her pre-dawn flirting with the roughly handsome milky, but she was behind in her chores already and couldn't afford his distraction this morning.

Brushing the flour off her hands on her plain linen apron, she headed for the back door, keen to have the milk inside before any of the street kids nicked it. She pushed the back door and was surprised it wouldn't give. She pushed harder and it moved a couple of inches.

"Bloody kids," she muttered. They had probably tossed a drunk down the steep stairs and left him propped up against the door to sleep off his intoxication. She put her shoulder to the timber and forced the door open enough for her to slip through, intent on giving the hobo a piece of her mind.

She rounded the door and stopped. She stared at the bundle of clothes, trying to figure out how they could weigh so much. Reaching down with one hand, she was about to shake the person when some instinct froze her movement.

Something didn't smell right. Sharp and metallic. And the shape was all wrong.

She stood up and prodded with her toe instead, letting her boot connect with the blanket and draw it to one side. Her eyes widened, struggling to make sense of the broken pile of flesh and limbs. Then, she turned her head and retched into the gutter until her stomach crawled back up her throat.



FRASER HELD a handkerchief to his nose. Vomit, blood, and excrement combined to make a toxic nasal assault. The girl discarded like a piece of rubbish—the very act infuriated him. There was no care or attention, only disposal.

"It doesn't fit," Connor muttered from behind him. He stayed away from the sheet-covered object

"No," Fraser agreed. He lifted the corner of the sheet and said a silent prayer for the broken girl underneath. Her chest a mess of stab wounds, too many to count with a casual look, he would need Doc to verify the accurate number of blows.

*He's angry. So much rage. But at what?*

From beside him, Connor recited facts from his notebook. "Madeline Alcott. This is her home. Her father confirmed the body as his daughter."

Fraser forced his mind to block out the pale beauty of Madeline's face; it was the only way to do his job. To remain impartial and sniff out the minute clues, he had to shelve the emotion. He would return to the memory later, and the sight would haunt his sleep. Only the bottom of a whisky bottle would

erase the sight of Madeline's broken body dumped on the back doorstep of her home. Her torso resembled a butchered carcass, and from the centre, jutted the ornate brass bow of a very familiar key.



LATER THAT NIGHT, Fraser stared at the bottom of his empty beer mug. Ale was a poor substitute for the hard liquor his body craved, but beer would have to do. He would drink enough to dull the memory, not to erase it. He needed his wits about him until the murderer was caught.

"What's the word on the street, Frannie?" he asked their waitress as she dropped two more beers on to their table.

"That it's just a bunch of toffs." Her tone was bitter. "Last summer, when that nut was killing our girls, they didn't care. They laughed while we were butchered in the streets like old mutton. Let them see what it's like for a change."

Her sister had been one of the victims of that particular serial killer, hacked apart and her limbs left to clog up various drains. They nicknamed him the Grinder, because of what he did with the flesh he removed from the girls. Fraser had never eaten a sausage from a street vendor since that case. He had his work cut out for him over those gruesome weeks. His superiors argued to let the killer thin the number of street girls. Ten were taken before he caught the Grinder and ended his reign.

"You were the only one who cared. You fought for us. We don't forget that." She patted his shoulder before slipping away to tend other patrons.

"Any news from Doc yet?" Connor asked, taking a swig from his beer.

Fraser ran a finger over the condensation forming on the outside of his glass. "He's up to two hundred separate wounds and still counting."

Connor let out a whistle and dropped his beer. "Poor wee mite. What did she do to piss him off that much?"

"I don't think he was angry at Madeline." He took a deep drink, the ale doing nothing to stave off the darkness threatening to envelope him.

Connor frowned.

"He must have been angry to do that to her. Over and over, without stopping." A shudder ran through his large frame.

"Oh certainly, I agree with you there. But I think poor Madeline was the outlet, not the cause." He surveyed the bar; conversations rose and fell around them. The room was so full of noise and passion, but he saw only the evil lurking and waiting to grab any one of them.

"Who, then?" Connor asked.

"Who slipped from London a few nights ago?" He flicked his passive grey eyes back to his friend.

Connor concentrated before coming up with a name. "Cara Devon."

Fraser nodded, watching Frannie bat away the hands reaching for her bottom as she moved through the crowd.

"That means he must be watching her. Or, heck, must know her." The sergeant made the connection Fraser had known for a while. "You know who it is."

"I believe so." He dropped his tone low, keeping the conversation for their ears only. "But this won't be an easy collar. We need all the ammunition we can get our hands on, and even then, it might not be enough. We're big game hunting, Connor."

Connor's eyes widened and he took another quick hit from his mug. "You could get us both killed with this one."

"If we fail, I doubt anyone will ever find our bodies to be able to make that declaration." He thumped his friend on the back to reinforce his cheery thought.

Connor muttered into his glass. "So what do we do now, then?"

The investigation had stalled. While the fathers of the murdered girls admitted an association with Lord Devon, they clammed up about the finer

details. In his interview, Lord Alcott let slip the men shared a common interest, then he too had fallen silent, lost in his grief. Fraser's gut instinct told him he was close, that the pieces would soon fall into place. With the target he had in his sights, he needed far more than a gut feeling. His superiors and the magistrates would stand against him, without hard evidence. His hands itched to close around the final piece.

"I need to crack Cara Devon. That should give us the evidence we need. That, and I intend to dangle her like an enticing piece of bait. I believe the killer has merely been practicing on the other girls, that Cara is his ultimate prize." He waved his empty glass at Frannie. "We're going to take her away from him. And hope he lunges after her, that he will react without thinking to get his hands on her."

"She could end up getting killed." Connor pointed out quietly.

Fraser's grey eyes glinted hard, turning to steel. "Sometimes the goat gets mauled when you try to catch the lion."

## CHAPTER 24



*WEDNESDAY, July 24*

London called, and two days later, Cara answered. She turned over the faithful gelding to the local livery and took the steam train. Her grandmother and Nussy saw her off at the station, waving as the mammoth black and steel monster clawed down the rails.

She tried to occupy her mind on the journey by flicking through her father's diary and *Magycks of the Gods*. Her tentative theory about the true nature of the artifacts grew the deeper, she dug. She kept finding objects in the ancient book that her father tracked down and concealed, almost as though he used the oral legends as a shopping list of items to steal and hide from the world. The idea nagged at Cara. *If he knew what they were, why didn't he use them?*

She jumped out of her compartment at the Liverpool Street station with pent-up frustration fizzing under her skin. The hours of sitting, unable to move, drove her to distraction. She wanted to seek out Nate, tossing up whether to try the house or the hangar first. She needed to burn off excess energy and a part of her knew exactly how he would suggest doing it. She had another reason for seeking him out; a tug on her heart posed a question she needed to answer.

She decided to walk off the stiffness in her muscles, before catching

transport to Mayfair, and headed down Bishopsgate Road. Heading along the main street, she caught sight of the familiar bronze and copper mechanical horses and the large black carriage they pulled. Jackson chatted to the driver as he smoked his cigarette. Cara glanced at the adjacent pale grey stone building; it contained the White Hart Inn.

She waved to Jackson as she wandered closer to the window. She scanned the assembled people inside, and her breath hitched. She spotted him seated at a table not far from the window, his face impassive as the gentleman opposite him gestured to emphasise his conversation. Nate's gaze flicked up and caught hers. The barest twitch of a smile pulled at his lips, before the mask dropped back. He glanced briefly at his companion and she saw him say something, sending the other man into a renewed arm-waving frenzy.

His attention returned to Cara. Holding her gaze captive, his fingers pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, made of cream silk. He ran the fabric through his fingers and brushed it against his cheek. Cara frowned, until she saw the green embroidery. She dropped her lashes, her mind raced as heat spread through her torso.

*He's playing with my knickers. In a public house!*

She dared to raise her stare, His eyes reflected his hunger. A slow twitch pulled his mouth into a predatory grin. A knot formed in Cara's gut; flames licked over her and she parted her lips in a silent cry. His fingers entwined in the silk, reminded her of how he stroked her through the fabric and touched her pulse.

Cara dragged her attention from Nate's strong hands and took a deep breath to steady herself. She approached Jackson. "Will he be long?"

The bodyguard shrugged. "He's relieving that other bloke of his fortune. He usually lingers over something like that. Or he might cut it short, seeing as you reappeared."

She bit her lip. "Can you tell him I'm at the hangar? I need to hit something."

Without offering any further explanation, and with the image of Nate playing with her underwear burned into her brain, she changed direction and took off down the pavement. Setting a brisk pace, she dodged amongst the numerous pedestrians clogging the footpath.

Down by the Thames, she entered the dim interior of the enormous Lyons airship hangar. She paused to let the smell of different lands and cultures roll over her. She spied Miguel in the back of the hangar. He was strapped into a metal exoskeleton, the steel claws unloading large crates from a mechanical trolley.

"Can you take a break?" she asked him. "I want to spar, and you're more my size than that lot."

She pointed over her shoulder to the other men. Most of them hit in excess of six-foot-four, and half as broad. She wanted to burn off energy, not wipe off her face.

He gave her a cheeky smile. "Sure. I'll just finish up here."

He unloaded the last crate, powered down the suit and then released himself. They struck off down the secret staircase to the Pit.

She removed her jacket, pistols, and corset and hung them above the oak pew. Miguel bandaged her hands. She returned the favour, winding white cotton over the wrists and knuckles of the young man.

At first glance, they appeared evenly matched. Only a close inspection showed the youth pulled his blows, ensuring he wouldn't fully strike his opponent. The bout wound on, both fighters breathing hard after twenty minutes of strikes, dodges, and exertion. A light sheen of sweat was visible on Cara's forehead and bare shoulders. Miguel sweated openly, rubbing an arm over his forehead to clear his vision of the threatening liquid. He froze, his eyes focused beyond Cara's shoulder, giving her an opportunity to land a hard blow on his chin, sending him reeling backward.

She paused, slightly puzzled, wondering why he didn't bounce up. She swung around to follow his line of sight.

Nate stood behind her, his gaze swept over her body and his nostrils flared. He glanced to the other side of the Pit, to the heavy steel double doors, closed and padlocked.

Cara never asked what was beyond the door. Her curiosity fled at the idea of asking; a tingle in the back of her head told her she didn't want to know.

"Upstairs. My office. Now," he commanded, before spinning on his heel and stalking out of the room.

Wary and thrown off guard by his reaction, Cara picked up her discarded clothes. She toyed briefly with heading straight back to her apartment in defiance, but she longed to run her hands over him and finally have his bare skin next to hers. Heading up the stairs, she found the office door shut. She slipped through and closed it behind her. She tossed her outer clothing on a nearby chair, before unwinding the tape from around her knuckles.

"You shouldn't be here alone." He sat on the corner of the desk, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"I wasn't alone." She tossed the ball of cotton bandage onto the chair with her clothes and started on her other hand.

"You know what I mean. You shouldn't be down there without me or Jackson." He clipped his words, holding his anger in check with each syllable.

She finished the second roll of bandage and threw it next to the first. Looking up, she caught his blazing stare.

"What is your problem? I thought you wanted me to come back to London. You told me if I wasn't back in two days, you would come after me. And just a couple of hours ago, you were practically sniffing my knickers in a tavern."

She was confused; after what happened in Leicester, she thought he would be pleased to see her. Her heart jumped into her throat at the sight of him, but he was angry.

"Just go to the house . . . please. You shouldn't be here, not today. We'll

talk later," he said softly, running a hand through his dark hair. For the briefest moment, he looked overloaded, and vulnerable. The mask dropped back into place quickly. "I'm sorry. Of course I want to see you. It's just business, something unpleasant that must be dealt with first. I don't want it touching you."

A tingle shot down her spine and told her the unpleasantness was something to do with the double-bolted steel doors deep underneath the hangar. Something lurked behind them, and made his usual icy control melt just a fraction under its heat.

"All right, then," she agreed.

"Good. I'll have Jackson drive you to the house." He uncrossed his arms, a small amount of tension eased from his shoulders.

"No, thank you. I'll find my own way there." She still bristled at his tone. "I have some things to do along the way." She could be as equally stubborn, and for once, he didn't push for dominance over her.

"I expect to find you at the house when I finish up here." He dropped his tone lower, brushing a promise over her with his words.

She gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir. But you could do something for me?"

"You're not getting your knickers back. They're my talisman. I intend to take them to every business meeting from now on." He gave her a heart-warming smile, but he looked tired underneath it.

She moved closer to him. "I just want one kiss, before I go."

His lips twitched, but before he could answer, she held up a hand.

"With one proviso. You can't touch me."

His gaze raked her instead.

"Very well. You have my word." He tucked his hands behind his back, an echo of how they started, almost a month ago. Only his burning gaze told her how much everything had changed. They had tasted each other, and Cara was fast becoming addicted.

Her pulse thrummed loudly through her veins as she stepped between his legs, her hip grazing him. Placing one hand on his thigh, she wound the other in his black hair, pulling his head down as she arched up to kiss him. His hunger was palpable, rolling off him as his tongue dove into her mouth. His warm scent filled her nostrils. She sucked on him, wanting more, and he responded by increasing the pressure and baring his teeth, nipping her lip until she moaned into him.

His arousal pushed into her thigh and she rubbed against the growing hardness like a cat, showing her own need and making him growl deep in his throat. She pressed against his chest, as a slow tingle spread over her skin. Her tongue played with his, then she pulled back, her heart pounded harder and faster than after the sparring bout.

His gaze was white hot metal, searing off her clothes. "I suggest you leave now, while you can. The business I have to tidy up won't take too long. Unless you want me to add another pair of knickers to my collection?"

She gave a shudder of anticipation, grabbed her jacket, and ran out the door.

THE BATH WATER was deliciously hot. Steam rose and swirled over the surface. Cara sank down and let out a deep sigh. The heat drew the stress of the last few days from her body. The water buoyed both her body and mind. The door to one side of the bathroom slid open and she glanced from under her eyelashes.

Nate entered and sat on the teal striped chaise in front of the fire. He pulled off his long leather boots.

Cara leaned forward and hugged her legs. Resting her cheek on her knee, she watched him for a change. His shirt came off over his head in one easy move. He tossed the garment over the back of the sofa. She let her gaze roam over the hard muscles of his torso. The finely chiselled lines made her fingers

itch; she wanted to run her nails over him and find out how much pressure it would take to make him gasp.

Standing, he put his hand on the buttons of his trousers.

A smile curled her lips and she shut her eyes. Moments later, the water around her rippled and stirred. The level within the copper bath rose, accommodating Nate's bulk as he sank down behind her. Placing a hard muscular leg either side of her, he reached out and drew her through the water, back against his chest.

The steam enclosed both of them, moisture beading over their bodies. He tilted her head, so he could claim her mouth, his lips hard against hers. He took her breath into him, fanning the heat spreading through her limbs. His hands roamed her body, gliding over her skin slick with the oil she had poured into the bath.

Heat-induced lassitude freed her mind. She gave herself up to the languid sensations rippling through her at his touch. With one hand he thumbed her breast, sending delicious waves rolling over her. His other hand stroked lower. She arched her back at the exquisite knot building deep inside her. She moaned and writhed against him; her hands gripped his thighs.

His hand stroked her centre. Her fingernails dug into his legs as lightning flashed up her body, igniting her senses. A moan broke from her throat as his fingers played over the sensitive bundle of nerves. As he plied deeper, her body ached, screaming for more. Her hands clawed his thighs, unable to reach any other part of him in the confines of the bath and held captive by his body around her. He stroked her slowly, unrelenting. His fingers rose and fell as he nudged her toward the edge. She cried out; her skin on fire as the pressure within her built.

"What would it take to make you scream?" he whispered, his teeth grazing her neck. He rubbed with the heel of his hand as his fingers sent shockwaves through her body. He drove deeper into her, and her hips rose to push against him as she teetered on a precipice. With his free hand, he

continued his assault on her breast and she cried out his name as release blossomed through her. It rolled from her centre outwards, arching her body out of the water as light sparked behind her tightly closed lids. Her body spasmed around his hand and she collapsed back against him, her head on his chest. Sensation lapped over her body with the water, as his hands soothed her. He caressed her while she came down from the erotic high. Her eyelids fluttered, not wanting to open.

"Don't go thinking I'm finished with you," he said. "You certainly don't get to fall asleep on me yet." His arousal pressing into her back emphasised his words.

She resisted the urge to pout; part of her wanted to lay in front of the fire and sleep like a sated cat. Part of her wanted more; she just didn't want to move too far to get it. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, and held her until the water started to cool.

He stepped out of the bath, grabbed a towel, and hooked it around his hips. He held out the other towel to Cara, and she stepped over the side of the tub, into the thick cotton folds. He took his time to rub her body, drawing the moisture into the towel, lingering over her breasts. He dropped to his knees to dry each leg, starting at her ankle and working his way up. He paused to kiss her inner thigh and she had to bite back the moan on her lips. Her skin was raw and each feather touch burned through her.

Satisfied she was dry enough; he tossed the towel to the ground, swept her into his arms, and carried her to the room beyond.

"This is your room," she whispered.

The deep green walls complemented the wooden furniture. The bedroom was luxurious and masculine. Small mementos from his travels decorated the walls and the mantelpiece. She saw a large and fierce tribal mask from Africa and a statue of Baast from Egypt. A richly coloured Persian rug spread over the floor. She wanted to study everything, learn where he travelled, and bombard him with questions.

He set her down next to the oversized four-poster bed. Barley-sugar twist posts held aloft a deep cream and green damask canopy. "You can explore my room later. Right now I want to explore you."

He discarded his towel, locked his arms around her, and tumbled onto the bed, rolling her under him.

"Oh dear, Miss Devon," he murmured hotly against the hollow of her throat. "You appear to have fallen into my bed."

She laughed at his line. "Was this a setup just so you could say that?"

"I have been waiting rather awhile. Ever since you stated so forcefully you never would." He made his point with her pinned naked under him. "Now roll over," he ordered, lifting himself enough to allow her to roll onto her stomach.

She complied and rested her head on her arms, the lazy cat waiting to be petted.

He straddled her thighs. Picking a scar, he traced it with his lips down her back, starting at her shoulder and moving down across her spine. He kissed, licked, and nipped at her skin. When he finished one lash mark, he followed the path of another. With his weight balanced on one hand, he used the other to caress her front as his tongue worked over her back. She was trapped between two layers of pleasure. Feline-like, her touch-starved body drank up every stroke and caress, all but purring under him.

Having tasted every inch of silken skin on her back, he rolled her over. He claimed her mouth in a hungry kiss; his tongue sought out hers. His lips were crushing in his need to possess her, to brand her as his.

She welcomed his weight on her, arching her body against him, the hunger within her desperate to be sated, now he had awoken it.

Breaking free, his lips trailed over her collarbone before heading south, down to her breasts. His tongue circled each in turn and drove her into a frenzy of longing. She reached out for him, desperate to explore and touch him, but he captured her hands and held them above her head. He tempered

his strength, his grip strong enough to stop her distracting him, but loose enough she could break free. If she wanted to.

"When do I get my turn to be in charge?" She asked between gasps, wanting to reciprocate, to taste him and stroke him until he lost his icy control. She longed to see a rush of emotion across his face as she pleased him.

"In case you haven't noticed," he breathed against the skin of her stomach. "I prefer to be in charge, and don't surrender easily." He continued licking wild fire down her body.

"I'll need handcuffs then," she gasped. His lavish attention made her writhe, her brain no longer able to function and form coherent sentences. She could only think of the ache inside her, needing to be filled by him.

He released her hands when his head dipped lower. His tongue explored her belly button as his hands feathered her thigh. His fingers pressed into her as his gaze sought hers. She moaned as he stroked her, the fire threatening to consume her again.

"No, Nate," she gasped. "It's too much. I need you, now."

He gave in to her demand, his breath short, and his eyes wild with desire to possess her. This was what she wanted, the freedom to give of herself and now she welcomed him. No space existed between them, as they moved together. He drove into her, each powerful thrust sending her spiralling out of control. She clawed her fingernails down his back, needing to be consumed by him.

Her heart ached to belong to him, and only him. His power and control made her safe; his strength matched hers and allowed her to be free. He was unrelenting in his rhythm, until she fractured under him, and screamed his name. Her powerful release was the trigger for his. Her body clenched around him and drew him deeper into her. He buried himself and cried out.

Careful not to collapse on her, he rolled onto his back, and gathered her into his arms. She nestled against him, her head on his chest, listening to the

pounding of his heartbeat, smiling with the knowledge of the effect she had on him. Next time, she would cuff him to the headboard, and indulge every wicked thought she had about him. She would explore every inch of him with her lips, tongue, and fingers, until he broke and begged her to ride him to release.

Nate stroked her hair. He pushed his thigh between hers, an intimate embrace, securing her to him in all ways, as she drifted into sleep.

EARLY MORNING, with dawn still an hour or two away and there came a discreet knock on the bedroom door. Partially awake, Cara grumbled as Nate disengaged from her warm, naked form to answer the call. She heard a low, muttered conversation, followed by the door shutting. Rustling indicated he found clothes and pulled them on. The mattress dipped under his weight as he sat next to her, and kissed her bare shoulder.

"I have to go. There's an urgent situation I have to sort out. Stay here. I'll be back late morning."

She murmured agreement, not intending to move very far, except to give a languid stretch. Pulling his pillow to her, she inhaled deeply of his scent and curled back into sleep.

## CHAPTER 25



*THURSDAY, July 25*

Cara stretched her hands up over her head. Her muscles quivered at the memory of being used in new, and sensual, ways. She was disappointed to find the bed next to her empty, but vaguely remembered Nate leaving before dawn to attend urgent business.

Her stomach rumbled. She cast her eyes around the room and remembered her clothes were in the bedroom on the other side of the bathroom. She was toying with a naked dash through the rooms when a soft knock sounded on the door.

She pulled the sheet up over her chest. "Yes," she called.

The door opened and the lady's maid entered, carrying a tray. Cara's stomach rumbled again on seeing the little triangles of toast in the silver holder, a soft-boiled egg, and smelling the glorious waft of crispy bacon.

The maid's eyes flitted around the room nervously as she set the tray over Cara's legs. Next to the breakfast lay a small, eggshell blue visiting card. A frown wrinkled her forehead.

"That came for you yesterday afternoon, miss."

Cara picked up the heavy card. The front bore a name and address. The back bore the inscription: *You helped Isobel. She said you would help me.*

Cara snorted out air. *Another one. This is starting to feel like a job.* Her

attention drifted back to the maid, her eyes darting around the room.

"Are you all right?" she asked, propping the pillow up behind her. "It's Emily isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. And it's just I haven't been in here before," she breathed.

Cara arched an eyebrow. "Does he normally chuck women out during the night then?"

"Oh, no, but he never has them on this side. Not here, never in *his* room. Always over there." She gestured with her head to the room on the other side. The room Cara always used to change and where she dropped her clothing the previous night.

"Oh. So we are both invading his private domain." She chewed over the information as she munched on the crispy bacon. Although it made sense, he couldn't have made his point about her falling into *his* bed, if he tumbled her into the guest bed. But her heart skipped a beat, hoping it meant something else.

"Do you want me to fetch a dress for you, or do you want your own clothes?" the maid politely enquired.

"My clothes, if you don't mind."

Emily nodded her head and disappeared through the door to the bathroom. She emerged moments later with the clothing and folded them neatly on the end of the bed while Cara demolished the egg and toast.

Emily fussed over her like a woman with too much time on her hands and not enough to keep them occupied. Cara never thought why a house of men employed a lady's maid, but her mind skirted around how often Nate had guests in the other room, to warrant having a maid on his payroll. Eventually she managed to escape and left Emily to tidy up, while she darted down the stairs to freedom.

Miguel hailed her in the entranceway. "Where are you off to, miss?"

"Are you spying on me today?" She was in a good mood. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel Nate's naked flesh pressed to hers. The memory

raised goose bumps along her arms.

"He's still busy with Jackson. Something messy blew up." His face pulled into a grimace. "He asked me to make sure you have everything you need."

He gave her a small bow and snapped his heels.

A smile tickled her lips. He reminded her of a gentleman's gentleman, not someone studying and emulating a crime lord.

"I have a visit to make to one of the neighbours." She held out the card for him to examine. "You'll be able to keep an eye on me from the end of the driveway. Then, I will go to my rooms to fetch some things, but I'll give you a wave before I do. If you're going to follow me, you may as well be useful and carry my bag." She gave him a wink. "I promise I will be sprawled in the conservatory by the time he gets back."

Her heart was light as she walked the short drive before hitting the busy main street. She waited for a steam-powered carriage to trundle past before darting across the road. Her feet quickly carried her along the pavement to a neighbouring house. She rapped on the ornate brass knocker and gave a wave to Miguel, who watched from the driveway. Waiting on the step reminded her, she needed to visit the family home and see if she could find where the cantankerous building hid the Heart. Preferably without the tenant breathing down her neck.

The butler showed Cara through to a woman's study. A deep yellow and cream pattern papered the walls, with matching heavy velvet drapes. The surface littered with letters, a small writing desk sat under the window. A piece of green ribbon draped over the edge, waiting to be wrapped around a bundle of correspondence. A cream chaise decorated with gold butterflies stretched by the fire. The room was small, quaint, and private. And a very definite indicator she was not considered a social visitor. The parlour out of bounds to her, this was strictly business.

*I'm surprised I didn't get taken down to the kitchen.*

A woman in her mid-twenties entered the room. Her dark chocolate hair

coiled around her head with not a hair out of place. Her dress would have screamed money, if the construction weren't so subtle, so it coughed money discreetly, instead. Cut to fit like a second skin, the fabric emphasised every curve before flowing over her hips. Sara Collins, the name on the card, was a picture of icy control. Her black eyes regarded Cara in a predatory fashion, causing a chill to walk down her spine.

"I've lost my engagement ring." Her voice was as chilling as her gaze.

*Straight to business, then.*

"Since you've asked for my help, I assume you didn't lose it picking roses in the garden." Cara noticed she wasn't invited to sit. She rubbed her hands over her arms, the atmosphere in the room frosty, despite the sunlight outside.

A momentary hesitation came before her next comment. "I lost it as a forfeit in Su-Terré."

Cara sucked in a breath; she was going to get her visit to the illicit playground, after all. She raised an eyebrow, wondering what escape the Ice Princess was seeking underground.

"I lost a bet to the Trickster. I was supposed to provide myself, but I panicked and gave up the ring instead. Now I need to have it back before my family discovers what I have done." She told the facts plainly, no rush of emotion, or embarrassment, marred her perfect face.

*I can't imagine you panicking.* "Why don't you tell your family you lost it in the garden?"

Sara's mouth twitched. "The ring is a very valuable piece. They would tear up every blade of grass to find it."

A warning prickled at the back of Cara's brain, the story not ringing true. "I'm no whore. I won't substitute myself for you. What are you prepared to offer for it?"

"A slight variant on the original terms. He can have me, but at my convenience, and for two nights instead of one, to compensate him for waiting. And you will be amply rewarded for fetching my ring."

The warning ice water turned to sleet as it ran down her back. *Something's not right here.* "I'll see what I can do, but I make no promises."

Sara nodded her head and walked to the door, when cold words halted her steps. "I wonder that you are still in London. The gossips say you will be the killer's final victim."

Cara eyed the other woman, weighing her words. "You'll be hoping I find your ring before he finds me, then."

Holding the door open, Sara waited for Cara to leave.

Practically turfed onto the pavement, she considered her next move. *She's not exactly endearing me to try very hard to retrieve her ring. And while I'm thinking of finding things, I think I'll pay the house a visit, on my own.*

Miguel lounged against the wrought iron gate farther down the road, his eyes fixed on Cara, even as he spoke to the bodyguard next to him. She gave him a wave and headed down the footpath toward him. He relaxed and turned his attention to his conversation.

A cab rumbled past, blocking the house from view. Cara used the opportunity, grabbed the handhold, and swung herself onto the running board.

The driver gave her a startled look from his position at the back of the cab.

She held out a coin to him, a smile on her face. "Soho, please, Broadwick Street."

He took the coin and shook his head. "Hop in, then."

Cara swung herself into the small interior and they chugged along the road.

*Forgive me Miguel, but I have to do this without you shadowing me.*

She disembarked down the road from her family home and approached it from the opposite side of the road, trying to discern if the tenant was inside or not.

Across the road, a hulking dark blue uniformed Enforcer climbed out of

the steam-powered carriage. His eyes widened on seeing Cara and he strode across the road toward her, heedless of the oncoming steam carriages and horse-drawn vehicles.

*Oh, no. Now what?* She waited for the officer to reach her side.

"Miss Devon," he hailed her. "From Inspector Fraser. I was on my way to see if you were home." He gestured to the house across the road from where they stood.

She took the card from his fingers and stared at it. The Enforcers' blue and gold shield occupied one side. Next to it, the name Inspector Hamish Fraser appeared in neat, subtle type. On the back was a short, concise message.

*As soon as possible. It's important.*

She didn't particularly want to see the inspector, but the time had come to lay everything on the table. She let out an audible breath, glanced up at the uniform, then over at the sulking house, unsure which option was the worse one to take. "I'll come now. Let's get this over and done with."

He gave her a brusque nod and escorted her back to the Enforcer carriage.

The murders of the girls preyed on her mind. Their fathers were the link. She decided to tell Fraser about the Heart. She believed their fathers, and probably other men, were privy to a private viewing of the artifact. It meant the killer was one of the men present when her father showed off Nefertiti's Heart, a pivotal clue for Fraser. An exchange of information was the way forward. Not that she would let Fraser get his hands on the ancient object; the gem was going to fund her future and independence. She just wanted to make sure the killer didn't get his hands on her. Self-preservation was high on her list of priorities.

## CHAPTER 26



CARA REACHED Enforcers Headquarters and climbed the stairs to Fraser's office, her brain whirring with theories and information. She knocked and waited.

"Yes?" a voice came from within.

She pushed the door open to chaos. Files, reports, and tagged items littered every available surface. Some were stacked many inches high and resembled the paper equivalent of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

"Ah, Miss Devon, have a seat, please." He stood up from his chair and indicated its companion on the other side of his desk.

She dropped into the chair with a heavy sigh.

He walked to the window and leaned against the side as he regarded her. "Does the name Henry Simons mean anything to you?"

She frowned; not the opening gambit she expected. "No. Should it?"

His placid eyes watched her carefully. "We pulled a man out of the Thames early this morning. He was identified as Henry Simons. He's been missing for a week now."

"Are you trying to find something else to pin on me now?" She snorted. She seemed to have moved to the top of the Enforcers' hit list for unsolved crimes.

"Not at all." He weighed his next words. "It's just that he was valet to

Lord Clayton."

Cara was flash frozen, immobile as her brain smoked at high speed to connect the dots. "What?"

"He had been Clayton's man for several years, until he disappeared about a week ago. He met a very unfortunate end. And he was quite a large man, not the sort to fall prey to a lone mugger."

"Yes. I remember." She closed her eyes. One large hand held her down, another curled around her throat, and he eagerly did his master's bidding.

"It appears he was beaten and tortured over a period of time, possibly the time he was missing. Then he was gutted and dropped into the water. Rather careless actually, almost as if someone wanted him found." Those eyes watched her every reaction, weighed them in his mind.

Another memory tumbled into her brain. The night at Savage's, a week ago, she told Nate how Clayton had his valet rape her first, so he could proclaim she hadn't been a virgin when he took her. Then yesterday, unpleasant business distracted him. *I don't want it to touch you*, he told her.

She thought of his gaze darting to the heavy bolted steel doors down in the Pit. *God, I hope I'm wrong*. Her mind turned to what she endured over the eternal week she was held, beaten, and raped, repeatedly. *No. Rough justice is better than no justice*. She drew a deep breath, trying to keep her wits about her.

Fraser's chalkboard caught her attention, covered in notes, names, arrows, and question marks. Her name was circled over and over. She imagined his hand drawing the chalk around her name, concentric circles moving closer, pressing in on her.

He saw what drew her eye. "Four women murdered most brutally, Miss Devon. I take the responsibility of bringing the killer to justice very seriously."

He moved to his desk and drew a file off the top of the pile. It contained a wad of photographs. He extracted one off the top and tossed the picture onto

the clear space in front of her. She glanced at the black and white image. Her breath caught in her throat, her mind struggling to determine what she was seeing. A mass of battered and abused flesh and from it reached a delicate bow suspended on its brass shaft.

"The fourth victim, Madeline Alcott. Different, as you can see; he appears to have vented his rage upon her." He paused, letting it soak in that the battered flesh had a name, and a life, once. "She was murdered while you were in Leicester."

"I'm sorry," Cara whispered, closing her eyes to shut out the image. She opened her eyes, and deliberately fixed them elsewhere, unable to look at the broken woman.

"I believe the connection is between your father and theirs." Fraser picked up the photo and gently replaced it in the file. He didn't toss the file back on the desk. Instead, he cleared a space for it in the centre. His fingers pressed the top, caressed each letter in the file name as though it were his rosary.

"Your father possessed something the killer wants, and these men knew about it. And you know what it is." He stated his theory simply, and waited. He stepped to the window, leaving her to mull over his words.

She couldn't do this alone. Not anymore. "Nefertiti's Heart."

Fraser turned, his eyebrows shot up, the very name an answer in itself to all the questions about the deaths. His hands curled around the back of his chair, expectant, waiting for her to continue.

"It's an artifact from the reign of Akhenaten in 1400 B.C. It's a diamond and mechanical heart. The myth surrounding it says it came from the body of Nefertiti, Akhenaten's wife. Her love for him was so pure and divine, it made him a god. The Heart is supposed to be able to bestow immortality, if the holder knows how to unlock it. My father went to Egypt eight years ago and hunted down the gem."

Fraser let out a soft whistle. "So the killer knows about the artifact. A heart-sized diamond would be incredibly valuable."

Relief washed through her at finally being able to discuss the topic, hoping Fraser would have answers to the questions that plagued her mind.

"My father used to hold private viewings of his acquisitions, for a select circle with similar tastes in illegally obtained objects. I believe you'll find all of them were invited to see the Heart." She waved her hand at the names of the men on the board. "But the killer has his facts wrong. The myth says to unlock the artifact, not a flesh and blood heart."

Silence descended, Fraser lost in thought, sorting through the puzzle pieces.

"And another thing: why kill my father and then the girls? If we assume their fathers all know about the Heart, why hasn't he gone after them? Why doesn't he kill them for their knowledge of the Heart, why kidnap their daughters and do . . . that?" She gestured to the file of photographs.

Fraser's grey gaze held hers. "Perhaps the killer thought it would be simple. Kill your father, and retrieve the object. Then his path either became more complex, or his mind became overloaded."

She tried to make sense of the killings. "How do you detour from trying to get your hands on a diamond the size of a fist and wander off and start driving brass keys through the hearts of debutantes? I don't understand."

A deep sadness dropped over Fraser's face. She wondered how he coped, dealing with an endless stream of cases like this. The onslaught of killers never stopped. He caught one and another simply popped up somewhere else.

"Killers like this, their minds are unhinged. Are we seeking an astute man who knows the value of large diamonds? Or, a deranged killer searching for immortality? What seems incomprehensible to us is perfectly logical to him. Perhaps something pushed him over the edge, and his mission to possess the Heart, for its commercial value, warped. His attention was already fixated on these families and became focused on their daughters."

One thing worried her, survival at the forefront. "Why am I alive, then?"

"Because there is something about you which marks you as special. I

believe he has merely been rehearsing with the other girls, perfecting his performance for the finale."

Cara shuddered at the thought, and immediately dropped her fingers to the handle of her pistol, stroking the design etched into the cool ivory.

"You must know, he is descending into madness, if not already there. Impending insanity makes him imminently more dangerous to you. I believe he is simply saving you for last." He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "And given what he did to poor Madeline, I think the end is very near."

She stiffened in the chair, Fraser's words sinking through, gradually realising *who* he was referring to.

"You're wrong." She shook her head in immediate denial.

"You're an intelligent woman. You know there is a connection. There is one man who has the means and motive. And, who would know the financial value of such an artifact."

She froze. *No*. One word repeated in her brain, a small bee hurling itself against the inside of her brain, frantically buzzing *no no no no . . . .*

"You must listen to me. You cannot deny the evidence any more. You place yourself in grave danger."

"You're wrong. The killer must be someone else." She swallowed, her gaze darted to his chalkboard. Next to her circled name was another. A name she cried in passion.

Who wanted the notebook? Who tried to steal it? Then, that day in his office, he suggested she hand it over for safekeeping.

*No*, her brain replied.

The sarcophagus came from his hangar. He had the manpower to lift the lid, and more importantly, the money to buy their silence and the position to enforce it.

*No*.

Who encouraged her to find the Heart? Who kept asking how her research was progressing? Asking if she'd come any closer to finding where

Lord Devon had hidden it?

*No.*

Who knew the value of a diamond the size of a fist and had the contacts to sell such a gem to the highest bidder? Who had a double-padlocked steel door, deep underground in a hidden chamber?

Silence. The raging bee in her head battered itself senseless, her mind unable to keep defending him. A sob welled up in her throat as her heart broke.

*God help me, I gave myself to him. I love him.*

"You must stay safe, Miss Devon. Please don't go near Lord Lyons again. Leave this matter to the Enforcers. We will have you watched, until he is caught." His tone was gentle, her distress obvious.

She nodded, unable to speak. Tears built behind her eyes, the pain in her chest unbearable.

"Perhaps it would be better if you returned to your grandmother's estate? Where you have friends and family to support you."

"Yes." Her voice was robotic, a flood of emotion barely held in check. "I have to go."

The tears streamed down her face. She refused to believe any of Fraser's words, but the facts all fell horribly into place, the only explanation that made sense.

She ran down the stairs and through the mid-day traffic, uncaring of her direction. Her feet moved as the skies opened up. Mother Nature wept with her distraught daughter.

Her feet carried her through the crowds; people skirted away from the madwoman flitting through their midst. She ran until she found herself at the edge of the Thames, the water turbulent and grey, stirred up by the rain and wind, the perfect reflection of her inner turmoil.

Cara fell to her knees and let the tears overcome her, blending with the rain and river. She keened while her heart fractured. Time slipped by

unnoticed. Darkness fell and blanketed her, protecting her from the prying eyes of those few around, rendering her near-invisible in her grief. Uncontrollable sobs and the pain in her soul exceeded anything ever inflicted on her body.

Laughter welled up in her throat and burst forth with a hysterical peel.

*I've given my heart to a serial killer who destroys hearts. I've done his work for him. There's a story to entertain Nan and Nessy.*

She changed position to hug her knees. Her tears now exhausted, the rain also relented, easing back to a steady drizzle. The water reflected the few lights from the surrounding warehouses. The workers left for their homes, and she was alone.

The noise came to her ears first, a quiet hiss and puff, punctuated by the zing of water hitting hot metal. The small steam-powered carriage drew near, strangely out of place by the docks, being more at home on the streets of Mayfair or Kensington. A new and expensive model, it could be operated from inside, and didn't require a driver.

She watched through red eyes as someone flung open the door. Soft light framed the sole occupant.

"Are you all right?" the gentle voice asked.

"I'm fine." She turned back to the river, hoping the carriage's occupant got the message and left her along. Water ran down her neck and disappeared between her shoulder blades, making her shiver at the cold touch.

"You're soaked to the bone. Let me give you a ride home." The voice was insistent.

Another shake of her head, conversation was too much effort. Her heart ached and emptiness leached back into her soul.

The rain parted above her head. Startled, she looked up.

Weaver Clayton held an umbrella over her. "Please, Miss Devon, you'll catch your death of cold. Come on." He held out his other hand to her.

She was cold, and shook, her teeth rattling against one another. The

numbness soaked through her limbs and she didn't even want to contemplate the long walk back to her rooms. "All right."

She took his offered hand and stood. Her muscles protested at the movement after hours curled in one position. She quietly followed him back to the roadside and climbed up into the small carriage. She gave him a weak, apologetic smile. "I'm going to get your seats all wet."

His smile was warm and gentle. "It's only water. I have a towel here somewhere." He lifted the seat next to him, revealing a half-compartment underneath. With a quick rummage, he extracted a towel and passed it to Cara.

She muttered her thanks and started briskly wiping the water off her hair and face.

"This towel smells funny," she commented to Weaver.

A worried look crossed his face. "Really? It's been in there for a while; it might be a bit musty."

Cara took another deep sniff of the fabric.

"No. It's something else." She couldn't place it, but the odour tugged a memory somewhere in the recesses of her brain. A fog descended and clouded her attempts to recollect. She blinked; she hadn't realised how tired she was. *How long was I out there?*

"Do you mind?" He moved to her side, and held out his hand.

She shrugged, about to pass the towel over, when Weaver lunged. Caught unawares, with her reactions slowed by exhaustion, Cara found the towel wrapped around her face before she could react. Her fingers clawed at the fabric, trying to pull it away as he pressed it against her mouth and nose. The reek overwhelmed even as it swarmed into her head. She hadn't realised how strong he was. Or had she become weaker? Why wouldn't her body respond to her desperate commands?

Her hands slowed, her brain screamed at her to fight, her life depended on it, but she was incapable of answering. As darkness crept over her one

horrifying thought solidified.

*Fraser is wrong. The killer isn't Nate.*

## CHAPTER 27



*FRIDAY, July 26*

Cara groaned. *God, this hangover hurts. I don't know what I drank, but I'm never touching it again.*

She rolled her head to ease the pressure headache, but something inhibited her movement. Something was wrong. Lightning seared through her brain as memories flooded back.

*Weaver. He's going to kill me.*

A sob of despair welled in her throat, but she choked it back down. A gag, pressed tightly through the corners of her mouth, blocked her cry. Her eyes flew open. The bright light directly above her head burned her retinas and she quickly closed them again. Red light flashed and strobed behind her lids. She took a deep breath through the fabric, willing the panic to settle and wait its turn. She needed her brain to function rationally, so she could evaluate her predicament.

She tried to rock her head, but something held her immobile, pressing over her forehead.

*Can't move head.*

She tried to raise her hands, but something tight pulled against her forearms.

*Can't move arms.*

An experimental move revealed her legs were strapped to whatever she lay on.

*Legs also not moving. Well, it's confirmed.*

*I'm going to die.*

She cautiously opened her eyes a fraction. The light seemed somewhat dimmer, and no longer seared into the back of her brain. She rolled her eyes, trying to make out her surroundings. By experimenting, she found, if she moved very slowly, she could rotate her head left and right a couple of inches. Through narrowed eyes, she saw grey stone walls. To her left, a wall of books, test tubes and jars. To her right, a trolley laid out with surgical equipment. The light glinted off scalpels, clamps, and scissors. There was a fresh roll of suture thread and a needle waiting to be used. She decided she preferred the view to her left.

She stared at the light fitting; the pounding in her heart kept pace with the heavy beat of the unseen clock. Each tick echoed through her body, reminding her time slipped by. Her gaze kept drifting back to the light fitting, an unusual wrought iron confection. There were five different branches, each holding aloft a small electric light. The arms curved and twisted into ornate patterns as they extended. *It reminds me of the one in the basement . . . at home.*

She twisted her head, trying to see, trying to make out any other distinguishing features. One cellar looked much like another. She never spent much time in the house, let alone down in the basement. The only distinguishing characteristic she could remember was the strangely out-of-place light fitting.

Cara tried to remember anything about her new tenant. She never bothered to meet him, leaving all the boring details to her lawyer. All she knew was that he was a scholar, doing some research. *And cutting up girls in the basement, apparently.*

"You're awake." The voice came from behind her, or possibly above her,

and out of her limited line of sight. "You don't know how long I've waited for you."

She tried to turn to see where he was, praying he wasn't reaching for the tray of instruments. Her ears strained to catch the sound of metal scraping on metal. Her body was held immobile but her brain raced faster than light. She knew from Fraser that he didn't kill the girls immediately. He kept them alive for nearly three days, which meant he wanted something. She just had to figure out how to buy sufficient time. And pray Nate was looking for her. *I shouldn't have tricked Miguel.*

He leaned over so she could see him. His pale amber eyes, almost luminescent orbs, floated above her head. The flop of curls fell over his forehead as he peered at her. He reached behind her head and untied the gag. She took large, ragged breaths of air over dry lips.

"Say my name," he whispered against her cheek. His face brushed hers in a travesty of an intimate gesture.

It had to be a trick question. Her brain screamed at her tongue, *don't say whackadoodle!*

She scraped her memory and pushed down the panic.

"Akhenaten."

She could barely form the syllables. The name came out breathy, as though she infused it with desire, when in reality, fear constricted her breathing.

His eyes widened, surprise and satisfaction glinting beneath the insanity.

"You remember me." He drew his knuckles down her cheek.

She tried to nod, but couldn't with the band around her head.

"Yes." Her throat was so dry, her tongue dragged over her lips, trying to draw moisture from the air like a snake.

His gaze shone with joy and lunacy. "I knew it was you. I always knew you were the one. Father was so excited when he wrote me at Oxford, and told me he had found Nefertiti's Heart. I came home from college and you

captivated me. So young, innocent, and beautiful."

*Oh shit. That's why he thinks I'm connected. Clayton wanted the Heart and got me instead. And Weaver was there. Did he watch his father rape me? Sick bastard.*

He stroked her face again. "It's your eyes. I knew you by your eyes. I had to kill your father to make you return to London. Then, I thought you didn't recognise me. That you didn't remember. And you've been hanging on to *him*."

"I haven't seen you for three thousand years. I didn't know if I could trust what the memories were telling me."

*And if Nate doesn't rescue me, I'm going to be really pissed.*

"It's been so long, Nefertiti. You promised me immortality." He sounded petulant, like a child promised a sweet if he behaved, who then didn't get one.

"You're the son of god, you were always eternal my love," she murmured gently, biting her tongue to keep the panic from surfacing. *God forgive me, but I need him to think I'm with him on this.*

"I want immortality." His tone became more strident. "Anubis promised me that if I found you, I would have eternal life."

He took to pacing back and forth next to her, drifting in and out of her limited range of vision.

"Soon," she whispered. "You're so close."

"The other girls, they weren't right. I kept trying, but deep down I knew they weren't you. I needed time to remember before I approached you."

"You need the heart, the remnant of our former lives." Cara scratched at her brain, trying to remember the story of Nefertiti and Akhenaten, so she could infuse her comments with sufficient details to make him believe her. "You need to remind these vessels of who we once were."

"Where is it?" He spun and returned to her side, peering at her intently. He waited for the answer that cost so many lives.

"It's here. Somewhere. But I can't—" The ticking of the clock was driving

her to distraction, pulsing through her body, resonating with every beat of her heart. "Could you possibly stop that clock so I can think? I need to remember."

"What clock?" A frown marred his perfect, angelic brow.

"The ticking. It's so loud." The constant beat bounced off the walls and tore through her. "The noise makes it hard to think. I need you to stop the pendulum, for just a little while, please."

He laughed. "There's no clock here, I only have my pocket watch." He drew on the chain and held up a small gold pocket watch. He waved the timepiece back and forth over her head, as though he were going to hypnotise her.

"I don't understand." Her eyes widened. *The beating. It's the Heart. Here, in the cellar.*

*How is it possible that I feel it? What has this conniving house done?*

"The heart, it's here."

"Where?" He looked around, as though expecting to see the gem dangling from the light fitting.

"Buried. Under the floor. I can feel it." She laughed at him. "Don't you understand? The heart is linked to me. It used to be my heart. Of *course* I can feel the pulse. The heart beats within me and around me. It calls to me."

It wasn't taking much effort to turn on the crazy routine; her mind was halfway there with fear. "You need to let me sit up, so I can guide you to where it is."

He frowned again; he clearly didn't trust her. "I can't lose you, not after so long. I have searched through millennia for you."

She heard the sound of instruments rattling, metal clinking against metal. Her brain screamed and quivered in a corner at the noise. Tears welled up in her eyes. She hastily blinked them away. She had to concentrate. She had to live.

*But how, when I can't move or fight? First chance I get, I'm beating him*

*to a pulp.*

She cried in pain as something jabbed into her arm. Ice flowed up her vein, spread over her shoulder, then wrapped frozen tendrils around her heart. The ticking slowed.

"What have you done to me?" A shuddering cry ran through her body, blind panic merely awaiting an opportunity to take over. Dusk settled over her brain, obscuring her thoughts in the half-light, making thought difficult.

"Something to relax you, that's all. I don't want you trying to escape. We're so close now." His hands undid the buckles holding her head and arms in place. He left her legs strapped to the table. With his arms around her, he helped her to sit up.

She groaned, vertigo threatened at the movement. The room spun at a leisurely pace, time slowed by whatever he had injected into her. She had no intention of vomiting in slow motion and struggled to stop her stomach from constricting.

She closed her eyes, concentrating on the beat pulsing through her body. She tried to touch it, to grasp where the sound originated. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.* Steady and rhythmic. She raised one arm and pointed to her right. "Over there."

He moved to that part of the room. "Where is it?"

Cara tilted her head. *I'm so tired. Let me sleep.* Her brain tried to bat consciousness away; it wanted to curl up in a corner and drift away. She took a deep breath, forcing oxygen up into her weary head. She tried to judge where Weaver stood, compared to the beat.

"Toward the door. Stop. Back this way. Stop." She directed him, until she gasped. A pressure descended over her, breath struggled to escape her body. He stood over the Heart, and *somehow*, his weight transferred to her chest.

"There. It's there. But you need to move." She gasped and slumped forward, her hands braced on her knees. He stepped back and the unseen force on her lifted. She turned her head, staring at him, willing him to stay off

that spot.

The slate tiles of the floor looked impenetrable. Weaver cast around, then his stare fell on the three metal monsters slumbering in the corner. Two were automatons, macabre without their wax flesh to cover their steel nakedness, burnished heads with dull, vacant eye sockets. They slumped against each other, waiting to rise up and answer their master's demands. Next to them stood a metal exoskeleton, its dangling limbs useless, the creature's inner life missing. Made of gleaming steel with brass bolts and gears, a small, battery backpack provided the power source.

Cara now understood how he placed Beth Armstrong into the sarcophagus. The exoskeleton lent him the necessary strength to move the lid on his own.

He climbed into the metal armour, clicked his feet into the boots, then strapped the heavy leather belts over his chest. His arms slid into the metal sleeves, which curved down around his fingers. He flipped a switch within the arm mechanism, and activated the electricity backpack. The skeleton's limbs unfurled.

He moved slowly to the spot she indicated. He bent down on one knee with a click and a whirr. Sparks flew from the energy source, flashes of blue and purple against the grey walls of her prison.

He pulled back one arm, formed a fist and slammed it into the floor. Cara screamed at the hit, direct to her heart. She gasped for breath. Black stars sparkled in her eyes and darkness crept into the edges of her vision. She fell back to the table with a groan.

*Bloody house is getting demolished for this.*

Weaver's powerful blow cracked the floor tiles. He ripped them up with his monstrous claws, tossing them aside as he worked. He gave a cry of glee when he revealed a small compartment under the floor. He powered down the exoskeleton and pulled himself free of the metal housing. His hands scrabbled with the broken slate. She listened to the harsh clink as he dug his

way in.

"I've found it!" he cried in triumph, pulling free the container.

She raised herself up, the length between her heartbeat and the echo reducing as he walked across the floor carrying his burden. By the time he placed the object on the trolley next to Cara, her heart pulsed in time with whatever lay within.

It looked like a small steamer trunk of aged tin. Rivets dotted the sides and the top. The lid curved slightly, as though fitting itself to whatever it contained. An old lock secured the latch. He went to the shelf, then returned holding a chisel and hammer. One strike and he removed the ineffectual lock. He cast a look at her, his eyes unnaturally bright as he lifted the lid.

He reached in and carefully withdrew a canopic urn. An unusual design, shaped in a womanly fashion, the head resembled the goddess Isis. Coloured paints on the body of the jar mimicked the cream linen folds of her gown. A small golden throne, fashioned into a crown, sat upon her head. The throne symbolised the power she conferred to the pharaoh. Gold bracelets decorated her arms, crossed over her chest. In her hands, Isis held an ankh and a short tasselled rod.

"The seat of the soul was normally returned to the body during mummification. But your heart, my love, was so special, it resides within the goddess Isis," he murmured as he set the jar next to the small tin chest.

He grasped Isis' head, the gold crown between his fingers. He twisted and wrenched, until he severed the beautiful face from her fuller body. He tipped the jar. A slow rattle sounded as something scraped down the inside.

He raised his hand, holding the diamond heart aloft. Light flared in the room. Rainbows danced and skittered over the walls, refracted from the large gem. Tiny brass cogs and strapping surrounded the priceless object. Red and blue veins ran over and under the brass additions, adding to the ghoulish realism of the artifact. A legendary heart, bound by strange mechanical workings, to make the gem beat and act as a valve.

"I still think it's gruesome," she muttered under her breath, her fingers creeping toward the straps holding her legs to the table. She tried to dance ahead of Weaver in her mind, devising a way to escape. She would not face death lying down, she would fight until her last breath.

Rapture spread over his face. His eyes widened in wonder as he held the heart in his hands. "I know what I have to do."

"What?" Cara swam through an ocean of treacle, her movements slow and arduous. Her brain struggled to stay awake. She was slowly going under and she desperately needed to stay conscious, to stay alert, and stay alive.

"It's so simple. I have to return your heart to you." He held the artifact over her body. The beat pulsed through her and the large gem simultaneously, although she couldn't discern any movement from it.

None of it made any sense. His words didn't make any sense. "But you have it now. The Heart is yours."

"No, silly." He smiled too widely, his eyes glazed over like Countess de Sal in the grips of her madness. "This has to go back in there."

He tapped a finger on her chest and carefully returned the Heart to the trolley. He rubbed his hands together gleefully, as he ran his eyes over his tray of instruments. He picked up a scalpel, holding the blade to the light. It glinted, light playing down the razor-sharp edge.

Terrible understanding shot through her. Her brain knew, but her body couldn't respond.

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Oh shit—" she managed to sob, before the injected toxin enveloped her and she fell back on the table, just as everything went black.

## CHAPTER 28



NATE SAT IN HIS STUDY, trying to work and failing, unable to concentrate on the papers in front on him. He looked up as the door opened, pen frozen in his hand.

"Well?" he demanded of Jackson the moment his bodyguard slipped through the doorway. He had returned home the previous day to find Cara missing. She had vanished into thin air, while within eyesight of two bodyguards and on a busy street. He hadn't slept; he couldn't, not when a piece of him was missing. He prowled his office instead, keeping an eye on the ticking aethergram for any news of her while his men scoured the city.

Jackson shuffled from foot to foot.

"We have a lead. One of the boys spotted her down at the shipyards last night. Before he could check if she was all right, a carriage came along, she got in, and disappeared." He paused and took a nervous swallow before continuing his report. "Plus, your Fraser tail checked in five minutes ago. He recognised Cara running from Enforcer Headquarters mid-day yesterday, but didn't think to relay the information until now; he figured she was heading in this direction, anyway."

They would all pay for that slip.

The pen in Nate's hand snapped under the pressure from his fingers. The two pieces fell to the desk in a torrent of blue blood. He pulled a

handkerchief from his pocket and cleaned the ink off his fingers. His men were spread far and wide, searching for her. He hissed a name under his breath. "Fraser."

*I'll snap his neck like the pen if she is harmed.*

"He's at Headquarters, in case you want to have a wee chat with him."



NATE BURST through the main doors into Enforcer Headquarters with Jackson hot on his heels. The rage rolled off him, sufficient to keep even the largest of the uniforms away as he barrelled up the stairs, his legs taking them two at a time, to Inspector Fraser's office. He didn't bother to knock; he flung the door out of the way, eager to curl his hands around Fraser's neck.

Jackson blocked the advancing Enforcers rushing up the stairs behind them.

Fraser looked up in surprise at the intrusion. "Lord Lyons—"

He got no further, as Nate rounded the desk and picked him up. His fingers closed around Fraser's throat as he dragged him from his chair and slammed him up against the wall.

"Where's Cara? She's gone. Someone saw her get into a carriage down by the shipyards and that's it. She has disappeared. My men can't find any trace of what happened to her." In the midst of his rage existed calm. His words perfect and clipped and full of bone chilling menace.

"I'm sure she has gone somewhere for her own safety," Fraser managed to stutter, despite the impediment against his windpipe.

The chalkboard next to Fraser's head drew Nate's eyes. Names and arrows radiated out from a central notation, "*Nathaniel Trent, Viscount Lyons.*"

He dropped Fraser to study the diagram before his frozen gaze turned back to his prey. "You bastard. You told her I'm a killer."

"Aren't you?" He rubbed his throat and eased himself a step away from

Lyons.

"I'd never kill a woman in cold blood." His fingers curled and uncurled at his sides.

Fraser huffed a quiet laugh. "Interesting choice of answer. You didn't say no."

"You're wrong. And he's taken her. So help me, if she is harmed—" Giving up on words to explain his gut-wrenching fear for Cara, Nate chose action to demonstrate his point. Drawing his arm back, he slammed his fist into Fraser's jaw.

The lighter man reeled from the blow and toppled over, then hit the wall. He slid down to land in an undignified heap on the floor.

"Get up," Nate snarled. He wanted the satisfaction of doing it again, but couldn't hit a man on the ground. He intended to beat Fraser repeatedly, until Cara was returned to him safely. He would tear the city apart brick by brick to find her, if he had to.

"How do I know this isn't just an act to throw me off the trail? Even now, you could have her trapped somewhere . . . ."

Nate grabbed the inspector's collar, hauled him to his feet and hit him again. A roar came from the corridor, as Connor tried to make his way past Jackson to reach his inspector. The two seconds were equally matched as they slugged it out for possession of the doorway.

Fraser stayed on the floor, rubbing his jaw. "I'm starting to suspect I may have been wrong in my initial suspicions. Although you have to admit, you fit the profile so splendidly, it seemed unnecessary to cast around for any other suspects."

Nate reached for the other man's collar again but Fraser held up a hand.

"You can keep hitting me, or we can find Miss Devon, and the real killer. Since, apparently, it's not you."

Nate backed off and gave Fraser room to stand and rub his bruised face. He waved his hand at Jackson to stop the feud outside the door. Uniformed

Enforcers lined the narrow corridor, unable to gain access.

Connor rushed into the small office, placing himself between Lyons and Fraser, as the inspector regained his composure.

"Since it is obviously not me," Nate said pointedly, "who is next on your suspect list?"

"I initially thought Lord Clayton. He is the only other one with a connection to Lord Devon and the fathers of the dead girls. Plus, he knew about Nefertiti's Heart, since his obsession with the gem led to Devon handing over Cara." Fraser stared at his chalkboard, trying to make new connections under Lyons' enraged gaze.

Nate shook his head. "He's too frail after what Cara did to him."

"Yes, quite. And he doesn't fit with what we know of the killer: young, handsome, rich, and secretive." Fraser let the words hang between them. "What do we know of the carriage she got into this evening?"

Nate inclined his head to Jackson, indicating he was free to tell all he knew.

"Dark coloured, small, steam-operated vehicle. One of the new ones that can be worked from inside and don't need a driver."

The room fell silent, the occupants all considering how many such conveyances were in London and who owned them.

One person of interest sprang to Nate's mind. "Clayton owns one."

"We've already discounted him. Who else?" Fraser asked.

"But not his son. Weaver uses the carriage at times." Nate remembered something Cara had told him. "Weaver told Cara about the book, *Magycks of the Gods*. It's the volume she was reading to find out more about the artifact."

Fraser's face lit up, possibilities slotting into place. "I thought it was you, and freely admit I was wrong, but what if the killer is Clayton *junior*?"

He had a gleam in his eye, the bloodhound who had caught the right scent and knows in which direction to run. His hands flew over his desktop, pulling files and discarding them, before he held up one in particular.

His train of thought tumbled out his mouth. "We know what Clayton senior did to Miss Devon. What if Weaver had been involved?"

Nate ran a hand through his hair, desperately trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. "He wasn't, though. He approached Cara a couple of weeks ago and apologised. He was away studying at Oxford."

"No." Fraser shook his head, his eyes scanning the report in his hand. "I've been doing a bit of digging about the original case. Seven years ago, he was put on academic suspension. He was sent home that week, suspended for *behaviour not becoming a scholar*."

"He can't have been involved. Cara would have mentioned him being there." Nate paced the small office, the conversation going nowhere and not doing anything to find Cara. Pain shot through his chest at the thought of being too late and losing her forever.

Fraser tapped a fingertip on the file. "Just because she didn't see him, doesn't mean he didn't see her."

Nate stopped pacing. "You think he watched?"

"We can't discount anything. But imagine what effect seeing the young girl raped repeatedly by his father would have on a fragile mind. A mind that teetered on the edge of sanity?"

Nate turned over the idea. "Clayton senior would have been vocal about the Heart. He was desperate to get his hands on it. That's why he collected all Devon's chits, hoping to drive him to the brink of bankruptcy."

Barely suppressed excitement rolled off Fraser as he finished reading the report. "Guess what Weaver was studying at Oxford? Ancient literature."

"So he knew about the Heart and the book, was home the week Cara was raped, and has access to the carriage." Nate made a mental note to extract his own vengeance on Weaver. He would ensure he killed him particularly slowly. He'd prefer to do it twice, if he could lay his hands on a reanimator.

The inspector broke his murderous thoughts. "His obsession with her has warped over the years, become entwined with the legend of Nefertiti's Heart,

and perhaps started this whole chain of unfortunate events. He probably murdered Lord Devon to draw her back to London."

"So where is he? We're running out of time. Would Lord Clayton be helping him, hiding him in the family's basement or something?" Nate's pacing increased with his need to do something physical in the hunt, to find the woman who meant the world to him. She was the blood that pulsed through his veins. Without her, he was merely a husk.

"Only one way to find out." Fraser grabbed his coat. The crowd in the corridor had dispersed; only a few uniforms lingered in case fighting erupted again.

"My carriage, it's quicker," Nate said as they headed down the stairs. He didn't bother to point out he wouldn't be caught dead in the noisy and smelly Enforcer vehicle.

The Clayton estate lay on the edge of London. The mechanical horses cantered unceasingly. They didn't require a break in pace like their mortal counterparts. Nate kept his calm exterior, but anger crawled under his skin, as his mind imagined what Weaver might be doing to Cara. Helplessness was a new emotion for him, and he didn't like it at all.

The startled butler bravely stood his ground and refused them admittance, for all of three seconds. At which point Jackson simply picked the man up and tossed him to one side. They found Clayton in the dining room, about to have his breakfast. He looked up from the buffet to regard the men who violated his privacy.

"Lord Clayton, where is your son?" Fraser asked politely.

Nate would have preferred a more direct, and physical, approach.

Clayton senior leaned on his stick, his fingers curling around the solid silver topped even as his lips curled in a cruel smile. "Now, what business do you have with Weaver?"

"You know damned well." Nate growled. "We will find him. The only question is how many pieces of him do you want back to bury? The longer

you keep me waiting, the less of him will be found."

Clayton held his ground.

"How is your valet? I hear he disappeared." Nate stared at his fingernails.

Clayton's smile dropped and his face blanched. "Weaver is not here. He's playing house with that little hellcat."

Nate swore under his breath.

Fraser frowned and flicked him a curious look.

"Cara rented out her family home," he explained.

"You didn't know the tenant was Weaver?" An eyebrow shot up at a detail escaping Lyons' attention.

His hand balled into a fist, one misstep on his behalf had cost Cara so much. "I didn't bother to enquire. The house was of no interest to me once I knew she didn't reside there anymore."

"Back to town, then." Fraser, ever polite, nodded to Lord Clayton and left the room.

Nate paused on his way out, to step close to Clayton. "I do hope your affairs are in order, Clayton," he said, his tone so chilling the older man's eyes widened and his pupils dilated. From the ton to the rookeries, everyone knew what such an enquiry from the villainous viscount meant—ruin.

## CHAPTER 29



THEY HALTED on the pavement outside the terrace house and Nate glared up at the brooding building.

"Basement," he announced after a moment's reflection. "He won't want anywhere with a window, it's too high risk."

He looked over the railing at the stairway stretching to the kitchen entrance below the street. He placed one hand on the black wrought iron, and leapt over the side. He dropped to the basement level, landing on his feet like a cat. By the time the others clattered down the stairs, he had the door unlocked and pushed open.

With only a glance to check that the others followed, he crossed the threshold into the silent house. The kitchen lay deserted, although there were signs of recent activity. A half-empty tea mug rested on the bench. A bread-shaped lump sat under a paisley fabric cover.

"It's so quiet," Connor muttered.

"I would assume if the neighbours heard girls screaming, you lot might have made it here a bit sooner," Nate wrenched open the pantry door. Peering within, he found only silent rows of preserved fruit, bags of flour, and coffee beans. "We try lower. He'd want somewhere soundproof and undisturbed. Look for the cellar door."

They fanned out and Jackson soon cried, "Here!"

A short corridor terminated in a solid door. Pushing it opened revealed a set of stairs disappearing into inky darkness.

Connor drew a short copper tube from his utility belt and shook it vigorously. Pale yellow light emitted from both ends of the tube, sufficient to light the way downward.

"Chemical reaction," he said to a fascinated Jackson. "Makes the stuff in the tube luminescent. We call them glowers." He led off down the narrow steps.

"The Enforcers still have one or two tricks you don't know about," Fraser muttered as followed his sergeant.

Nate and Jackson exchanged glances before hurrying after the others, lest they lose the dim light. The bottom of the stairs opened onto a small wine cellar. Hundreds of bottles lined the walls, gathering dust and spider colonies, now that no one entertained in the rooms above.

A large metal door stood opposite the steps, with no visible handle.

The four men stood and contemplated the silent obstacle. Nate's anger grew, hemmed in by the inactivity. He needed to do something. Anything. He charged the door, diverting his rage to his shoulder as he slammed into the steel door.

"Cara!" he yelled. The door remained immobile, his blow not even registering as a ripple across the surface.

"Excellent," Fraser muttered drily. "Now he knows we're here." He cast his analytical eye over the door. "Spike," he said to Connor and held out his hand.

Nate rubbed his shoulder and glared at the inspector.

The sergeant pulled a six-inch metal spike from his belt and handed it over.

"I assume you have a blade on you?" he directed to Nate.

"Whatever you are planning, do it quickly." He drew the knife from his boot and gave it to Fraser, hilt end first.

Fraser used the hilt of the dagger as a hammer. Coupled with the spike, he popped the bolts from the door hinges. "People invest in impressive locks, but always forget the hinges."

He pulled the bolts free and tossed them to the ground.

"Hurry up, Fraser," Nate growled. The white-hot agony of not knowing if Cara was alive or dead clawed its way through him.

Jackson and Connor pulled on the door experimentally, using the hinges as handgrips. They rocked it slightly in the frame, buying them valuable room to slide their fingers around the edge and get a grip.

Jackson looked at his opposite. "Ready?" he asked.

A curt nod in reply. The two strong men braced their backs.

"Now!" Jackson grunted as they wrenched the door forward. There was a sickening *snap* as the metal bolt barring the door on the inside broke. They bent the door around, giving them sufficient space to gain access to the room beyond.

Nate barely waited before he charged into the breach. His gaze briefly registered the scene within, before he was thrown back through the broken door. He landed at the foot of the stairs.

"We have a large, and metallic, problem." He sucked in a breath as he climbed back to his feet.

He saw enough to chill him. Cara lay immobile on a slab, blood spread over her chest and dripping onto the floor.

He charged again, ducked low and rolled to one side, avoiding the metal fist that slammed toward him. He came up behind the monster that winded him the first time. Weaver was in control of a dockside exoskeleton, normally used to shift large cargo, and not usually found in wine cellars.

Jackson and Connor burst through the wrecked door, followed by a more cautious Fraser.

The steel automatons rose from their corner, long limbs extended and flexed.

Weaver gave them their command. "Attack. Destroy the intruders."

He unfurled an arm and backhanded an advancing Nate, flinging him into the shelving. Specimen bottles full of formaldehyde crashed to the floor, spilling out their gruesome contents and spiking the air with a pungent aroma. From within his metal cage, Weaver roared over the squeal of metal, as his minions attacked in unison. "You'll not stop me. I will be immortal!"

Jackson and Connor threw themselves into fighting their metal equivalents. The glee shone in their eyes as they unleashed the full force of their blows. Intense grunts sounded as they smashed and dented the robots.

Fraser edged around the side of the room, observing and calculating odds. He kept his movements slow, so as not to attract Weaver's attention, while he inched his way closer to Cara's motionless form.

Nate pushed himself up using the broken shelves. He left Jackson and Connor to deal with the unflinching metal guards. His concern was for the unconscious form bleeding in the middle of the room.

"Cara," he called, refusing to entertain the idea they were too late and she might be dead. The steel arm swung for him, stopping him from going to her side. He grabbed hold of the limb and hung on, while he tried to find purchase for his feet on the cables running down the monstrous legs.

Weaver laughed from within his exoskeleton, the shrill noise combining with the grate and hiss from the metal armour.

"You're too late," he taunted. "Nefertiti is mine, she has always been mine."

Weaver caught Fraser's movement. With his other arm he swept away Fraser and tossed him at Connor's feet. The sergeant hauled his inspector up with one hand, while his other meaty hand was occupied squeezing a metal neck.

"No," Nate cried out, looking for some way to reach Weaver and wrench him out of the protective suit.

Weaver swatted at Nate. Fraser hit the frame from behind with a slate

floor tile. It smashed and dropped to the ground, barely leaving a chalky imprint.

"We need something harder," Nate yelled. Fraser cast around for a suitable weapon, while Nate tried to reach the buckles holding Weaver into the framework. His fingers grasped one edge and started to pull.

"Oh, no, you don't." Weaver chuckled as he stretched out an arm, pressing Nate against the wall. He drew one metal finger down his opponent's forearm, playing with him as manic laughter burst forth. The metal tip sliced through flesh and sent blood running down, making his grip slippery.

Nate sucked in a breath as pain blossomed up his arm.

"Any ideas, Fraser?" he shouted from his position, imprisoned by the wall and dangling from the side of Weaver.

Fraser cast around, seeking a way to end the fight and pull Weaver from his metal suit.

Jackson and Connor were making progress in their private battle. Jackson wrenched an arm off his automaton and used it to batter the machine into the floor. Connor took a different approach; he dismembered a leg, sending his robot to the ground. He proceeded to jump on its chest, giggling like a schoolboy as he flattened the machine like a pancake on a griddle.

"The electricity source." Fraser pointed to the pack powering the suit, nestled between metal shoulder blades. "We need a way to route it to the skeleton."

Nate and Fraser both cast desperate glances around the room. Nate's gaze drifted back to the immobile Cara. She hadn't stirred, despite the commotion.

Fraser grabbed a piece of flexible copper tubing.

"Here!" He caught Nate's attention as he slipped out of Weaver's grasp, the blood working as a lubricant. Nate dodged under another blow as Fraser tossed the pipe.

He held the tubing one-handed and jumped onto the back of the skeleton, hoping Weaver didn't body slam him into the wall again. He bent the soft

metal around the frame protecting Weaver's head. Taking a breath to brace himself, he thrust the other end into the battery pack, and jumped clear, even as he rammed the copper tube home.

Blue light flashed from the electricity source and raced along the copper conduit like ethereal fire. Flame touched the framework and flew along every inch of the steel exoskeleton. Weaver screamed as the entire structure came alive and turned on him.

His body arced and convulsed as the electricity flowed over his body and short-circuited his brain. The exoskeleton danced wildly around the room, crashing into the remains of the automatons. Sparks flew as metal grated against metal. Weaver's brain cooked and dissolved under the onslaught. He slumped within the framework and, without a living being to operate it, the entire exoskeleton teetered, before crashing to the floor.

Nate rushed to Cara. He put two fingers to her throat, feeling for a heartbeat. He breathed a sigh of relief when the faint *thump-thump* pulsed under his touch. He dropped a kiss to her forehead before turning his attention to the chest wound. He pulled back the edges of her sliced shirt. The cut was four inches long, but not too deep. Grabbing a wad of cotton from the nearby trolley, he pressed the bandage to the wound, stemming the blood loss.

The automaton soldiers continued to twitch and obey their programming, even as Jackson and Connor merrily dismembered them. Arms crawled toward legs, the individual pieces displaying a hideous intelligence to be reunited with their parts. Wielding torn-off arms, the men continued battering the parts into submission, until nothing dared move.

Fraser skirted around the twitching Weaver, the battery not yet exhausted and still powering the macabre display. He looked over Nate's shoulder to inspect Cara's wound. "It doesn't look too deep. We must have interrupted him, just as he started."

Nate shot him a hard look. "So, if I hadn't thrown myself against the door,

and alerted him to us outside, he would have had time to finish slicing her open."

"Possibly." Fraser reluctantly admitted.

Jackson took over from Nate, putting his large hand over the bandage.

Nate picked up the ancient and valuable mechanical organ. Something red and circular, the size of a pinhead, pulsed deep within the centre of the object. He squinted to discern what lay in the core. *It looks like blood.*

The slice on his arm continued to bleed. A crimson trickle ran from his fingers to the gem. He watched, fascinated, as his blood soaked *up* into the diamond. It pooled in the delicate channels circling the heart. One of the tiny brass cogs gave a whirr, setting off its neighbours in a complex array. The movement of the mechanism sucked a drop of his blood into the middle of the gem. He saw his blood touch and swirl around the droplet already deep within the artifact. The two danced, before merging into one larger globe, suspended in the centre of the diamond.

*Boom.* A visceral beat shot through his body, rocking him back on his heels as though he took a cannon ball to the stomach. He gasped at the savagery of the blow. Before he could register what it meant, Cara sat bolt upright and screamed. Her fingers tore at her chest where Jackson tried to press the cloth to the open wound and simultaneously stop her frantic movements.

Fraser grabbed for her arms, before she hurt herself. She scrabbled to tear at her own flesh, her nails biting into the edges of the cut.

Nate's grip instinctively tightened on the diamond, even as he turned to help Cara and another pulse shot through his body.

On the table, Cara struggled to draw a breath.

"Heart," she managed to gasp, her wide hazel eyes locked with Nate's.

He stared at the gruesome relic in wonder. Her words about the true nature of the artifacts, that day in the conservatory, flooded back to him. *What have we done?*

He grabbed the canopic urn and eased Nefertiti's Heart inside. Taking up Isis' head, he wedged the lid back onto its body.

Cara drew a large lungful of air and fell back, lifeless.

"Well, that was unexpected," Fraser said. He opened one of her eyelids. "She appears to be unconscious again." He flicked his eyes to the urn. "Care to tell me what that was all about?"

"No."

"What about him, should he keep doing that?" Connor asked, pointing to the twisted wreck of metal on the floor. Weaver lay trapped within the exoskeleton. His eyes rolled back and forth, the lids fluttering as foam bubbled from his lips.

"Residual current," Nate replied.

"Can we stop it?" Connor edged around the twitching cadaver.

"We could, but we're not gonna," Jackson muttered.

"We shouldn't have killed him. Now he will never be brought to justice," Fraser said.

Nate gave a bark of laughter. "That is justice." He pointed at the convulsing figure. "I hope he's dancing in hell. Or we could increase the charge, reanimate him, and kill him again. Once just doesn't seem like enough for what the bastard has done."

He looked around the room. Apart from surgical instruments and broken specimen jars, containing Lord only knew what, there was nothing to show that four women lost their lives down here.

"I trust you will clean up. I have to get Cara medical attention. She's going to need stitches." With the leg restraints undone, he gathered her gently into his arms, and cradled her to his chest.

Jackson picked up the canopic urn and tucked it under his arm.

"You can't take that, the gem is evidence." Fraser protested.

"Your evidence is here, on the floor, laying in excrement and vomit." Nate's tone was flat, the time of mutual assistance over. He wouldn't forget

that Fraser's actions resulted in Cara being hurt.

"You're safe, *cara mia*," he murmured, as he carried the unconscious woman through the darkness and out into the light.

## CHAPTER 30



*WEDNESDAY, July 31*

Five days later, Cara unlocked the door to her apartment and pushed it open to find Nate sitting on her sofa, reading a book.

"And just how long have you known I lived here?" She shut the door and dropped her satchel on the floor.

"I will admit, it took me a couple of days to find out where *Arabelle Williams* pays her rent. Following the money was far more effective than trying to follow you." He closed the book and placed it on the nearby table.

Cara pouted. "You're better than I thought."

"You seemed to enjoy the cat and mouse. And you never asked outright if I knew." He softened his expression for a moment. "I was worried. You up and left. Again. You were supposed to be resting."

"Resting?" She snorted. "More like house arrest. You had me locked up in the spare bedroom, you weren't talking to me, and Miguel paced outside the door like some caged animal. I had to resort to climbing out the window."

She dropped onto the sofa and nestled into him, drawing her feet up under her. He wrapped his arm around her waist. Cara listened to his heart, beating in perfect rhythm with her own.

"I'm here now, to talk, if you want. And I knew you had gone. Did you notice? There was a slight echo to the beat." He tapped his chest, next to her

ear. "It increases the farther apart we are and diminishes when we are close, until the pulse becomes one again."

She had noticed and that was part of the problem, her mind still tried to sort out the implications. "Are you saying you can use the beat as a locator beacon?"

He cocked his head, thinking on the possibility. "Yes, so no point in you running anymore, is there?"

Cara frowned, not sure if she liked him knowing where she was at any time. Although it would work both ways. And, he wouldn't be able to sneak up on her, but she had more pressing issues on her mind.

"You had him killed. Clayton's valet." A statement, not a question.

"Yes. I will not apologise for hunting those who hurt you." He was unrepentant.

"I hear Clayton is on the verge of bankruptcy." Another statement. "Rumour has it he will die in Debtors' Prison."

"Yes." He wouldn't be drawn on that subject either.

"When the nightmares woke me, and I couldn't get back to sleep, I used to pretend I had a knife and he was the powerless one. I imagined plunging the blade into him over and over. But now he is destroyed completely. He will be erased and forgotten."

He remained silent, but his fingers stroked her hair, the action giving her as much reassurance as any words.

"And Weaver is dead. So it looks like that chapter of my life is finally closed." She let out a deep sigh, glad to close that particular book and start a fresh, new one. "Fraser thought you were the killer. He intended to use me as bait."

"Yes." His arm tightened around her.

"And Weaver thought I was his lover who had been dead for three thousand years." She moved to straddle him, while her fingers undid his waistcoat buttons and pulled the sides apart, before starting on the smaller

buttons of his shirt. She needed to place her hands on his bare flesh.

"Yes." He unlaced the front of her corset, pulling the ribbon through the eyelets until the garment tumbled to the floor.

"That boy licked one too many cane toads." She was victorious over his shirt and ran her fingers down his chest and around the waist of his trousers. She caught the quick gasp as her nails grazed over him. "Funny thing, honour. They all claimed to have it, but you were the only one who was true to me, who never lied."

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. He tugged the laces of her chemise free; his eyes flicked down to the small plaster between her breasts, covering the incision.

"What happened when I picked up the Heart?" He stroked her neck as he asked his question.

She didn't remember much. Darkness closed in after Weaver found Nefertiti's Heart. She drifted until intense pain ripped through her body. She screamed, believing Weaver was pulling her heart out of her rib cage.

When she remained silent, Nate continued. "I had blood on my hands, and I watched it get sucked into the diamond. At the centre was another drop of blood, yours. And when they mingled, I got hit, hard, in the stomach by something. Now I can feel you. Your wound has been like a tug on me, until now. It's nearly healed, isn't it?" His fingers crept to the back of her wool skirt, and worked the buttons loose, so the skirt would pool around her feet if she stood up.

"I had the stitches out this morning. It's healed faster than it should. Like your arm." She pushed his shirt over his shoulders and he tugged it free of his hands. She discarded his clothing on the floor with her corset. A thin red line ran down his forearm, all that was left of the slice from the exoskeleton.

"I think my blood came into contact with the Heart the day I escaped Clayton. The thing was sitting on father's desk in the library. When he beat me, a drop must have flicked off his belt onto the gem. It explains why I

could feel a heartbeat; I thought the house had come alive. Down in the cellar, the pulse was so loud I thought I was hearing a malfunctioning clock. The ticking was driving me as batty as Weaver." She traced the lines around his abdominal muscles, marvelling at how warm his skin felt under her fingertips.

"What would have happened if Weaver's blood had flowed into the Heart?"

"Nothing." She chewed her bottom lip. "Love can only be given, not taken."

"You'll have to spell that out for me." His hands stroked up her bare thighs before moving to cup her bottom.

Cara ran a hand down the side of his face, meeting his intense gaze. A slight tremble in her fingers was the only sign of her anxiety at saying her next words aloud. "It only worked because I love you."

He took her palm and placed a kiss in the centre. His gaze never left hers. He didn't say the words, but they burned in his eyes and echoed through their strange new bond, *and because I love you.*

Reaching up, he drew her head to him and kissed her. His touch was gentle as he licked the seam of her lips before he claimed more. His lips and tongue tender, teasing, caused her to moan as the fire built within her. His hand on her bottom pulled her tighter against his hips as the kiss deepened. His tongue delved into her mouth as his arousal pushed against her.

"Come back to my house, my bed. Or were you planning on fleeing London?"

She drew a deep breath as heat flowed through her limbs. "I hadn't thought what I'm doing. I never intended to stay, but things have changed."

"Stay with me while we figure out what it means."

Leaning in, he nibbled the lobe of her ear, before he trailed down her throat.

She tried to clear her head before the pleasure rolling through her body,

stole her ability to think. "I have no idea what exactly it means, except we're in tune with each other. You felt my injury and I, somehow, drew on your strength to heal faster."

"Are we immortal?" He paused in his exploration of her skin.

Mischief shone in her gaze. "Want me to shoot you and find out?"

"Perhaps not." He resumed licking her collarbone, sending her thoughts into a tailspin.

She shook her head, remembering what had been bothering her, a frown marring her brow. "And the blasted thing can't be sold now."

He halted his caresses. "It's safe, I saw to that. No one will be able to lay their hands on it."

She stood up and her skirt fell to the floor. Kicking her feet free, she resumed her place on his lap, naked except for a pair of silk knickers and a short chemise.

Hunger flared in his blue gaze as his hands ran up the inside of her thighs.

"I doubt any of the artifacts can be sold, if they're all like the Heart and Boudicca's Cuff. I'll be buried for months trying to figure out what each one does. And I was rather relying on the cash flow." Cara's lawyer was having difficulty leasing out the house where four girls were callously murdered.

"I can help you with that," he slid her hips closer, as her fingers loosened the fastening of his trousers.

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I came to offer you a job position. You have certain skills and talents that could come in handy. I thought I would interview you for the number two spot. Someone once told me I worked too hard and needed a second." He gasped as her hand stole into his trousers and encircled him.

She stroked his hot flesh, running her hand up and over the sensitive tip. She marvelled at the size of him and wondered what he would taste like.

She smiled; she enjoyed discussing business with Nate, particularly when she had the upper hand, literally. "Aren't you worried I might have my eye on

your position on top?"

"I was rather counting on it." He pulled her into a tight embrace, her hand trapped between them as he pulsed against her palm. His hands were possessive on her body as he claimed her lips in an open-mouthed kiss that melted her bones and moulded her to him.

"I'm in a delicate state, remember?" She pulled back a few inches, to tap her chest.

He took advantage of her distraction to lift her chemise up over her head, leaving her naked except for the silk knickers.

"You're nearly healed. But if it worries you, I promise to be very, very slow and gentle." He gave her a wicked grin. "I might add these to my collection."

He stroked her through the silk, causing her to inhale sharply.

"I don't think so. These aren't cheap, you know." She had a pretty good idea what going slowly would involve. "I think it's my turn to be in charge."

She picked up her satchel and extracted handcuffs. She dangled them from her outstretched hand. He gave a throaty laugh in response.

Nate picked her up in his arms and carried her through to the bedroom, slamming the door behind him with his foot.

## EPILOGUE: THE MISSING MECHANICAL MOUSE

*Six weeks later...*

Cara pulled aside the green damask curtain. Taking a sip of coffee, she watched sparrows play on the front lawn, as they dive bombed each other and fought over seed heads. Their antics came to an abrupt halt when the gardener rounded the corner and the little birds all flitted to the protective hedgerow. Behind her, the aethergram ticked away on the corner of the desk, spitting a coded message into the waiting wicker basket and signalling the start of the work day.

With another fortifying java hit, she crossed the Persian carpet to the desk, and cast an eye over the message. The machine drew each letter from the aether with laborious precision. Sentences took long minutes to appear, and the cargo manifesto crawled along the ticker tape like a blind caterpillar missing half its legs. She wondered what contraband would soon arrive at the Thames airship dock, when the echo within her chest shifted, to beat almost in sync with her heart. She raised her gaze to the door just as it swung open. Nathaniel Trent, also known as the villainous viscount, the man who shared her heart beat and made her toes curl, strode toward her.

"Helene left a message for you, another injured bird needs your help." His lips twitched in amusement, as his fingers held out a small rose coloured

visiting card. Cara was one of the few people who saw beneath his icy façade, to the dark depths swirling far below. Small ticks on the surface were a mere echo of deeper ripples, a tug of his lips meant he was amused as hell at her new role.

She blew a snort of air and dropped the coffee mug to the desk top. Society turned its fashionably clad back on her, but behind closed doors, many wanted her help. She never realised how many upstanding, virginal, young women of the *ton* concealed such sordid and grubby secrets. By some collective agreement, which nobody ever consulted Cara about, she had been nominated the problem solver for young ladies with indiscretions liable to tarnish their sparkling reputations.

She took the slip of heavy paper and glanced at the name and address. *Dianne Forsyth.*

Nate dropped his arm around her waist and pulled her close to the heat of his broad chest. His lips nuzzled up her neck and fire skated over her skin at the electric touch. A sigh broke from her lips, as she toyed with forgetting about injured birds and perhaps encouraging a lion back to bed instead. Running her hands down the soft linen shirt covering his torso, she hooked her fingers under the waistband of his trousers. Perhaps for once, society could await her pleasure, and not vice versa?

A growl rumbled through Nate's body. Even without her wandering fingers, her intentions leaked along their shared bond and flowed to him.

"Don't tempt me, I have work to do. A large shipment is due this morning of rather a fragile nature. I cannot be distracted or tired."

More kisses burned through her senses, the sensual haze fighting the coffee alertness, and she wondered who was distracting whom.

"Miguel wants to come with me," he murmured against her skin. "So Jackson will be your tail for the day, try not to lose him, he takes it rather personally. Tonight, *cara mia*, I will make it up to you." With a swift, hot kiss that stole her breathe, he unravelled his arms from about her, and

disappeared from the study.

Cara took a deep breath, and tried to remember what she was doing before Nate muddled her thoughts. The aethergram gave a short violent cough, before falling silent. She ripped the ticker tape off and held up the message. One item caught her attention.

*Three tonnes of rice flour.*

She laughed when her brain decoded the true nature of the cargo. Explosives. No wonder he didn't want to be distracted while dividing up the shipment.

A short while later, with her immediate paperwork concluded and nothing urgent to attend, she left the calm sanctuary of the study.

"Come on, Jackson," she hollered like a barmaid down the hallway, as she walked across the marble floor toward the front door.

The large bodyguard stuck his head out the men's lounge and headed her way. His imposing mass intimidated everybody, except Cara. She knew his weakness for Belgian white chocolate, and if he got out of hand, she could always shoot him. Again.

"What about the carriage?" A frown fought for space on his scarred and lined face.

She shook her head. "We're walking."

The henchman regarded her as though she announced he was to don tights and take to the stage as Oberon, King of the Fairies. "You're bleedin' kidding me?"

She held the solid wooden door opened and gestured outside. "Chop, chop. Fresh air is good for you."

"You're a noble, love, you're supposed to take the flippin' carriage everywhere, not walk." He muttered, grumbled, and complained all the way down the curving driveway and along the street. He only shut up when he paused to light a cigarette and shoved it between his lips. The process of inhaling and exhaling distracted him from moaning about the enforced

exercise. The glare he gave the other pedestrians ensured Cara walked in her own little unimpeded bubble.

She stopped outside her destination and Jackson took it upon himself to prop up a nearby lamp post, feigning exhaustion. He grumbled, but his immaculate suit hid hard muscle and old battle scars. All of Nate's men were fit, strong, and capable of fighting their way out of a myriad of situations. Jackson's complaints about tagging behind Cara were all bark, with no bite.

"I won't be long," she called, rapping on the dark blue front door.

Inside, the butler showed her through to a small parlour, decorated in tones of yellow and green. Books were scattered over sofas and end tables, adding a lived in touch. A cream coloured long haired cat occupied most of a sofa. The feline cracked one green eye open, surveyed Cara and promptly went back to sleep. She barely completed a circuit of the cheery room when the door opened to admit Dianne Forsyth. Her warm blonde colouring was perfectly offset by an outfit of pale green and the blush of new rose. Blue eyes held an open regard and the trace of a smile touched her pink lips.

"Cara Devon," she breathed, before holding out her hand to offer a steady handshake. "I never thought to meet you in person. You are so lucky."

Cara rocked back on her feet. Being called lucky was a new label. "Pardon?" she asked, sure she misunderstood.

"You and Viscount Lyons are so. . . open, about your relationship, you engage no subterfuge. The *ton* can talk of nothing else." The woman's smile broadened as she waved her hands about Cara to punctuate her words.

Three weeks ago Weaver Clayton attempted to carve out her heart. Two weeks ago, Cara took up residence at Nate's Mayfair home, only rarely venturing back to her Soho apartment. In the absence of any other scandal to relieve their boredom, society filled the void tittering about her comings and goings.

Cara blinked, unused to such a direct approach, the other woman's candour was as welcome as a spring breeze. "The worse has already

happened to me. I stopped caring what society thought about me after that."

"While the rest of us fashion society's expectations into gilt bars for our pretty cages." Dianne gave a sad smile and Cara's heart melted round the edges.

*I'm in danger of liking this one.*

"You have a matter that needs my assistance?" She prompted with a soft tone.

"Yes." She sighed. "Samuel Denning courted me for over a year. We had an understanding; he wanted to wait until he came into his title, before making our engagement official. I believed his whispered promises, and gave myself fully to him. He recently became the Earl of Stoke, and found a far larger fortune than mine, with which to garnish his title." The other woman cast her eyes down and drew a deep breath.

In Cara's experience, an all too common refrain unfortunately. The man takes what he wants and leaves the woman to suffer the consequences of no longer being the virtuous paragon society demands. Cara moved closer, to lay a hand on her arm. "Do you still love him?"

Dianne raised her head, and rich blue eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "Yes. One does not simply brush aside such feelings. But he has chosen his path, and father has since brokered my marriage to an older noble, in need of a new wife."

"I'm sorry." A shudder worked down Cara's spine at the thought of being traded like cattle at market. *Bloodlines are so important in broodmares.*

Dianne drew another deep breath and clapped her hands together, dispelling the sombre air gathering in the gaily-decorated room, and startling the cat. "I will be content with the match. And perhaps love will grow over time."

Cara hoped so and the woman seemed resigned to her fate. A tiny part of her wondered if she would take some consolation in the passion she briefly shared with her suitor.

The noble woman patted the cat until it resettled. "Anyway, I have a small token of some sentimental value which Samuel is withholding. I wish to have it returned to me."

Cara's ever-present curiosity sat up, waiting for further details. "All right. What is it?"

The other woman fidgeted, her fingers tugging on the cat's ears, before a sigh worked from her chest. "A small mechanical mouse with my name carved on the underside. I believe Samuel keeps it about his person."

*A mechanical mouse?* Cara puzzled over the woman wanting a toy returned, the motives of other nobles were beyond her. Who was she to question what value they placed upon a wind up creature? "Where will I find him?"

Another tug on the cat's long fur. "His club, Red's. He has taken to spending most of his time there, so I cannot send a servant to him. They will not admit a woman."

A slow smile spread across Cara's face. *Challenge accepted*, her brain cried. "Won't admit women will they? Well, we shall see about that."

"Thank you," her new friend murmured. Her hand stroked down the long body of the cat for a moment, and then she turned to Cara. The sadness of a moment ago was now replaced by the hint of laughter dancing in her gaze. "Would you satisfy my curiosity? Is it true, the rumour that you reside under Viscount Lyon's roof?"

Cara laughed, she could understand curiosity and she liked the other woman's direct manner. She gave a shrug. "It suits me to live there. I have an office in Nate's house and I complete paperwork for Lyons Cargo."

Dianne fell back onto the sofa, a hand grasping at her chest. "Work?" She made the single syllable into an exclamation of surprise. "You mean like paid employment?"

"Yes."

The other woman's brows knitted together in concern. "Well, I never."

Cara guessed afternoon gossip in the salons and parlours would be devoted to devouring that little titbit. Who thought that her engaging in employment would be more scandalous than moving in Nate's bedroom. "I'll see myself out. I should have your mouse back by this afternoon."

Once out the front door, Cara tapped the top of Jackson's bowler hat to wake him up. "Come on, we're off to Red's."

Jackson scowled as he pushed off the post to fall in step beside her. He let out a long-suffering sigh as he corrected the angle of his hat.

Cara turned on him and threw up her arms. "All right, hail us a cab to St James, I can't bear the thought of you sulking all afternoon."

He flashed a toothy grin and promptly flagged down a chuffing hansom cab. The driver sat at the back with the controls and access to coal to fuel the fire, passengers sat with nothing in front of them, except the snub nose housing the engine.

The cab rattled along the road and they alighted in St James. Cara stared up at the discreet exterior of the building, built of soft grey stone with austere columns. The only extravagance to the club was the front door, painted a rich glossy red. The colour signalled the name of the club, without the need for a gauche nameplate. With an exclusive, and sought after clientele, Red's had no need to advertise its presence.

Cara bounced up the stairs and down the short hallway, which opened into a small and plush reception area. An ornate set of dark panelled doors occupied a large portion of wall space. Muted laughter and chatter could be heard from beyond.

An attendant in a black uniform stood guard, waiting to greet the members and turn away those bold undesirables who dared cross the threshold. He straightened on seeing her. His gaze narrowed as he, rather correctly, pegged her as trouble.

She fixed the man with a stare and cocked her head to the doors. "Is Samuel Denning within?"

"Yes, miss. But he cannot be disturbed."

"I'll only be a moment." She turned to her left and the entrance to the lounge beyond, only to find he moved fast, to block her path with his larger body.

He waved at the small brass plaque attached to the wall. "I am sorry, miss, but no women allowed beyond this point."

Cara's gaze flicked to the sign and read the three words embossed on brass. "You adhere to the sign?"

"Yes, miss. No women are allowed in Red's." A slight sneer pulled one corner of his mouth, as though he thought her intellect lacking.

She winked at him. "Humour, me. Read the sign aloud."

He shook his head, her request confirming his low opinion of her. Like a teacher at the head of a classroom, he pointed to each word and sounded out the syllables as he moved his finger. "Strictly no skirts."

"No skirts." Cara repeated, as her fingers slid under the back of her corset and found the hook and eye closure of her skirt.

"Well, it means no women, it's the same thing, isn't it?" He gave an indulgent smile, as though dealing with someone of diminished mental capacity.

Cara wrinkled her nose with laughter. "No, actually, they're not the same thing." Her fingers released the hooks and the soft wool skirt slid to the floor, pooling around her feet. She stepped out of the puddle of fabric and scooped it up, handing it to the stunned attendant. "Be a dear, hold that for a moment, would you?"

Pushing aside the double doors, she paused on the entrance. Heads swung at the intrusion and numerous wide eyes took in her attire. Someone started coughing, or possibly had a heart attack, while another hacked up a fur ball. Her brown-laced boots stopped just below the knee. Above, striped woollen stockings rose to mid-thigh to meet silk French knickers, the same dark chocolate brown as her stockings. Strapped to her thigh in a leather holster,

she wore a four-inch blade. Her swallow-tailed corset dipped to graze the back of her knees and obscured their view of her derriere as she passed amongst the assembled gentlemen. She smiled cheery greetings on her way through the mortified men.

One rose from his chair, nearly tipping over the small table holding an in-progress chess game. "Now just a minute—" he levelled a finger at her.

Cara waved a dismissive hand in his direction. "Keep your trousers on and don't get over excited. I have business to discuss with Denning, it shan't take long to conclude."

A man unwound himself from a fireside wingback chair, and turned to stare at her. "I say," he murmured, his eyes racking over her form. "I'm Denning and you can take as long as you please."

"We have a different sort of business, I'm here on a task for Dianne. You do remember her don't you? The one you set aside because you found her dowry lacking?" Cara hated men who couldn't stand up for the women they loved. Perhaps that was why Nate drew her, he knew what he wanted and had no intention of ever letting her go.

Denning's face flushed around his moustache. "You don't understand how noble marriages are arranged."

"No, for which I am grateful." Cara held out a hand. "Dianne's mouse, if you please."

"What if I refuse?" He ran a fingertip down the side of his waxed facial adornment.

A smile curled her lips, but never reached her eyes. She pulled the Smith and Wesson from the chest holster and aimed it. Low. "Do I look like I'm here to play games? You can hand it over, or you lose your family jewels. You have three seconds to decide which you prefer."

He laughed, a retort rising to the tip of his tongue.

"One." Cara cocked the pistol.

Frantic hand movements pulled the ivory mouse from his trouser pocket

in under two seconds. He thrust the tiny object in her direction.

"Smart boy." Cara replaced the pistol and took the mouse, depositing the creature in the leather pouch hanging from her belt.

"You're not a law unto yourself, you know." Denning found his spine, now he didn't have a pistol pointed at his crotch. "You can't just march in here and do whatever you want."

Cara cocked her head to one side. "Given who has my back, I rather think I can."

A sneer touched the corner of his mouth. "He's not as untouchable as he thinks he is."

Cara frowned, about to ask what he meant, when a growing commotion echoed from the foyer. Filing away his comment, she walked back through the haze filled room, and past the slack jawed patrons.

Exiting the double doors, she found the small spaced crammed with the attendant, Inspector Fraser, and the hulking Sergeant Connor. Jackson lounged against the street side doorjamb, not allowed admittance any further into the exclusive club. He raised one eyebrow, shook his head and then returned to his cigarette. He obviously figured she didn't need any help.

Connor took one look at her state of undress, turned beetroot red and developed an instant fascination for the ceiling mouldings.

Fraser kept unwavering eye contact. "Miss Devon," he murmured, as though they met in the street on a Sunday afternoon.

She smiled at the dapper Enforcer. "Hamish. Here to arrest me?"

"Not at all, the attendant was concerned you may need assistance. He thought you were confused and had perhaps escaped from somewhere." Translation, the attendant rang for urgent help with the mad woman. Fraser plucked the skirt from the outstretched arm of the man and handed the garment to her.

"He thought I would require assistance to leave the premises?" Cara stepped into the skirt, flipped out the tails of the corset, and refastened the

back.

He gave her a shy smile, which warmed his hazel eyes behind their wire-rimmed glasses. "As always, we understand one another completely." He gestured for her to precede him from the building, and Cara stepped outside to the amused gaze of Jackson.

"I trust you won't be returning to Red's today?" Inspector Fraser enquired.

"No, I don't think so." She winked and waited while Jackson waved his arm and hailed a steam powered cab. When it puffed to a stop beside them, he helped her up.

Once on their way, she extracted the mouse to examine it closer. It was made of smooth polished marble. The rough size and shape resembled a chicken egg, but with a more tapered, triangular end, forming the mouse's head. Delicate ears, eyes and whiskers were carved into the stone. An ornate curving pattern covered its body, instead of fur. A thin silver chain formed the tail, the end wrapped around a tiny key.

Turning the mouse over, its tummy bore the engraving "*to Dianne, always a pleasure.*"

Next to the ornate lettering, Cara saw a tiny keyhole and succumbed to the constant curiosity. She inserted the end of the tail and turned the key several times. Once the key slid free, the mouse began a gentle pulsating motion. Cara stared at her hand, the small oval creature vibrating across her palm. She almost knew what it was, the answer so close that it danced just at the edge of her reach.

Jackson watched her with barely suppressed laughter. "Got it yet, doll? Figured out why a man would give such a toy to his lover?"

The words *toy* and *lover* buzzed around and around, until realisation slammed into her brain.

"Ewww! she cried, as her hand jerked, the mouse leaping for freedom to be caught by the swift reflexes of Jackson.

He burst into full force laughter and dropped the critter back into the

pouch at her side.



Later that night, Cara lay on her stomach, reading, when Nate entered the bedroom. The tiredness vanished from around his eyes, as he drank in her sprawled form.

He sat on the bed next to her, and removed his boots. "How is your injured bird?"

He stripped the shirt over his head next, and Cara lost any pretence of interest in her book. She loved watching the muscles in his back bunch and stretch with each movement.

"Reunited with her mouse. Which, I suspect, she wants for when she is buried alive in the countryside, stuck in a loveless marriage with some decrepit toff." She rolled to her side and followed a faint knife scar with a fingertip.

Nate turned and captured her hand. "Well, if you ever find yourself buried in the countryside, or bored with your old toff—"

He pulled a small object from his pocket and placed it in her palm.

Cara recognised the shape and laughed. A retort rose to her lips, only to be swallowed down by her constant curiosity.

*Perhaps, just this once...?*

~FIN~

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