



CHAOTIC

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From "DatesFrom Hell"



1

“So what kind of stories do you cover?” he asked, bathing my face in champagne fumes. “Bat Boy Goes to College? Elvis Shrine Found on Mars?” He laughed without waiting for me to answer. “God, I can’t believe people actually buy those rags. Obviously, they must, or you wouldn’t have a job.”

My standard line flew to my lips, something about tabloids functioning as a source of entertainment, not news, quirky pieces of fiction that people could read and chuckle over before facing the horrors of the daily paper. I choked it back and forced myself to smile up at him.

“I did a Hell Spawn feature once,” I said, as brightly as I could manage. “That’s True News’s version of Bat Boy. I covered his graduation from kindergarten. He was so cute with a little mortarboard perched on his horns...”

I crossed my fingers under my cocktail napkin and prayed for “the look,” the curl of the lip, the widening of the eyes as they frantically searched for an escape. Escape would be so easy—a crowded museum gala, everyone in evening wear—come on, Douglas, just excuse yourself to use the bathroom and conveniently forget where you left me...

He threw back his head and laughed. “Hell Spawn’s kindergarten graduation? Now that’s a fun job. You know what the highlight of my workweek is? Nine holes of golf with the other AVPs.”

See, now that was the problem with guys like Douglas—they weren’t evil. Boring, boorish and borderline obnoxious, but not so awful that you could justify abandoning them. So you were stuck hoping they’d be the ones to declare the date a dud, and beg off early.

Dinner had been a mistake. I should have insisted we meet here, at the party, so if things didn’t go well, we’d have only been sentenced to a couple hours of each other’s company. But he invited me to dinner first, and even as I’d been thinking No! my mouth had done the right thing, the polite thing, and said, “Sure, dinner would be great.”

I’d spent forty-five minutes at the table by myself, fending off sympathetic “you’ve been stood up” looks from the servers and watching my salad wither on the plate. Then Douglas had arrived... and I’d spent the next hour listening to him complain about the cause of his lateness, some corporate calamity too complex for my layperson’s brain to comprehend. It wasn’t until we were here at the opening of the museum’s new wing that he’d even gotten around to asking what I did for a living.

“So what’s the weirdest story you’ve ever covered?” he asked.

I laughed. “Oh, there would be plenty of contenders for that one. Just last week I had this UFO—”

“What about celebrities?” he cut in. “Tabloids cover that, right? Celebrity gossip? What’s the best one of those stories you’ve done?”

“Ummm, none. True News includes some celebrity stories, but I’m strictly the ‘weird tales’ girl, mainly paranormal, although—”

“Paranormal? Like ghosts?” Again, he didn’t wait for me to answer. “Our frat house was supposed to be haunted. Frederick and I—your brother-in-law and I were frat brothers, but I guess your mother told you that. Anyway, one night...”

My poor mother. Reduced to canvassing my sister’s husband’s college buddies for potential mates for her youngest child. She’d long since gone through every eligible bachelor she knew personally.

“I don’t need you to find me dates, Mom,” I said the last time, as I’d said the hundred times before. “I’m not so bad at it myself.”

“Dates, yes. Relationships, no. I swear, Hope, you go out of your way to find men you wouldn’t want to know for more than a weekend. Yes, I know, you’re only twenty-six, hardly an old maid, and I’m not saying you need to settle down, but you could really use some stability in your life, dear. I know you’ve had a rough go of it...”

What do you expect? I wanted to say sometimes. You gave me a demon for a dad. Of course, that wasn’t fair. Mom didn’t know what my father was. I’d been born nine months after my parents separated, and grown up assuming, like everyone else, that I was my father’s “parting shot” before he’d run off with his nurse.

Only at eighteen had I begun to suspect otherwise, when I’d realized that my feelings of being “different” were more than adolescent alienation.

Douglas finished his haunted frat house story, then asked, “So what kind of education does a tabloid writer need? Obviously you don’t go to journalism school for that.”

“Actually, I did.”

He had the grace to flush. “Oh, uh...but you wouldn’t need to, right? I mean, it’s not real reporting or anything.”

I searched his face for some sign of condescension. None. He was a jerk, but not a malicious one. Damn. Another excuse lost. I had a half-dozen girlfriends who wouldn’t need a justification for ending this date early, who’d just cut and run. So why couldn’t I? I was half-demon, for God’s sake. I could be as nasty as I wanted.

I scanned the room. The gala was being held in the reception hall, which was also—as discreet signs everywhere reminded us—available for weddings, parties and corporate events. A jazz trio played in the corner beside a portable parquet dance floor that was small enough to be a solo stage, as if the organizers acknowledged this wasn’t a dancing crowd, but felt obligated to provide something. Most of the guests were big business, so the main event here was schmoozing, fostering contacts while basking in the feel-good glow of supporting the arts. Large-scale artifact replicas, such as statues and urns, dotted the room, reminding guests where they were and why...although the pieces seemed to be getting more use as coat racks and leaning posts.

“The buffet table looks amazing,” I said. “Is that poached salmon?”

“Wild, I hope, but you can’t be too careful these days. I had dinner with a client last week, and he’d been to a five-star restaurant in New York the week before, and they’d served farm-fed salmon. Do people just not read the papers? You might as well eat puffer fish, which reminds me of the time I was in Tokyo —”

“Hold that thought,” I said. “I’m going to grab something and scoot back.”

I bolted before he could stop me.

As I crossed the floor to the buffet, I was keenly aware of eyes turning my way. A wonderful feeling for a woman...if those eyes are sweeping over her in admiration and envy, not glued to her dress in “what the hell is she wearing?” bemusement.

It was the dress’s fault. It had screamed to me from across the store, a canary yellow beacon in the rack of blacks and olive greens and navy blues. A ray of sunshine in the night. That’s how I’d pictured myself in it, cutting a swath through the darkness in my slinky bright yellow dress. Ray of sunshine? I looked like a banana in heels.

Sadly, it wasn’t my first fashion disaster. The truly sad part was that I had no excuse for my lack of dress sense. My mother routinely showed up on the local society papers as a shining example of the well-bred and well-dressed. My sister had paid her way through law school by modeling. Even my brothers had both made the annual “best dressed bachelor” lists before their marriages disqualified them. It didn’t matter. My whole family could have accompanied me to that store, told me—yet again—that yellow was the worst color anyone with dark hair and a dark complexion could choose, and I’d still have walked out with this dress, blinded by my sun-bright delusions.

At least I hadn’t spilled anything on it. I paused mid-stride, and looked down at myself. Nope, nothing spilled yet, and as long as I stuck to white wine and sauce-free food, I’d be fine.

I picked up a plate and surveyed the table. A roast duck centerpiece surrounded by poached salmon, marinated prawns on ice, chocolate-covered strawberries...I wasn’t hungry, but there’s always room for chocolate-covered strawberries. As I reached for one, my vision clouded.

Oh God. Not now.

I tried to force the vision back, concentrate on the present, the buffet table, the smell of perfume circling the room, the soft jazz notes floating past, focus on that, keep myself grounded in the—

Everything went dark. Images, smells, and sounds flickered past, hard and fast, like physical blows. A forest—the shriek of an owl—the loamy smell of wet earth—the thunder of running paws—a flash of black fur—a snarl—teeth flashing—the sharp taste of—

I ricocheted from my vision so fast I had to grab the edge of the table to steady myself. I swallowed and tasted blood, as if I’d bitten my tongue.

A deep breath, then I opened my eyes. There, in the center of the table, wasn’t a roast duck, but a newly dead one, ripped apart, bloodied feathers scattered over the ice and prawns and poached salmon, steaming entrails spilling out on the white tablecloth.

I wheeled, smacked into a man standing behind me, and knocked the plate from his hands. I dove to grab it, but my charm bracelet snagged on his sleeve, and I nearly yanked him down with me. The plate hit the floor, shards of china flying in every direction.

“Oh, I’mso sorry,” I said.

A soft chuckle.“Quite all right.I’m better off without the added cholesterol. My doctor will thank you.”

I fumbled to extricate his sleeve from my bracelet. He reached down, hand brushing mine, and with a deft twist, set us free.

As he did, I got my first glimpse of him, and inwardly groaned. If I had to make a fool of myself, it would be in front of someone like this, who looked as if he’d never made a fool of himself in his life. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was elegance personified, marred only by a slight hawkish cast to his face. Every response to my stammered apologies was witty and charming. Every move as we untangled was fluid and graceful. The kind of guy you expected to speak with a crisp, British accent and order his martinis shaken, not stirred.

As a bevy of serving staff rushed in to clean up, I apologized one last time, and he smiled, his last reassurance as sincere as his first, but his gaze grown distant, as if he’d mentally already moved on and, in five minutes, would forget me altogether...which, under the circumstances, I didn’t mind at all.

As I walked back toDouglas , the working Big Ben replica clock in the middle of the room chimed the hour. Ten o’clock?Already? No, that made sense—withDouglas being almost an hour late for dinner, we hadn’t arrived at the gala until past nine.

I hurried over to him. “There’s a—”

He cut me short with a discreet nod toward my bodice.

“You have a spot,” he whispered.

I looked down to see a dime-sized blob of marinara sauce beside my left breast.Fallout from the buffet table debacle.Naturally. If food flew, I’d catch some, and in the worst possible place.

I thanked him and tried to blot it with my napkin. It grew from a dime to a quarter, and I stretched my purse strap to cover it.

“I was going to say there’s a special behind-the-scenes tour of the new exhibit starting now,” I said. “I’d love to see it, and it would be a great way to meet people, mingle...”...save me from another two hours of your corporate war stories.

“Speaking of mingling, did you see who’s here?” He directed my attention to a group of middle-aged couples wedged between a bronze urn and a terracotta bull.

“Robert Baird,” he whispered reverently.

He paused, as if waiting for me to drop and touch my forehead to the floor.

“CEO of Baird Enterprises?” he said.

“Oh, well, if you know him, I guess we could—”

“I don’t, but I’m sure you do...not directly maybe, but his wife and your mother both serve on the Ryerson Foundation board, and—”

“You thought I could introduce you.”

“You would? Thanks, Hope. You’re a gem.”

“Sure, right after the tour—”

Too late. He was already heading for the Bairds . I sighed, adjusted my purse strap, and followed.



2

Thirty minutes later, the tour was over, the attendees were returning, gushing over the new exhibit...and I was still stuck with Douglas and the Bairds . Now that I’d won him an audience, he wasn’t leaving until they did.

I began to wonder whether he’d notice if I left. Maybe I could slip away, conduct a little self-guided tour...

Douglas put his arm around my waist and leaned into me, as if to take some of the weight off his feet. I bit back a growl of frustration, fixed on my best “gosh, this is all so interesting” smile, and did what I’m sure every other significant other in the group had done an hour ago: turned off and tuned out.

While every other partner’s mind slid to mundanities like juggling the children’s schedules, planning next weekend’s dinner party, or contemplating the report he or she had to write for work, mine went straight to the dark realm of human suffering, evil, and chaos. I can’t help it. The moment I let my mind wander, it turns into a dedicated chaos receiver, picking up every nearby trouble frequency.

Unlike the buffet table vision, these weren’t mental blackouts. More like semi-dozing, that state right before sleep where you’re still conscious, but the dream world starts to encroach on reality. The first thing I saw was a woman sitting at Mrs. Baird’s feet, her knees pulled up under her party dress, her makeup running, her shoulders heaving with silent sobs.

As the apparition vanished, I felt my gaze slide to the left, and I knew somewhere down a hall, I’d find a woman, huddled and sobbing in some quiet place. Maybe someone had called with bad news, or maybe she’d seen her husband’s hand snake onto another woman’s thigh. I never knew the causes, only the outcomes.

“Tonight,” a man’s voice hissed at my ear. “He had to do it tonight, while the offices are empty.”

I didn’t bother looking beside me. Instead I let my subconscious draw my attention across the room to two men near the door. One was shaking his head. The other’s face was taut as he talked quickly.

The voices faded, and others took their place—angry words, accusations, whimpers, sobs, a Babel of voices joined in the common tongue of chaos. Images flashed, superimposed on reality, burning themselves onto my retinas, an unending parade of chaos in every conceivable form, from grief to rage to sorrow to jealousy to hate. I saw, heard, felt, experienced it all. And the worst of it? Even as my brain rebelled, throwing up every proper reaction: horror, sympathy, and anger, my soul drank it in like the finest champagne, reveling in the sweet taste and the bubbles popping against my tongue and the delicious caress of giddy light-headedness.

Every half-demon has a power, inherited from his or her father. Some can create fire, some can change the weather, some can even move objects with their minds. This was mine.

For six years, I’d struggled with my growing “power,” this innate radar for chaos, this thirst for it. I’d fought like the most self-aware junkie, knowing my addiction would destroy me, but unable to stop chasing it. Years of dark moods, dark days, and darker thoughts. Then... salvation.

Through my growing network of half-demon contacts, someone had found me, someone who could help. I wouldn’t say I was surprised. For community support, you can’t beat the supernatural world. Most races had formed core groups centuries ago, like the witch Covens, werewolf Packs, sorcerer Cabals... When you live in a world that doesn’t know you exist, and it seems best to keep it that way, community is a must, for everything from training to medical care.

Half-demons are often considered the least “communal” of the races, but I’d argue the opposite. We may not have a core group or hold meetings or police our own, but the half-demon regional communities encompass everyone in that region, which is more than I can say for the others. Because we lack the family support of the hereditary races, half-demons are always on the lookout for others, and once you’re found, a world of support opens up to you. So, when a local half-demon I knew only through a mutual acquaintance called me, I wasn’t surprised. And when she asked me to meet with someone who might be able to help me hone and control my powers, I didn’t say no.

The meeting had been scheduled for lunch, at a sidewalk café, someplace public and private at the same time, which reassured me from the start. I’d arrived to find just one person at the table, a slight, fair-haired man in his thirties, dressed business casual, like everyone else in the restaurant. Handsome, in a delicate way, well-mannered, with an easy smile and warm brown eyes, Tristan Robard had put me at ease from that first handshake. We’d ordered a pitcher of sangria, chatted about local events, and spent the first half of the meal getting a sense of each other. Then, halfway through lunch, he’d looked up from his salad, met my gaze and said,

“Have you ever heard of the interracial council?”

When I hesitated, he laughed. “They really need a better name, don’t they? The Sumerian Council, the Grand Guild, or something like that. That’s the problem with trying to be understated... if you don’t give yourself a fancyname, no one remembers who the heck you are. Get a good name, a clever slogan, a nice logo—” He grinned. “Then people would remember who you are and, more importantly, remember you when they need you.”

“Is that... It’s the delegates council, isn’t it? The heads of the various supernatural races—the American ones, at least...”

“Exactly. Do you know what the council does?”

I made a face. “Sorry, only the vaguest idea, I’m afraid.” I smiled. “Like you said, they need a better marketing plan. They’re supposed to help supernaturals, right? General policing, resolving conflicts between groups...”

“Protect and serve, that’s the council’s motto... or it would be, if they had one. The problem is that, for about twenty years, they’ve been slipping so far under the radar that no one knows they’re there, so no one reports problems. They’re trying to fix that now, and step one is broadening their reach. Recruiting, so to speak.”

“New delegates, you mean?”

He laughed. “No, those positions are filled, and far loftier than you or I can aspire to... for now, at least. What they’re doing instead is creating a network of ‘eyes on the ground,’ supernaturals willing to join the payroll, look for trouble and, eventually, help them solve it.”

My hand clenched around my napkin as I struggled to keep my face neutral. Help look for trouble? Was there anyone better suited for such a task? If I could help—use my power for good—Oh, God, please...

I don’t think I breathed for that next minute, waiting for him to go on.

“In particular, they want people in careers suited to troubleshooting, like law enforcement officers, social workers, or—” He met my gaze and smiled. “Journalists. And the ideal candidate would be someone not only with a suitable job, but from a race that could prove equally useful, werewolves or vampires for their tracking skills or, maybe”—his smile grew to a grin—“a half-demon with a nose for trouble.”

“You mean...” The words jammed in my throat.

“On behalf of the council, Hope, I’d like to offer you a job.”

And so it began. With Tristan as my contact, I’d been working for the council for eighteen months now. I hadn’t been fortunate enough to meet the delegates to thank them personally, but in the meantime, I thanked them with every job I did, putting my all into each task they assigned me, however simple.

Tristan had gotten me the job at True News. Not exactly a prestigious position for an up-and-coming journalist, but I knew it would help the council and that was more important than my professional ego. Tabloids do stumble on the truth now and then, and it’s usually trouble: a careless vampire, an angry half-demon, a power-hungry sorcerer. As Tristan had taught me, my powers were particularly honed for supernatural trouble. So I used my job at the paper to sniff it out.

I was good at my job. Damn good. So after the first year, the council had expanded my duties to cover bounty hunting. Supernaturals who cause trouble often flee. With the right cues, I could find supernaturals even when they weren’t creating chaos. If they came near my part of the country, I could sniff out the guilty party, then call in the cavalry.

For this, the council paid me, and paid me well, but the best part wasn’t the money; it was the guilt-free excuse to quench my thirst for chaos. To help the council, I needed to hone my powers, and to do that, I



had to practice. I had a long way to go—I still picked up random visions like that silly one with the duck, who'd probably seen his mother ripped apart by a dog or some such nonsense. But I was improving, and while I was, I had every excuse to indulge in the chaos around me.

So when my mind wandered during the conversation, that's exactly what I did—practiced. I concentrated on picking out specific audio threads and visual images, pulling them to the forefront and holding them there when they threatened to fade behind stronger signals.

The one I was working on was a very mundane marital spat, a couple trading hissed volleys of “you never listen to me” and “why do you always do this?” The kind of fights every relationship falls into in times of stress...or so my siblings and friends told me—relationships, as my mother pointed out, are not my forte. There's too much in my life I can't share, so I concentrate on friends, family, work, and my job with the council, and try to forget what I'm missing. When I hear stuff like this meaningless bickering, ruining what should have been a romantic night together, I'm not convinced that I'm missing anything.

The very banality of the fight made it a perfect practice target. Even at a social function like this, there were a half-dozen stronger sources of chaos happening simultaneously, and my mind kept trying to lead me astray, like a puppy straining on the leash in a new park.

Keeping my focus on the bickering couple was a struggle and—

“You aren't supposed to be back here, sir,” said a gruff voice in my ear. “This area is off-limits to guests.”

I mentally waved the voice aside like a buzzing mosquito. Back to the couple. The husband was bitching about the wife ordering fish for dinner when she knew he hated the smell of it.

“Which is why I had it when we were out,” she snapped. “So I don't stink up the kitchen cooking it and—”

“What the—?”

The same gruff voice, now shrill with alarm. My head shot up, pulse accelerating, body tense with anticipation, as if my mental hound had just caught the scent of fresh T-bone steak.

“No! Please—!”

The plea slid into a wordless scream. One syllable, one split second, then the scream was cut short, and I was left hanging there, straining for more—

I whipped my thoughts back and turned to pinpoint the source of the chaos. Another jolt, this one too dark, too strong even for me, like that last gulp of champagne when you've already had too much and your stomach lurches in rebellion, the sweetness turning acid-sour.

“Hope?” Douglas's hand slipped from my waist, and he leaned toward my ear to whisper, “Are you okay?”

“Bathroom,” I managed. “The champagne.”

“Here, let me take you—”

I brushed him off with a smile. Then I made my way across the room, my legs shaking, hoping I wasn't staggering. By the time I reached the hall, the shock of that mental jolt had been replaced with an oddly calm curiosity.

A few more steps, and I began to wonder whether I'd been picking up a "chaos-memory." I often sensed strong residual vibes from events long past, like that dead buffet duck. I'm working on learning to distinguish residuals from current sources, but I'm always second-guessing myself.

I arrived at the end of the hall, where it split into two. To the right I could detect traces of the source that had bitch-slapped me. But I also caught another, fresher source of trouble to the left.

My attention naturally swung left. The chaos-puppy again, far more interested in that squirrel gamboling in plain sight than an old rabbit trail. I gave in to the impulse, already ninety percent convinced that whatever I'd felt had been a chaos-memory.



3

I looked around, then slipped past the sign reminding guests that this area wasn't part of the gala. In other words: keep out, worded nicely to avoid insulting current and future museum benefactors.

As the sounds of the party faded behind me, the clicking of my heels grew louder. I stopped, backed into a recessed doorway, and removed them. Then, with the shoe straps threaded through my purse strap, I leaned out of the doorway, looked both ways, crept out, and padded down the hall.

I'd nearly made it to the end when a flashlight beam bounced off the walls. I backpedaled, heart tripping. A security guard's shoes clomped through the next room, then receded. I started out again.

At the end of the hall, I peeked into the next room. The chaos signal was stronger now, a siren's call luring me in. It came from down yet another darkened hallway. As I stepped into the room, a red light blinked. A surveillance camera. Shit!

Again I scooted into the hall. I crouched nearly to the floor, then shuffled forward, too low for the camera to pick up. I craned my head back to look for that light. There it was, on a video camera lens fixed on the display cases.

Squinting, I visually charted a safe path around the perimeter. Still crouched, face turned from the camera, I started forward. It wasn't easy, moving in the near darkness, through an unfamiliar room dotted with obstacles—priceless obstacles. But I reveled in every terrified heart thump. Part of me wanted to rise above that, to dismiss this as an inconvenient—even silly—part of my job, skulking about dark corridors, avoiding security guards. I blame my upbringing in a world that prized detachment and

emotional control. But that only made the thrill that much more precious, the glittering allure of the forbidden...or at least, the unseemly.

I made it to the next hall. This time, I had the foresight to look before I strolled in. I needed more practice at this sort of thing. My bounty hunting missions often required some degree of stealth and spying. Another skill I didn't mind having an excuse to hone.

As I peered around the corner, I saw another corridor, this one wide and inviting, with a carpeted floor and benches. Paintings and prints decorated the left wall. The right needed no adornment—it was a sloping sheet of glass overlooking the special exhibit gallery below. I had seen Tutankhamen in that gallery, relics from the Titanic, peat bog mummies, and most recently, feathered dinosaurs. Now, if I remembered correctly, it displayed a traveling collection of jewelry.

This second-story viewing hall stretched along two sides of the gallery below. Through the glass, I saw something move on the adjoining side. The pale circle of a face. I eased back, but the face stayed where it was, bobbing only slightly, as if the owner were cleaning the glass. A janitor? Was my trouble alert on the fritz again? I really needed more practice.

A shard of light reflected off the glass on the other side. Again I moved back, expecting the guard with his bouncing flashlight. But by then, my eyes had adjusted enough for me to see a dark figure beneath that pale face, and the light had reflected off a sheet of glass...in his dark-gloved hands.

I bit back a laugh. So that's what I'd picked up, not a janitor or some bored partygoer wandering around off-limits areas, but a robbery-in-progress. My gaze still fixed on the would-be thief, I reached into my purse.

My fingers brushed two objects that Tristan insisted I carry at all times: a gun and a pair of handcuffs. Even tonight, he'd been so concerned for my safety that he'd had me meet someone from the security detail before I'd gone to dinner, pass my gun and cuffs to him, and pick them up again inside the gala, circumventing the security at the door. Overkill, but it was sweet of him to care.

I'd rolled my eyes as I'd gone through Tristan's cloak-and-dagger routine with the gun and cuffs, but now I was actually in a position where they could come in handy. That would add some excitement to my night. But no. Apprehending a thief wasn't my job, no matter how tempting. Instead, I pulled out my cell phone to call the police. An unexpected positive use for my powers.

Across the way, the thief was climbing over the edge, through the hole he'd cut in the glass. Now this would be interesting. How would he get down? Rappel or lower himself like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible? Curiosity stayed my finger on the phone buttons. I'd just see this, then back out—

The man jumped.

I sucked in a gasp. My God, it was at least thirty feet down. Was he crazy? Surely he'd break—

The man landed on his feet as easily as if he'd hopped off a two-foot ledge.

I put my phone away. No human could make that leap, not like that. I knew now why I'd picked up the trouble signal so clearly from so far. A supernatural thief. This was my job after all.

The figure moved across the well-lit gallery. His back was to me as he started working on the security panel.

What was he? Knowing his supernatural race would help. The first time I'd followed a paranormal lead from True News without council backup, I'd ended up with second-degree burns from a very pissed-off fire half-demon. My own fault. He'd been torching abandoned buildings, what did I think his demonic power was?

I looked down at the man. No clues there. There never were. Half-demons, witches, sorcerers, werewolves, vampires...you couldn't tell by looking. Or, with the vampires and werewolves, I'd heard you couldn't tell. I've never met one of either race, both being rare.

He could be a vampire. Vampires had more than their share of thieves—natural stealth combined with invulnerability made it a good career choice.

As he continued working on the security panel, I ran through a few other possibilities, so I'd be prepared. My mental databanks were overflowing with supernatural facts, most for types I had never and maybe would never meet.

Sometimes, poring over my black market reference books, I felt like an overeager army recruit digesting ballistic tables for weapons he'd never fire, tactical manuals for situations he'd never encounter. Yep, I was a keener, devouring everything in an effort to "be all that I could be." The council had taken a chance on me and turned my life around, and damned if I wasn't going to give them all I had to give.

Security system disabled, the man walked to the display and, with a few adroit moves, scooped up three pieces of jewelry as easily as if he'd been swiping loose candy from a store shelf. As he moved, something about him looked familiar. When he did turn, face glowing in the display lights, I let out a silent oath. It was the man I'd crashed into at the buffet table.

The oath was for me—I'd been inches from a supernatural and hadn't noticed. I could blame that silly "dead duck" vision, and the ensuing confusion, but I couldn't rest on excuses. I needed to be better than that.

Jewelry stashed in an inside breast pocket, the man crossed the floor. I pulled the gun from my purse and crept forward, crouched to stay under the glass. When he came through that open window again, I'd—

Wait, how was he going to climb out of it? He hadn't left a rope...meaning he didn't plan to exit the way he'd come in. Shit!

I popped my head over the window ledge to see him at the door. It was barred on the inside—vertical metal bars—the extra security hidden from passersby who would see only a closed door.

The man reached one gloved hand through the bars, and pushed the handle. The door opened a crack, any electronic security having been overridden from the panel he'd disabled. Great, but that still left those metal bars—

He took hold of the nearest bar, flexed his hand, and pulled. As I stared, he pried open a space big enough to slip through and—

Wake up, girl! He's going to get away.

I snapped my hanging jaw shut, and broke into a hunched-over jog. As I moved, I mentally ran through

the layout of the museum. Take the first junction and there'd be back stairs to the main level. The stairs led to an emergency exit, but the stairwell itself could be used without tripping a fire alarm, a courtesy to museum-goers who knew their way around and didn't care to cross to the main stairs and elevator.

But even if opening the door didn't set off a fire alarm, did it trigger anything else? Maybe a signal in the security station? I couldn't worry about that. When I hit the doorway, I quickly checked for security cameras, saw none, pushed open the door, and tore down the steps.



4

Pulseracing, I forced myself to slow enough to peek out the main level door first. It opened into a dark hallway. No security cameras in sight. I put on my shoes, stuffed my charm bracelet into my purse, and stepped out.

As I hurried down the hall, I put the finishing touches on my plan. Was it a good plan? Of course not. I needed time for that. The best I could do was concentrate on him, his situation, his certain desire to get the hell out of the museum before the theft was discovered.

Sure enough, I looked around the next corner to see the thief step into the well-lit main hall leading to the front door. Cheeky bastard, waltzing right out the front. He wasn't even hurrying.

Idid hurry. I raced down the hall, and called "Excuse me!"

He didn't slow...or speed up, just tipped his head to a trio of women at the coat check. I picked up my pace. He made it to the door, and paused to hold it open for an exiting elderly couple.

I covered the last few paces at a jog. He saw me then—the yellow dress did it, I'm sure. A friendly smile and nod. He did remember me. I'm sure in his profession, he made it a rule to remember anyone who might be able to identify him later.

"My bracelet," I said, breathing hard, as if I'd chased him from the party. "Charm—my charm bracelet—it snagged—"

"Slow down." His fingers touched my arm, and he frowned in polite concern. "Here, let's step out of the way."

His fingers still resting on my arm, he steered me into a side hall, a scant yard or so in, far enough from the door to speak privately, but not so far from others to alarm me. Damn smooth...and damn calm for a guy with a pocketful of stolen jewelry.

“My bracelet snagged on your jacket,” I said. “In the buffet line—”

“Yes, of course. It isn’t broken, is it?” His frown grew. “I did try to be careful, so I hope—”

“It’s gone. I noticed it right away, and I’ve been trying to find you ever since. It must have been caught on your jacket or slid off into your pocket or—”

“Or, more likely, fell onto the floor. I’m sorry, but if it did catch on me”—he lifted his arms and displayed his sleeves—“it’s long since fallen off and it didn’t”—another demonstration, reaching into his pockets—“fall in here. It must be on the floor somewhere.”

“It isn’t. I checked everywhere.”

Frustration darted behind his eyes. “Then, I would suggest, as reprehensible as the thought is, that someone picked it up with no intention of returning it.”

Reprehensible? Amazing, he could say that with a straight face. Then again, I suspected he could say pretty much anything with a straight face.

“You mean someone stole it?” I said.

“Possibly, although, considering the guest list, I realize that’s hard to believe.”

“Oh, I believe it,” I said, letting my voice harden. “I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, but your conclusion just proved me wrong. It didn’t fall into your pocket, did it?”

He chased away his surprise with a laugh. “I believe someone has had one glass of champagne too many. What on earth would I do with a . . . cheap bauble likethat.”

He faltered on “cheap bauble.” The man could spin lies with a face sincere enough to fool the angels, but lying about his specialty gave him pause. Even in that brief moment of untangling my bracelet he recognized it for what it was—a valuable heirloom, each charm custom-made. I was surprised he hadn’t tried to nick it in the confusion of our collision.

He continued, “And, if I recall correctly, you bumped into me.”

“I tripped over you . . . and I’m pretty sure that wasn’t an accident.”

“You think I tripped—?”

A security guard glanced down the hall.

He lowered his voice. “I assure you, I didn’t steal your bracelet, and I would appreciate if you didn’t accuse me quite so publicly—”

“You think this is public?” I strode past him toward the main hall. “Let’s make this public. We’ll catch up with that guard, you let him search you, and if I’m wrong—”

He grabbed my arm, his grip tight, then loosening as I turned toward him.

He managed a smile. “I would rather not end my night being frisked. Why don’t I help you search for it,

and if we don't find it, I'll willingly submit to the search."

I pretended to think it over, then nodded.

"Last time I saw it was when you freed it from your jacket," I said. "Then I went to the cloakroom, to get my scarf to cover this—" I pointed to the marinara spot. "And I noticed the bracelet was gone. Maybe..." I paused. "When I was looking for the cloakroom, I walked into the wrong room—it was dark, and I brushed against something."

"Perfect. Let's start there then."

As we walked down the semi-dark hall, music and chatter drifting in from the party beyond, I prayed the door would be open. The room I had in mind was a janitorial closet I'd discovered in fourth grade, when my best friend and I had hidden to avoid our teacher after we'd been caught ducking out of the pottery exhibit and sneaking into the arms and armor one. My fault. I'd loved that gallery, even more than mummies and dinosaurs. Those marvelous, ancient weapons where I could, even at eight, stand in front of the display, close my eyes, and hear the clash of metal on metal, smell the blood-streaked sweat, see the rearing horses, feel the hate, the fear, the panic... and feel my own soul rise to drink it in.

At the time, perhaps thankfully, I'd seen nothing wrong with my "fixations," nor had anyone around me—at my mother's insistence—chalking it up to a child's bloodthirsty imagination.

My second visit to the janitorial closet had no such demonic backstory, only the raging hormones of youth. I'd been with a cute boy and a dark closet held infinitely more attraction than even the weaponry exhibits on a tenth-grade field trip.

If the door wasn't open, I had a backup plan, but I really hoped—

"Here," I said.

He waved at the door. "This one?"

I nodded, and he reached for the handle. I slid my hand into my purse, crossed my fingers, and...

The door opened.

"Seems to be a janitor's closet," he said. "How far in did you—?"

I pressed the gun barrel against the small of his back. He stiffened, as if recognizing the sensation. At this point, he could call for help, even just cry out, but in my experience, no supernatural likes calling attention to himself... either that or our powers make us cocky when others would panic. Whatever the reason, he did as I expected—only sighed, then walked into the closet. I flipped on the light, and closed the door behind us.

Once inside, the man turned to me and smiled. "Nicely done. An excellent trap, and I admit myself caught. My cuff links are gold, and you're welcome to them, but if you'd prefer cash, there's a few hundred in my wallet. No banking or credit cards, I'm afraid."

"I believe you have something more valuable. Check your inside breast pocket. The left side."

Surprise darted behind his blue eyes, but he masked it with a laugh. “Well done again. And, again, I surrender and offer my forfeit. Your choice of the bounty.”

He started to reach into his pocket.

“Uh-uh. Hands out,” I said. “I don’t want any of your ‘bounty,’ but I think the museum does.”

“Ah, museum security, I presume. I believe you might find my offer more...lucrative than the pat on the back the museum will give you.”

“Nice try. I’m not—”

“Interested in a bribe? I’m impressed, and I’m sure your superiors will be as well. You see, they hired me to test their security system. They didn’t inform your team, to test you as well, your efficiency and, if possible, your integrity. You’ve outdone their expectations, and I will personally recommend you for a bonus—”

“Stuff it. I’m not museum security.”

He only gave a small smile, still unfazed. “So this is a citizen’s arrest? Very admirable, but police won’t appreciate being called for an authorized test of museum security, so I’d suggest you reconsider...and I do hope you have a permit for carrying that gun because—”

“I’m not calling the police. As I’m sure you already know, our sort have special ways of handling our special problems, ones better dealt with internally.”

Normally this was enough, but he only arched his brows, feigning confusion. “Our sort?”

“The sort who can jump thirty feet and bend metal bars with their bare hands.”

“Ah, that. I can explain—”

“I’m sure you can. Save it for the council.”

His brows arched. “Council? You don’t mean—”

The jingle of the handcuffs as I pulled them from my purse swallowed his last words. I’d heard enough already. He didn’t have anything important to say, but would keep saying it, in every possible form, until I either lowered my guard or got so confused I set him free.

“You carry handcuffs in your purse?” He chuckled. “Perhaps when this misunderstanding is cleared up, we can get to know each other better—”

I drowned him out by snapping open the cuffs. He only sighed and held his hands in front of him, as helpful as could be. That, too, is typical. I’d only “arrested” four supernaturals so far, but three of them had done just this, surrendered and let themselves be taken into custody. The council had a reputation for fairness, and even criminals trusted them. As for the fourth arrest, the witch... I pushed the thought back. That one had been a lesson to me—no every supernatural would come along easily.

“You said council,” he said as I fastened the cuffs. “That wouldn’t be the interracial council, would it?”



“Had some experience with them, have you? Surprise, surprise.”

“And you’re a... delegate?”

“I’m a bit young, don’t you think?” I said as I tested the cuffs.

“No, not really,” he murmured. “So you’re a...”

“Contract agent.”

His brows shot up. “Agent? I hope you don’t really expect me to believe that.”

Figures. He might not be physically fighting back but he sure as hell was going to use what—despite his superhuman strength—was obviously his weapon of choice. I took my scarf from my purse.

He continued, “Perhaps that story works with others, but I’m afraid whoever you’re working for has underestimated my knowledge of the interracial council. They don’t employ—”

I lifted the scarf.

He looked at it. “I’m already cuffed, and I can assure you, I don’t need to be bound in any other way.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

I jammed it into his mouth. His eyes widened. He looked at me, eyes narrowing. Then, with a noise almost like a snarl, he turned his gaze away, and let me tie the scarf.

“Wait here,” I said. “I’m going to make a call.”



5

One last check to make sure my quarry was secure, then another check—this one outside the door—and I slipped into the hall. I didn’t dare go far, not when I wasn’t sure of his powers.

He wasn’t a vampire. The Samson routine with the metal bars had disapproved that theory. Contrary to some legends, vampires didn’t have superhuman strength. My guess was that he belonged to the most complex of races—my own. I couldn’t recall a half-demon type with his particular skill set, but we were a varied lot, with plenty of rare and poorly documented types, like my own.

One thing I did know. This meeting had been no accident, and I kicked myself for not realizing that the moment Tristan offered me tickets to the gala. Granted, he did that kind of thing often—the perks that came with this job were phenomenal, and I sometimes felt guilty accepting them. I'd told Tristan and, through him, the council, that I didn't need any extras to boost my job satisfaction. But he assured me they were all freebies, like these gala tickets, a gift from a grateful supernatural that would go to waste if I didn't use them. Still, this was the second time Tristan had sent me someplace and I'd "stumbled" onto a supernatural crime in progress.

They were testing me. The council wanted to see how good my chaos nose worked, and I guess I couldn't fault them for that, but when I made that call, I couldn't help snapping at Tristan.

"Okay, okay," he said, laughing. "No more tests. Can you blame us, Hope? You're an Expisco half-demon! We're like kids with a new toy, dying to see what it can do. And you outdid yourself, as always. Karl Marsten, caught by a half-demon rookie agent."

"So the council's been after this guy for a while?"

"They have, which is why I should remind you that you shouldn't take down targets on your own. That's why we provide backup. You're too valuable."

"It wasn't much of a risk. Superhuman strength or not, he didn't even try to fight." I paused. "Those handcuffs will hold him, won't they? You said they're specially made to hold anything supernatural."

A moment's hesitation. "You cuffed him?"

"So they won't hold? Well, he's still in that room anyway. The door's closed and—"

"He can't break the cuffs, Hope. That's not the problem. I thought you knew—didn't you—you usually know what they are."

"Sometimes. This time, I didn't get a vision—"

Oh yes, I had. Standing in line at the buffet, with him behind me, a vision of forest and fur and fangs and blood.

"He's a werewolf," I said.

"And a very dangerous one. You need to subdue him—"

"Should I? If he's dangerous, don't you want me to wait—"

"No time. As charming as Marsten seems, he's a werewolf, the most brutal and unpredictable kind of supernatural, and now he's cornered, which makes him ten times as dangerous. If he knows it's the council who captured him, he'll do anything to get away—kill anyone in his path."

I swallowed. "Okay, so how do I subdue a werewolf?"

"Disable him. Knock him unconscious. Shoot him if you have to. You don't need silver bullets—"

"I know."

“Don’t kill him, just—”

“Disable him. Got it.”

I was already hanging up as Tristan promised me a backup team was on the way.

I made it as far as the door, one hand on the knob, the other on my gun, still hidden in my purse. I turned the handle and—

“You there!”

I dropped the gun into my purse and wheeled as a white-haired security guard strode toward me.

“What are you doing in that room?” he said.

Room? Oh, this room, the one I was clutching for dear life. I let go of the knob and stepped away. Inside, a broom clattered to the floor. The guard turned toward the door, his eyes narrowing.

“Sorry,” I said. “Guess I jostled it too hard. This isn’t the coatroom, is—?”

Something clanged against a metal bucket. Then a clacking, like nails against linoleum. Oh God. He’d changed into a wolf. Of course he’d changed into a wolf. What else would a cornered werewolf do?

The guard reached for the handle. In that split second, I saw him pulling open the door, and a wolf leaping at his throat—

I grabbed the knob and held it. “It’s jammed, see?” I made a show of jangling it. “That noise, that’s what I heard, that’s why I was trying to open it. But it’s jammed.”

“Probably locked.”

“Er, no, I don’t think—”

“The janitor has the keys—”

“Oh, actually, then, I bet you’re right,” I said quickly. “It’s probably locked. Why don’t you go find the janitor. I’ll wait here.”

The guard started to leave, then paused, and turned. “First, let me try the door. It might just be jammed—”

I backed into the door so fast my head cracked against it. The guard reached to steady me.

“Heels,” I mumbled. “I’m always tripping in them.”

I stepped forward, and let my knee give way. The guard grabbed my arm as I grimaced.

“My ankle. I think I twisted it.”

“We should get you to—”

“Please,” I said through my teeth, still grimacing. “I’ll wait here.”

“All right, just let me try the door first—”

As he turned toward the door again, I had no idea what to do, short of falling to my knees and howling in agony. He reached for the handle. Okay, one pratfall coming up—

Before the guard touched the knob, it turned. The door opened. A figure stepped out. KarlMarsten, fully dressed.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” he said with a self-deprecating half-smile. “I could’ve sworn this was the bathroom, and then the door jammed. Thank you. You saved me from the even more serious embarrassment of having to call for help.”

He shook the security guard’s hand. Then he turned to me, and with a murmured thank you, a tip of his head, and a smile, he strolled off down the hall. I took a step after him.

“Miss?Do you want me to call a doctor?”

“Doctor?Oh, right.My ankle. No, my...date...he’s a doctor. I’ll just—”

I looked up and down the hall. The guard pointed toward the party, in the opposite direction of the one Marsten had taken. Damn. I managed a weak smile and a thank you, and headed back to the gala, tossing in the occasional limp for good measure.

When I reached the party,Douglas was still with theBairds . I tried making a beeline for the other door, to go afterMarsten , butDouglas hailed me. I headed over.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just...there’s an old friend over there. You stay with theBairds . I’ll just go talk—”

“Friend?”He perked up. “What company does he work for?”

“She’s a musician.Classical.With the symphony.”

His face fell. “Ah, well, you go on then.” He nodded toward theBairds . “I’m fine here.”

I’ll bet you are,I thought as I hurried away.And, by the way, my stomach’s fine, too. Thanks for asking.

When I reached the corner where I’d last seenMarsten , he was gone. I switched on my mental radar to find him before he escaped with the jewelry. Yes, according to Tristan, I had far bigger things to worry about than stolen goods but...maybe I’m being naïve, butMarsten hadn’tacted like a cornered wild beast. I couldn’t imagine him ripping through innocent partygoers in a frenzied dash to the exit, especially not when I wasn’t picking up any chaos signals to suggest such a thing.

Tristan could be quite a mother hen. As he’d said, I was valuable.Expisco half-demons were rare, and one willing to work on the side of the white hats was rarer still. So I understood when Tristan did things like this, not letting me in on a takedown, keeping me sequestered from other agents, or overreacting with someone likeMarsten . But understanding isn’t accepting. I knew my limitations, which were many, and I

was careful. Yet I had lost KarlMarsten , and damned if I was going to sit on my butt and wait for the backup team to find him again.

So I practiced my developing bounty hunter skills. I cleared my mind and pulled up the images I'd seen at the buffet table: forest, running, fur, fangs. As I did, I tried, with debatable success, not to chastise myself too much for failing to recognize the meaning of the vision from the start.

I knew little about werewolves. Like vampires, they were rare, and kept to themselves. Unlike vampires, they also policed themselves, meaning the council had no reason to deal with them. I knew only one half-demon who'd ever even met a werewolf...and she wasn't all that sure that's what it had been. So I had an excuse for not leaping to "he's a werewolf!" conclusions. But, again, I didn't accept excuses.

After about a minute of mental scanning, I picked upMarsten's frequency. It was faint and flat—meaning he wasn't causing any trouble. Not yet.

I focused on the signal and followed. Down two dark halls, skirting past the gala, down another hall—the same one I started in when I'd first left the party. I reached the fork again.Marsten's trail went left, in the direction of that chaos residual I'd been tracking when his theft had diverted me. He was heading for the back exit.

Still concentrating on his trail, I went down the next corridor, turned the corner—and was smacked by a wave of chaos.

Marsten.Shit! He was—

No,a deeper, calmer part of me replied.It's not him. It's here. Something happened here.Something recent.

I'd been hit by two chaos waves, both originating in this area. They had to be connected.

I pushed aside the werewolf images, and focused on this new signal. The voice came again, that gruff voice telling someone he shouldn't be back here.The plea.Then the scream.

When the wave hit me this time, I only rocked on my heels. Half the strength of the slap I'd felt in the main room earlier, even though I was at the apparent locus of the trouble. I filed this away as a lesson in separating residuals from current chaos, then closed my eyes and pivoted, trying to find the exact location—

There, around that next corner. I hurried to it,then walked into a wall of darkness. I braced myself as the visions flashed past.

Metal glinted. A blade winked in a flashlight beam. The flashlight clattered to the floor.A plea.No! Please—! The blade sheered down. Hands flew up. Blood sprayed.

I froze the vision there as I panted, my heart racing. I struggled to hold that last thought...and wondered why I was holding it.

Blood sprayed.

Blood.

I fumbled in my purse for my keys, took them out, and turned on my penlight. I waved the weak beam over the walls. There. Blood droplets, invisible in the near-darkness.



6

Were the blood drops still wet? I almostreached up to one before snatching my hand back. Look, don't touch, stupid. Standing on my tiptoes, I moved the light closer to the specks. They glistened. Still wet, but drying.

I swung the beam to the floor and found faint smears of blood that would go undetected until they turned on the lights in the morning...or noticed they were one security guard short.

So where was...? Follow the trail.

I stopped at a door a few yards away. Tissue over my hand, I turned the knob.

I half-expected a body to fall out on top of me. Too many horror movies, I guess.

The door opened into an office. I shone my flashlight around. Nothing.

As the door closed behind me, I grabbed it and twisted the knob, to make sure it wouldn't lock me inside. Reassured, I eased the door shut, and moved toward the center of the room.

As I walked, I picked up a twinge of trouble. Yes, this had to be the right place. So where was the...?

A booted toe protruded from behind the desk. I hurried to it. The desk faced the wall, with a wide gap for computer cord access behind it, and that's where the killer had stuffed the body. One end of the desk was against the adjoining wall and the other against a metal filing cabinet, so I had to crawl onto the desk to peer behind it.

I shone the flashlight beam into the gap, and bit back a yelp.

I resisted the urge to pull away. With something like this, I was sure the council would expect a report, so I had to get a good look.

A man layfaceup in the gap. His eyes stared at me, wide with that last minute of "I don't believe this is happening" horror. His security uniform shirt was a mess of gaping holes, the edges torn, shredded, unlike anything a knife would do. The flesh beneath the holes looked...mangled. Chewed. It looked as if he'd been—

A hand clamped over my mouth.

“Found something you were missing?” a voice hissed.

I kicked backward. My foot connected, but a second arm clamped around my neck, and yanked me off the desk. It spun me around, and I found myself looking into a pair of blue eyes so cold and hard that my heart leaped into my throat. KarlMarsten .

“Did you think I wouldn’t smell the body when I walked by?” His voice was as cold and hard as his eyes, all traces of smooth charm gone. “You would have been wiser to let me leave through the front door.”

I pulled back my fist and plowed it toward his gut. He caught my hand easily and squeezed. Tears of pain sprang to my eyes. Oh God, you stupid, stupid—

He brought his face down to mine, and the thought dried up.

“I’m going to let go,” he said, his voice calm. “If you scream, I will crush your fingers. Do you understand?”

I blinked back tears and nodded. He took his hand from my mouth and released the other one just enough to stop the throbbing pain, but still gripped it so tightly that I didn’t dare even try to wiggle my fingers.

“I will only ask you this once,” he said. “Who do you work for?”

“The—I told you—the—”

“Interracial council,” he interrupted. “Is that so? Then tell me, which delegate of the council hired you?”

“I was approached by a representative—”

“Which delegate?”

“He’s not a delegate. He works for them.”

He exhaled, as if in frustration. “All right, then. Which delegates have you met?”

“None. I only work through my contact—”

He cut me off with a humorless laugh. “Oh, they have you well trained, don’t they? I’m sure this story has worked well for you in the past, but it falls a little flat when dealing with someone who actually knows the interracial council, knows most of the delegates, and knows, beyond any doubt, that they do not have employees or recruits or ‘agents’—”

A noise from the hall. Voices. Marsten half-turned, his attention diverted just long enough for me to ram my spiked heel into his shin and wrench my hand free.

He grabbed for me. I kicked and lashed out at the same time, my nails clawing his face. He fell back. I ran for the door, threw it open, and raced into the hall.

A split-second decision: run toward the voices or away from them? Running to them might have been safer, but I couldn't—wouldn't—endanger others. I'd already underestimated Marsten once.

I tore down the halls. Marsten's soles squeaked behind me as he wheeled out of the office. That reminded me that he was in flat dress shoes...and I was in heels—with no hope of outrunning him.

I grabbed the first doorknob I came to. Locked.

I dove for the one across the hall. As my fingers closed around it, I saw Marsten running toward me. The handle turned. The door opened. I darted through, and slammed it.

Even as I turned the lock, I knew I might as well not have bothered. It was a flimsy household privacy lock, one that could be snapped by any strong man, let alone a werewolf.

I reached for my purse but it wasn't on my shoulder. It must have fallen when Marsten yanked me off the desk. No purse...no gun.

Marsten's footsteps had slowed to a walk. Of course they had; he didn't need to hurry. I'd trapped myself in an office with no second door, no windows, no way to escape.

Blockade the door.

The council backup team was on the way. If I could slow Marsten down long enough to call Tristan—

The footsteps stopped inside the door. The handle turned.

Someone laughed—the sound close by—and the handle stopped turning. A drunken giggle. A voice, growing closer.

I grabbed the sides of the metal filing cabinet. It didn't budge. The printer stand? Like that would slow down a werewolf.

"Oh," someone said near the door. "Didn't see you there."

"Unless you're staff, this hall is off limits," Marsten said.

"Oh, right, we were just—"

"Lost," the woman giggled.

"Then I suggest you turn around, go back to the end of the hall, and follow the sounds of the party. You can't miss it."

I looked around for something to block the door, but anything big enough was too heavy for me to move. Outside, the man was telling Marsten to mind his own business, but his companion was already moving away, and calling to him to do the same. No time to phone Tristan. I needed—

My gaze rose to the ventilation shaft over the desk.

Oh please. You have seen too many movies.



I silenced the inner voice, and climbed onto the desk as Marsten threatened to call security. As much as I appreciated the distraction the couple was providing, I prayed they moved on before Marsten gave up trying to handle them discreetly.

As the woman cajoled her partner away, I quickly unscrewed the ventilation cover with a quarter from a dish of coins on the desk.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” the man slurred, then muttered a parting obscenity at Marsten.

As the man’s footsteps faded, I yanked on the cover. One side came free. I tugged again, but the other side caught.

The footsteps were almost gone. Palms sweating, I fumbled for a better hold. The cover popped off with a ping that I was sure could be heard throughout the museum. I shoved the cover into the shaft, grabbed the edges, heaved, and managed to get inside up to my breasts. Then I found myself stuck, upper torso in, butt hanging out, legs flailing, arms trembling with the strain of just holding myself up, with no extra strength for hauling the rest of me through.

Goddamn it! I’d been spending three evenings a week at the gym, and I couldn’t do better than this?

The door handle turned.

Shit, shit, shit! I’d never make—

“And another thing, asshole,” the man’s voice boomed from the end of the hall.

One last push, boosted by a wave of relief, and I heaved the rest of my torso into the shaft.

“Come on, Rick!” the woman called. “Do you want me to go back to the party?”

I wriggled and twisted, getting my legs in and my body turned around so I was facing the shaft opening. I tugged the cover from under me, hooked my fingers through the slats, and pulled it into place just as the doorknob twisted, and the lock snapped.

Marsten threw open the door, fast—as if he expected me to be standing there armed with a heavy stapler. Door wide, he paused in the opening, gaze tripping across the room, nostrils flaring.

Nostrils flaring... Werewolf... He could smell me.

Damn it! I tried to twist around. My shoulder knocked against the metal. A dull thump, but he heard it. Of course he heard it.

Werewolf. Heightened smell, heightened hearing, heightened strength...

I knew all this, so why did I keep forgetting until it was too late? I was out of my league. Way out of it, and I would pay for my hubris—

“Let’s make this easy,” he said, his smooth mask back in place. “You don’t want to play hide-and-seek with me. I have all the advantages, and a low tolerance for frustration. So we’ll skip the games. If you feel safer in your hidey-hole—” He scanned the room. “You’re welcome to stay there. You can hear me, and that’s all that matters.”

He turned slowly, searching for me even as he said he wouldn't. Bastard.

I shifted my shoulders, testing my space limits again. Too tight. I'd been able to turn around with the vent open but, without that added space, I was stuck. No, not stuck. I could move backward. Awkward, slow, and probably loud, but if it came to that, I would. He'd barely fit in here—if at all—so I could still move faster than he could.

"Whoever you are, you're of no interest to me," he continued. "That means I have no particular desire to hurt you. So you have a choice. Tell me who you're working for, and I'll step aside and let you out this door. Refuse, and I'll use you for leverage. That's not a position you want to be in."

I stayed still and quiet.

"I don't have all night," he said. "Nor do you. When I hear your associates approach—which I'm sure will be soon—I'll sniff you out, and the choice will be made. After that, whether you walk out of here depends on how willing your employer is to negotiate."

I said nothing. As he moved, his nostrils flared, still searching. Then he stopped and smiled. His gaze lifted to the ventilation shaft.

"Ah, there you are."

A quick leap and he was on the desk. As he pulled off the cover, I scrambled backward. I got about five feet before my shoulders hit the sides, stopping me. While I struggled to back up, he peered into the shaft and smiled, his teeth glinting in the dark.

"I do believe you've backed yourself into a corner."

I wriggled, but the shaft had narrowed, and the more I moved, the tighter I wedged myself in.

"Are you going to tell me who you work for?" he said.

"I already did," I snarled.

"And I told you, I know better." His voice was calm, conversational, no trace of the cold fury from earlier. "You're obviously a bright young woman, and quite capable of thinking on your feet, as you proved earlier, so why you insist on sticking to this story—"

"Don't bother. I know who I work for, and nothing you say is going to make me second-guess that—or betray them."

He lifted his hand to his mouth and rubbed it, his gaze searching mine.

"You didn't kill that security guard, did you?" he said.

"Kill—!" I gritted my teeth. "We both know who—and what—killed him, so don't try pinning that on me."

"That spot on your dress. I suppose you'll tell me it isn't blood."

I snorted. “It’s the marinara sauce from the damn mussels you threw at me in the buffet line.”

“I threw —?”

He rubbed his mouth and growled. Or I thought it was a growl, until I saw his eyes dancing and realized he was laughing.

“All right. Here.” He reached into the shaft. “Come on out of there. I believe we both have a problem, and we’d best set about resolving it before your ‘associates’ arrive.”

“You really think I’m a fool, don’t you?”

He tilted his head, as if considering it. “A fool? Young, yes. Reckless, yes. Naïve, probably. But foolish? No. Not foolish. You—”

A sound from the hall. A door opening, then closing. He swiveled, his eyes narrowing as if tracking something I couldn’t hear. His gaze shot to the door handle and he mouthed a silent oath.

“Couldn’t lock it, could you?” I said. “That’s the problem with breaking things. They tend to stay broken.”

He shushed me, grabbed the vent cover, and knocked it back into place. Then he peered through the slats and whispered, “If you want to find out whether I’m lying—and I think you do—stay there and stay quiet.”



7

Marsten jumped off the desk and was halfway to the door when it opened. Two men strode in, guns in hand. Part of the council security force. I recognized both from other operations.

I crawled forward, ready to push open the vent. Then I stopped, palms against the cover. I didn’t need to eavesdrop to know Karl Marsten was full of shit. I heard the web of lies he’d spun when I’d first confronted him with the theft. He’d say anything to get out of this—to use me to get out of it. Yet there was reason to stay up here, hidden and silent, the perfect position to watch Marsten, and make sure he didn’t try anything. Or that’s what I told myself.

A man strolled in. Mid-thirties, average height and slightly built, with light brown hair and a delicate, almost feminine face. Tristan, my council contact.

“Ah, Karl,” he said. “I didn’t know you were a patron of the arts.”

“TristanRobard ,”Marsten said. “I’d say I should have known, but I’d be lying. After the last time, I thought you’d have the sense to leave me alone. I guess I overestimated you.”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed.

“I should give you credit, though,”Marsten continued. “You have quite a clever setup here.And your young agent. Well done. A beautiful young woman lays the most irresistible traps and, it seems, even I’m not immune.” He paused. “Aren’t you going to ask where she is?”

“Not terribly worried.”

Marstensmiled. “Oh, but you should be.The one problem with using beautiful young women as bait? They make equally irresistible hostages.”

“So you have her.”

AsMarsten nodded, I opened my mouth to call out and let Tristan know I was safe—

Tristan smiled.“As I said, not terribly worried.”

I blinked, but shook it off. Of course Tristan would say that. He was a skilled negotiator. He wouldn’t letMarsten know he had leverage.

“I don’t think your superiors will approve of that attitude,”Marsten said. “Oh, but your superiors have nothing to do with this, do they? This is personal.A little boy lashing out because the big bad wolf embarrassed him.”

Tristan’s jaw set.

“I didn’t embarrass you, Tristan,”Marsten continued. “You did it to yourself. You offered me a job. I turned it down—respectfully and politely. But that wasn’t good enough, because you’d already promised them I’d do it. If I refused, you’d need to explain that you’d overreached, and there was no way you were doing that, so you came after me. I was happy to let the matter rest—a rejected business proposition, no cause for animosity—but you came after me.That was your mistake.”

Tristangive a tight laugh.“My mistake? You’re the one being held at gunpoint, and you’re talking about my mistake?Delusional to the end.”

Marstenonly shrugged.“If you say so.”

Marstenstepped forward, as if ready to go with them. Then he stopped.

“I’ll suppose you’ll want me to tell you where I hid that security guard you had killed. Backup plan, I presume?”

Tristan said nothing, only reached for his cell phone.Marsten’s gaze flicked to the vent shaft, then back to Tristan.

“So you didn’t trust your girl to do the job. If she failed, you’d still have a mauled security guard, found at the scene of a jewel theft, a little tale you could take to the interracial council.”

Tristan only smiled, gaze still down as he checked messages on the phone. "I think the Pack would be more interested in that story."

"Ah, of course. The werewolf Pack. A clever plan, and one that might have worked... if I hadn't been part of the Pack myself for the past two years."

Tristan looked up.

Marsten laughed. "Not very good at doing your homework, are you? That's obvious from that preposterous story you told the girl. Working as an agent for the interracial council? I'm sure Aaron, Paige, Adam, and the other delegates will be thrilled to know they have a team of secret agents working on their behalf."

Marsten caught Tristan's look and smiled. "Surprised I know their names? Your story probably works much better on those who don't know the delegates personally. I could toss a few more names at you, including the werewolves, but I doubt you'd recognize them, and they wouldn't appreciate me filling that void for you."

He paused, head tilted, feigning deep thought. "Oh, but I do have another name, one you might find infinitely more interesting. You know who Paige Winter-bourne's husband is, I presume. You can't possibly be that out of touch."

Tristan stiffened.

"Ah, you do know. A very nice young man. I did some work for him last year. Quite pleasant." Marsten frowned. "I hear his father isn't always so pleasant, though. A decent employer, I'm sure... unless he finds out one of his employees has been building his own little spy network behind his back."

"I haven't been doing anything behind Benicio's back. He knows all about my initiative. And he's very impressed."

"Oh? So this is a Cabal-sanctioned hit? Funny, I could've sworn it smelled like personal revenge. Well, what do I know? A Cabal kills a Pack werewolf... that shouldn't cause too much trouble. Or I suppose it won't if the Cabal doesn't know about it."

Tristan waved to the guards. "Get him out of here."

He turned, and Marsten started to follow. Then one of the guards spoke up.

"Sir? What about the girl?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about her," Marsten said. "She's quite resourceful. I'm sure she'll get herself free, if she hasn't already. But the security guard? Now that's a problem. You should—"

Tristan turned sharply. "Hope's still alive?"

"Is that her name? Of course she's alive. You didn't think I'd—" Marsten shook his head. "I suppose, considering who I'm talking to, I shouldn't need to ask. Oddly enough, I find the best hostages are the live ones. Yes, Hope is fine and, as I said, will almost certainly free herself, so there's no need—"

“Where is she?”

“The question is: where’s the dead guard? The girl can take care of herself. That guard, sadly, is beyond—”

“Where is she?”

Marsten paused and rubbed his chin, as if realizing he wasn’t going to talk his way out of handing me over. I’m sure he had some self-interested reason for not wanting to do so, but I was grateful for the effort nonetheless. I didn’t know how I’d face Tristan, knowing the truth.

Oh God...the truth.

My stomach heaved. I’ve been tricked. The whole time I’d been up here, listening as the facts rolled out, I’d processed them without absorbing them. Without letting myself absorb them—

“She’s in a janitor’s closet,” Marsten said. “Tied with her own handcuffs, which I thought was appropriate. I can take you there—”

“You’ll wait here. I’ll come back for you when I’m finished with her.”

Finished with me? What did he mean by—?

I pushed the thought away and, as Marsten gave Tristan directions to the closet I’d used earlier, I scrambled for an escape plan. Yes, escape. Maybe I was being paranoid, and Tristan had only meant he’d return when he’d finished freeing me. Yet Marsten’s life was in danger. And I’d put it there.

Tristan left with one guard. When he was gone, the second one backed up to the desk and, gun still trained on Marsten, slid his rear onto it.

I eased the vent cover out. Marsten’s gaze shot up, but he looked away before the guard noticed, then flicked his fingers, telling me to stay where I was.

As quietly as I could, I moved the cover into the shaft, and laid it down beside me. Marsten’s gaze met mine and he shook his head, in case the waving hadn’t been understood.

When I grabbed the edge of the vent, he threw me one last glare, then cleared his throat.

“You do work for the Cortezes, I presume,” he said to the guard, his voice loud in the small room.

The guard said nothing.

I gauged the distance between us, then pulled my legs forward, moving into a crouch.

“I’ve heard the Cabals frown on this,” Marsten continued. “Employees taking outside jobs. Yes, I know, you’re working for a Cabal AVP, so one could argue it’s not truly moonlighting, but I suspect Mr. Cortez wouldn’t be so quick to see the distinction.”

I braced myself on the edge of the opening.

Marsten continued. “An AVP using Cabal resources for a personal vendetta? I’ll wager Mr. Cortez

would like to know about that, and would richly reward—”

I jumped. Marsten leaped to the side, out of the range of the gun. I hit the guard in the back. A noomph, and he fell forward. Marsten snatched the gun. Then he tossed it to me. The move caught me off-guard, and I scrambled for it but was too late, and my hand knocked it flying. The gun ricocheted onto the desk, and tumbled down behind it.

Marsten grabbed the guard around the neck. The guard flailed. Marsten swung him off his feet and bashed his head against the filing cabinet. As the guard's body went slack, Marsten looked over at me, still crouched on the desk, staring.

“Don't worry,” he said. “I didn't kill him.”

The last licks of chaos rippled through me. I shuddered, eyes rolling in rapture. Marsten's brows arched. I turned the shudder into a more appropriate shiver of fear.

“You're sure?” I said. “He looks—”

“He's fine.” Marsten knelt beside the guard as he pulled my handcuffs from his pocket. “Though I do hate to waste these on him.” Another dig into his pocket and he tossed me my scarf. “Since you did such a good job tying this earlier...”

We secured the guard. Then Marsten waved me to the door as he double-checked my knot. My fingers brushed the knob, but Marsten yanked me back.

“I was going to look first,” I said.

“You don't need to. I can hear them.” He looked around. “You take the vent.” He grabbed my arm and propelled me to the desk. “Go headfirst this time, and you'll be able to squeeze through.”

“After you,” I said.

“No time. Just—”

“After you.”

He gave me a look, as if contemplating the chances of stuffing me in the shaft himself, then, with a soft growl, hopped onto the desk. He grabbed the edge of the shaft, and easily swung himself up and in, then paused in the opening, his rear sticking out.

“It's very narrow,” he said. “I'm not sure I can—”

“Try,” I said, and gave him a shove.

He wriggled through, then reached back between his legs, and helped haul me up. The door clicked. No time to replace the cover. I pulled my legs in, scrunched down on my hands and knees, and followed him.



8

In the movies, ventilation shafts are the escape route of choice for heroes trapped in industrial buildings. They're clean and roomy and soundproof, and will take you anywhere you want to go all, like a Habitat 67 system for the beleaguered protagonist on the run. I don't know where Hollywood buys their ventilation shafts, but they don't use the same supplier as the museum.

We crept along, shoulders whacking the sides with every few steps. The sound reverberated through the shaft. I could feel skin sloughing off my knees as they scraped over the rivets, and imagined a snail's trail of blood ribboning behind me. And the dust? I sneezed at least five times, and managed to whack my head against the top with each one.

"Breathe through your mouth," Marsten whispered, his voice echoing down the dark tunnel.

Sure, that helped the sneezing, but then I was tasting dust, as it coated my tongue. Would it kill the museum to spring for duct cleaning now and then?

I resumed crawling, and smacked my face into Marsten's ass... again.

"Warn me when you stop," I muttered... again.

A low chuckle. "At the next branch you can take the lead, then you won't have that problem. I will... but I suspect I won't complain about it."

"You won't have an excuse. Werewolves have enhanced night vision."

"Mine's been a little rusty lately."

"You seem to be doing just fine." I head-butted him in the rear. "Now move."

After that, we did switch positions—three times—as we ran into three dead ends.

"I'm taking the next exit," Marsten said on the fourth about-face.

"Not arguing."

The next vent we hit, he hit, driving his fist into it and knocking it clattering to the floor. Guess I wasn't the only one getting claustrophobic.

Marsten crawled out. I started to, then my dress snagged on a rivet, and I tumbled out headfirst, floor flying up to meet me—



Marsten grabbed me and swung me onto my feet. I regained my balance and took a deep breath of clean—reasonably clean—air.

“Well, there goes two thousand dollars,” he muttered, looking down at himself.

Both elbows of his jacket were torn, and the front of his shirt was streaked with dirt, as were his face, hands, and pretty much every exposed inch of skin. Cobwebs added gray streaks to his dark hair. His shoes were scuffed, as were his pant knees. While he surveyed the damage, he looked so mournful I had to stifle a laugh. Well, I tried to stifle it. Kind of.

“Don’t snicker,” he said. “You’re just as bad.”

“But I don’t care.”

As he brushed himself off, I looked around. We were in some kind of laboratory, with microscopes and steel tables and what looked like pots of bones in the middle of being de-fleshed. At any other time, curiosity would have compelled me to take a closer look. Tonight, only one thing caught my attention: the exit door.

As I strode to it, Marsten grabbed my arm.

“You can’t go out like that,” he said.

“Oh, please. My life may be in danger. You really think I care how I look? You stay here and pretty up, if you like, but I’m bolting for the nearest exit.”

His grip tightened as I tried to pull away. I yanked harder. He squeezed harder.

I glared at him. “That—”

“Hurts. Yes, I know. But you’ll hurt a lot worse if Tristan catches you.”

“We don’t know—”

“That he plans to kill you? He wasn’t heading to that closet to congratulate you on a job well done, Hope. He wants me dead, and to do it safely, without risking his own life on the repercussions, he needs to clip off his loose ends. That includes you and, later, those guards.”

“Kill four people because you embarrassed him?”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“What did—?”

“Whatever I did, it came after he retaliated because I turned down his job offer. It doesn’t matter. To a man like Tristan Robard, killing four people to avenge his ego is perfectly reasonable.”

He studied my face, then shook his head. “You don’t believe me? Fine. But at least give me the benefit of the doubt by not strolling out that door and testing my theory. You don’t think he’ll have all the exits covered?”

“Uh...yes, of course, but there are plenty of other exits. I know my way around—”

“Good. But if we start wandering the halls looking like this, we’re going to raise alarms. If not Tristan and his men, then a security guard or a concerned guest—”

“Who will cause a fuss, which will alert Tristan. Okay. Let’s pretty up then.”

Marstendeclared his tux jacket a write-off. No big deal. It was nearing midnight, and jackets and ties would be coming off anyway as the party wore down. Under it, his shirt needed only a brisk wipe down. My dress had actually fared quite well, with only a rip under the arm and a smear of blood on the skirt. Take off my nylons, wipe down my dusty shoes and bloody knees with a damp paper towel, and I was fine...below the neck anyway. There were no mirrors, and my distorted reflection in the stainless steel table wasn’t very helpful.

“Here,” Marsten said. “I’ll get your face if you can clean mine.”

He wet a fresh paper towel in the lab sink, and walked over to me. I lifted my face. He raised the cloth to my cheek, then paused to brush cobwebs from my hair. When he finished, he smiled, took a stray strand, and wrapped it around his finger. As he did, I could see, out of the corner of my eye, that it was more than a “stray strand.” It was a huge hunk of hair, which thirty minutes ago had been battened down in an upswept twist.

I groaned. “How bad is it?”

“It’s a bit...tousled. Very sexy.”

I lifted my hand to my hair and swore. At least half of it had come free. Beyond repair without a brush and a mirror...and a half-hour of styling time. I yanked out a handful of bobby pins, and gave my hair a shake, letting it fall down my back.

“Mmmm...very sexy.”

“Down, boy. We’re fleeing for our lives here, remember.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “Any better?”

A wolfish grin. “Much. You look like you just crawled out of bed.”

“Damn it—not the look I’m aiming for.”

He caught my hands as I tried to smooth out the damage. “It’s fine. Tousled, yes, but it looks intentional.”

He put his hand under my chin and lifted the wet cloth again. Then he paused again.

“What now?” I said.

A low chuckle. “I was just thinking I’ve never seen a woman who looked so beautiful in dirt and cobwebs. Trouble suits you.”

“You have no idea,” I muttered.

“No, I’m sure I don’t, but I certainly hope I get the chance to find out.” He brushed his finger over my cheek.

“Fleeing for our lives, remember? Let’s save the flattery and soulful gazing until after we escape.”

“Is that a date?”

“Date!” I jumped so fast I knocked the paper towel from his hand. “Sorry. My date. Douglas. He’ll be looking for me. I need to tell him—”

“Tell him what? Don’t worry, I was held captive by a werewolf but I’m okay now...except for the deranged Cabal sorcerer on my tail?”

I glared up at him. “I’m serious. He’ll be worried—”

“Let him worry. From what I saw, it’s only...what, a first, maybe second date, and you didn’t seem very enamored—”

“He’s a nice guy. Kind of. He’s not evil.”

Marsten’s brow shot up. “That’s your dating criterion?”

“You know what I mean. He was worried, and I can’t just walk out on him. Plus, if my mother finds out I abandoned the guy she set me up with—”

“Your mother sets you up blind dates? With guys like that?” The corners of his mouth twitched. “She doesn’t like you very much, does she?”

“My mother—” I bit back at the rest, and started again. “My mother is just fine, which is why I won’t embarrass her like this. I do that enough as it is.”

His face softened. “All right. But, while I do understand, you’re forgetting—”

“The whole ‘fleeing for our lives’ part?” I took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’ll have to—I’ll work something out later. Apologize to my mother. Make it up to Douglas...”

“I don’t think you owe Douglas anything.” He paused. “If we need to go past the party, you can tell him. Make an excuse to leave, and call it even.”

I nodded and we finished getting ready.

I was picking cobwebs out of Marsten’s hair when I remembered something else.

“The gun,” I said. “I should’ve grabbed the gun.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. In my experience, guns are only good for threatening. In combat? I’m as likely to shoot my own foot. Best to avoid them altogether.”

“Easy to say when you have super strength, super senses, fangs, claws...”

He glanced up at me as I plucked out another cobweb. “You are... What’s the word they use? A supernatural, aren’t you?”

“Sure, but not all of us come with built-in defense mechanisms. Why do you think I carry a gun?”

“So what is your—?”

“Speaking of my gun, it’s also still back there, in my purse... with my bracelet. Damn it.”

“The bracelet—an heirloom, I presume.”

“So you didn’t mistake it for a ‘cheap bauble’ after all. And you still didn’t try to nick it. I’m shocked.”

He glowered as he got to his feet.

“What?” I said. “I’ve offended you? I should be ashamed of myself. Those pieces in your pocket just fell in there, didn’t they? Damn museum displays. Stuff just drops off them—”

“Point taken,” he said as he stood and smoothed his hair. “But, no, your bracelet isn’t at risk. Valuable or not, it’s worth more to you than to me. These—” He reached into his jacket and transferred the jewels to his pants pocket. “Worth something only to an insurance company. Which I realize is no excuse but—” He shrugged. “As for your bracelet, considering it’s with your gun, and you’d probably feel safer carrying that, I suggest we make that office our first stop, presuming Tristan has moved on.”

I shook my head. “Yes, I want it back, but I have to trust my purse will still be there when all this is done.”

“I’ll make sure I get it for you later.”

Later? I hoped that didn’t mean he planned to come back and steal something else. No, he’d been leaving when I’d first stopped him.

He took my elbow and propelled me toward the door. “Let’s go before they find us.”

It took a few minutes to get my bearings. The laboratories weren’t part of your typical museum visit and thus were woefully lacking in directional signs. I knew we were on the first floor, which helped... except that most of the sprawling first floor was offices and labs, which didn’t help. Nor did the lack of windows. I’d never noticed it before, but, the building was window-free. Great for security and artifact preservation; not so great for those needing to end their visit in a hurry.

“There,” I whispered to Marsten. “That’s the media room. I was there last month for a story.”

“You’re a journalist?”

I nodded, not mentioning I’d been covering the story of an “ancient curse” that a former worker swore was responsible for his herpes outbreak. That thought pinged another. Did all this mean I’d never cover

another silly curse story?

An unexpected pang of panic followed the thought. I liked what I did. Once I'd worked past the "I'm too good for this" phase, I'd genuinely enjoyed tracking down UFOs and Hell Spawn sightings, far more than I'd ever liked covering drive-by shootings and political scandals. But if I wasn't working for the council and wouldn't be plugging supernatural leaks...

Had I ever been suppressing leaks? Helping my fellow supernaturals survive under the cover of secrecy? Or had I just been covering up a Cabal's messes?

My gut twisted. Oh God, what had I done? I thought I'd been—

Stop it. Not now.

I looked up at Marsten. "We're in the northeast quadrant, closest to the main doors, which I know we can't use, but there must be an emergency exit—"

"There's one along the west side, probably fifty feet from the front."

"Perfect. I'll watch for exit signs; you listen for company."

We found the exit. As Marsten strode toward it, I called, "It might trigger an alarm."

"A chance I'm willing to take."

I stayed at his heels, eager to be out of this place—

Every hair on my body leaped to attention, and I stopped short, lips parting in an involuntary hiss. Then I grabbed Marsten by the back of the shirt.

"It's trapped," I said.

"I said—"

"Not alarm-trapped. Trap-trapped. Magically. They must have a witch or a sorcerer—" I stopped myself. "Earlier, you said something about a Cabal sorcerer. You meant Tristan, didn't you?"

As Marsten nodded, I winced. Another unforgivable faux pas. Tristan had let on he was half-demon, but I'd never seen a display of his powers or even asked what those powers were. If I'd known he was a sorcerer, I would have been suspicious of his "working for the council" story.

Witches led the interracial council, and witches and sorcerers had as little as possible to do with one another. The Cabals were the great sorcerer achievement—powerful corporations staffed by supernaturals and run by sorcerers. I knew little about Cabals—every half-demon I knew stayed away from them and had warned me to do the same, but if I'd realized what Tristan was, I'd have had a good idea who I'd really been working for.

"What kind of trap is it?" Marsten asked.

I shook my head. “No idea. I can just tell that it’s there, and it’s trouble.”

When I caught his frown, I said, “That’s my so-called power. Chaos detection. Like you said, trouble suits me.”

“Your ‘power’? So you’re a half-demon?”

When I nodded, his frown grew. “I thought—admittedly, my knowledge of demons is next to none, but I was under the impression that they were all chaotic. They feed off chaos or some such thing.”

“Demons, yes. Half-demons, no. Half-demons inherit their father’s special power without his affinity for chaos. Lucky me, I’m the one type that gets the reverse.”

I walked toward the door and peered at it. “All I can tell you about this is that someone cast a spell on it, and I know as much about spells as you do about demons. It might just alert Tristan...or it could immolate us instantaneously.”

“Having no great desire to end the evening in flames, I say we don’t test it.”

“Agreed.” I paused. “I’m sure, then, that he’ll have the other unguarded exits trapped, too. So now what?”

“We’ll skip the ‘fleeing’ part and revert to the second mode of defense: hiding. We’ll start by getting that gun for you, then find a safe place and try to outlast them. Eventually, someone is bound to realize a security guard is missing and sound the alarm.”

“Making it too hot for Tristan to stick around.”

“Or hot enough for us to escape out the front door in the confusion.”

When we reached the hall adjoining the one with the offices, Marsten made me wait while he scouted. When he came back, I could tell the news wasn’t good.

“Tristan left a guard behind,” he whispered. “Either in case we come back or to forestall discovery of the crime scene.”

“Maybe they’re moving the guard’s body. Getting rid of it.”

He shook his head. “Tristan will want it found eventually. That’s his backup plan.”

“But you said—” I stopped. “That was a lie, wasn’t it? About being part of the werewolf Pack.”

“Not...entirely. I’m what you might call a quasi-member. But the Alpha—the Pack leader—knows I’m not a man-eater. My reputation in that respect is spotless.”

“So why are you worried?”

“Some members—I’ve done things, in the past, to the Pack and while I’ve had a change of heart in that regard...”

“The ink on your reprieve is still wet, and you can’t afford to test it yet.”

“Exactly.”

“Which is why you tried persuading Tristan to take care of the body.”

“No, I was trying to divert his attention from you.” He paused. “But yes, admittedly, I had a secondary goal in mind.”

“Okay, so why don’t we look after it now? Take out Tristan’s guard, and we can move the body someplace safer, to dispose of it later, plus we’ll have my gun.”

One side of his mouth twitched. “For an amateur, you’re remarkably good at this sort of thing.”

“It’s in my genes, remember?”

“But I suppose you want the guard disabled, not killed.”

“Preferably. I’m not ready to completely give in to the dark side yet.”

His smile broke through. “Let’s see what we can do then.”



9

I leaned against the wall, closed my eyes, and focused. The guard was a supernatural, probably half-demon. After a moment, I picked up his vibe, but it was too far away to be in the first office, with the body.

“He’s in the second one, isn’t he?” I whispered as Marsten returned. “The room we escaped from.”

Marsten’s brows shot up.

“Supernatural radar comes with my package.”

“Oh? But you didn’t detect me earlier.” He smiled. “Not even when you ran right into me.”

“I did. That’s why I ran into you.” I shook off the urge to explain. “I’m still practicing. The package doesn’t come with a user’s manual.”

“Well, it worked fine this time. He is in the second room. Replacing the vent cover. Cleaning up, it seems.”

“Good, then let’s—”

“I’ll look after him. You stay—”

He caught my expression and breathed the softest sigh. “Just stay clear then. As you said, I’m better equipped for this. Provide backup if you want but—”

“Don’t turn this into a hostage situation.”

“Exactly.”

Marsten started to leave, then wheeled back to me. “He’s coming.”

He held his finger to my lips before I could answer. His eyes narrowed as he tracked the footsteps. A moment passed, then he shoved me in the opposite direction, prodding me to the next adjoining hall. We barely made it around the corner before the guard stepped into the hall we’d vacated.

Marsten pressed me against the wall, still listening, body against mine as if he expected the guard to veer around the corner and open fire.

The footfalls grew softer. The guard was leaving. That would certainly make getting into the office easier.

Marsten started to pull away from me, then froze.

“Was it okay?” a muffled woman’s voice asked. She giggled. “I’m kind of tipsy—”

“It was great, babe.”

Marsten winced as he recognized the privacy-seeking couple from earlier. Guess they’d found what they were looking for.

A door opened less than ten feet away. Marsten swore and looked toward the corner, but it was too late to run—we’d risk being seen by the departing guard. But if we stayed here, the couple would recognize him, and if the man got belligerent again, the guard would hear—

Marsten’s mouth dropped to mine. He pushed me up against the wall, his hands wrapping in my hair and pulling it up to shield the sides of our faces. As he kissed me, I felt a stab of disappointment. His kissing was excellent, of course. Polished and perfect, just like the rest of him. For most women an excellent kisser is cause for celebration. But me? I prefer the ardent gropes and kisses of an enthusiastic, if less experienced, lover.

Behind us, the man laughed. “Looks like we aren’t the only ones looking for a little diversion. There’s an empty office right over there, guys.”

Marsten raised his hand in thanks. The couple moved on. I let the kiss continue for five more seconds, then pulled away.

“They’re gone,” I said.



Marsten frowned, as if surprised—and disappointed—that I'd noticed. I tugged my hair from his hands.

“Okay, coast clear,” I said. “Let's go.”

He let out a small laugh. “I see I need to brush up on my kissing.”

“No, you have that down pat.”

“She says with all the excitement of a teacher grading a math quiz...”

“A-plus. Now let's move. Before someone else comes along.”

We reached the office safely. This time, the door was locked, but Tristan hadn't trigger-spelled it. He must have assumed we wouldn't come back. The door lock was only for snooping partygoers or privacy-seeking couples.

Marsten gave the handle a sharp twist, and it snapped open.

“I'll find my purse,” I said as we hurried inside. “You pull the body out.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I flipped on the light and looked around. No obvious sign of my purse. It must have fallen—

“It's gone,” Marsten said.

“No, I'm sure it just fell—” I glanced up to see him leaning over the desk. “You meant the body?”

A grim nod. He pulled the desk farther from the wall, then glanced at me. “Find your purse. I'll find this.”

He leaped onto the desk, hopped into the gap behind it, bent and disappeared. I resumed my purse search. I looked under the desk, beside it, between the desk and filing cabinet—every place my purse could have fallen when Marsten yanked me off the desk earlier.

Marsten popped back over the desk, started to crouch, then noticed me watching.

“What?” I said when he paused.

“I have to sniff the floor.”

“Then sniff the floor.”

Again, he paused, as if trying to think of a dignified way to do it. I sighed, and turned my back to give him privacy.

A moment later, he said, “Nothing. They must've carried him out.”

“Meaning you can't pick up the trail. Not of the security guard, at least. But what about Tristan's guard?”

“Questionable. I can try, but it’s difficult to do in human form and without getting on the floor, close to the scent.”

“Which is a whole lot tougher to do in a semi-public place.”

He motioned for me to keep looking, and pitched in, checking the other side of the room.

He continued, “I’ll still try tracking. I know a few tricks.”

“Ah, so you did get your user’s manual.”

“Most werewolves do.”

“Oh, right. Most of you are hereditary. So your father...?”

“Raised me and taught me everything I needed to know about following a scent.” A quick grin. “Although there was usually a diamond or two at the other end.”

“Your father raised you to be a thief?”

His gaze chilled. “My father raised me to have a career suitable for a non-Pack werewolf who can’t stay in one place without being roused by the Pack or his ‘fellow’ mutts.”

“The Pack doesn’t let—?”

He cut me off with a wave, his anger receding. “It’s not like that anymore. Not entirely. But in my father’s day, a nomadic life was a must, and thieving skills helped.”

“Tell you what, then. You don’t slam my mom for setting me up on blind dates, and I won’t slam your dad for teaching you to steal.”

He laughed. “Fair enough. No jabs against well-meaning—if occasionally misguided—parents. As for your purse...”

“It’s gone, isn’t it? Tristan or his guard found it when they were cleaning up, and they took it to erase any sign of me being here.”

“Most likely. As for the body, though—”

“Billy?”

The voice echoed down the hall. We both froze and turned toward the closed door.

“Billy? You down here?” Then softer. “Damn kid.”

It was a security guard, looking for his dead colleague. Marsten waved for me to get behind the desk, and we both jumped on it just as the door opened.

“You!” the guard said.

A flashlight beam pinged off our backs. Marsten slipped his arm around me in an awkward, interrupted embrace. We looked over our shoulders to see the same older security guard who'd "helped" me open the janitor's closet. He speared Marsten with a glower.

"Get lost on your way to the bathroom again, sir?" he said. "This is bigger than that storage closet, but I'm sure the young lady would be more comfortable in a hotel. There are two right down the road."

"Uh, oh, yes, of course," Marsten stammered. "We weren't—that is to say, we wanted to look around the museum, see the sights—"

"Oh, I know what sights you wanted to see, sir." He waved us off the desk. "You're a long way from the dinosaur exhibits."

We complied, getting off the desk and pretending to straighten up. The guard continued to glare at Marsten, as if disgusted that a man wealthy enough to afford tickets to this gala couldn't spring for a bed.

"There's a Holiday Inn three doors down," he said as we walked past. "But I'm sure the lady would prefer the Embassy, which is—"

A movement at the door stopped him. One of Tristan's guards strode in. He'd swung around the right side of the door, meaning he hadn't noticed the security guard against the right wall. His attention—and his gun—were on us.

"I thought I heard voices," he said to us as the security guard stepped up behind him, surprisingly silent for a man of his size. "Good thing I came back. Tristan will—"

The security guard pressed the barrel of his gun between the younger man's shoulder blades.

"Didn't see me, huh?" the old guard chortled as the other man stiffened. "A word of advice, boy? Always check the room before you walk into it. Now, lower that gun—"

The younger man spun, gun going up, finger on the trigger. The security guard's eyes widened and he froze. Whatever ex-cop reflexes he had were buried under years of chasing kids off dinosaur displays and foiling amateur thieves.

The old guard stumbled back, as if forgetting he still held a gun. Marsten threw himself at Tristan's guard's back. I wish I could say I did the same. God, how I wish I could. But the truth was that I just stood there, shocked into impotence, like the old guard. It all happened in a heartbeat, not even enough time for me to feel the chaos rising, and not enough time for Marsten to make that five-foot leap. The young guard spun on the old, and fired.

Marsten hit the shooter in the side, knocking him away even as the silencer's spfitt still hung in the air, even as the old guard was still falling, bloody hole in his chest, even as I was reeling backward from the chaos explosion.

I hit the floor and, for a moment, could only lie there, system shocked by the high-voltage jolt. If there was any pleasure in that shock, I didn't feel it. I lay there gasping, mind blank. Then another shot snapped me from my shock and I leaped up, limbs flailing as if I'd been jolted again. Marsten was crouched over Tristan's guard, who lay in a heap, neck twisted, eyes open and staring.

“The shot,” I said. “Did he hit you—?”

Marsten waved to a bullet hole in the wall, but didn't speak, just stayed crouched with his back to me, his breath coming in sharp, short pants.

I ran to the old security guard. Even as my fingers went to his neck, I knew he was dead. The bloody spot on his breast now covered half his shirt, and was still growing.

As I looked down at him, I saw him again sneaking up behind Tristan's guard, eyes dancing as he imagined himself retelling the story of how he'd single-handedly apprehended an armed man. Again I heard his “see, I've still got it” chortle as he put his gun to the young man's back. The hair on my arms rose, and I rubbed them, trying to chase away the chill, unable to pull my gaze from his body.

My first murder. My first witness to death. And, only an hour earlier, peering behind this desk, I'd seen my first dead body outside a funeral home.

Before tonight I'd never even seen a dead body, and yet I'd fancied myself some kind of secret agent. What had Marsten said when I'd asked if he thought me a fool? Naïve, probably, but not a fool. Probably naïve? Dear God, could I have been anymore naïve? I'd pulled a gun on a werewolf thief. I was lucky Marsten hadn't done what he just did to Tristan's guard, and snapped my neck.

“I need to hide the bodies,” he said, his voice soft. “You can wait in the next room if you'd like.”

“No, I'll clean—” I took a deep breath. “I'll clean up.”

That's what I did. Cleaned up the crime scene. When I realized, really realized what I was doing, my blood went cold.

Oh-ho, so now you're worried. All this time, playing secret agent, and now that you're actually doing something illegal, you get scared.

I chased the thought back. Yes, I was scared, and yes, I'd been the biggest damn fool—

Enough of that.

As I wiped away evidence of a crime, and watched Marsten hide the bodies in the ventilation shaft—another handy vent shaft—all I could think about was what would happen to my family if I was caught. The shame, the embarrassment, the humiliation, but most of all the “why didn't we do more to help” bewilderment and grief. And what could I say? “No, no, you got it all wrong. See, I thought I was helping supernaturals with this interracial council, but really I was working for this sorcerer corporation, and then this werewolf...” I loved my family way too much to inflict that explanation on them.

“It's clean,” Marsten murmured behind my head. When I tried to give the tile one last rub, he caught my hand. “It's clean, Hope.”

“Out damned spot,” I said, trying to smile.

“There's no blood on your hands.”

“I wouldn't be so sure of that,” I said softly.

I thought of all the cases I'd solved, the "criminal" supernaturals I'd turned in. I could see that one witch, so terrified she couldn't even cast a spell, begging me—begging me—not to hand her over, swearing it wasn't that council who wanted her but a Cabal—

"Hope?" Marsten grasped my shoulder, his grip hard enough to push back the vision.

"Sorry," I murmured. "Just... ghosts."

"Whatever you did, you thought you were—"

"Doesn't matter, does it? It's actions that count, not intentions. Ignorance isn't an excuse. That's what my ethics prof always said. Ignorance isn't—"

I champed down on my lip hard enough to draw blood, then pushed myself to my feet. "So no gun, no body, but one guard down." I paused. "Three guards, I should—" I shook it off. "One of Tristan's guards. One goal achieved out of three. Not doing so hot, are we? So what's next? Resume the plan and find a place to hide?"

He nodded. "We'll try that."

That didn't sound terribly optimistic but, considering our luck so far, I can't say I blamed him.



10

We discussed options and settled on hiding in one of the less "sexy" exhibits—those displaying artifacts unlikely to interest a bored partygoer conducting his own off-limits tour. The ceramics or textiles galleries seemed like the safest bets.

Both required passing the party, but we would take the back hall around it, rather than walk through. Seeing two people die had convinced me this wasn't the time to worry about my abandoned date.

We hurried into the hall skirting the gala, then veered left. We jogged through the looming skeletons of the dinosaur exhibit, and were crossing to the Greco-Roman wing when I picked up the twang of a supernatural vibe.

I grabbed Marsten's arm and told him. He listened for footsteps, then inhaled the scents.

"Tristan and the other guard," he said. "Coming right where we'll be going. Is there another—"

He stopped and answered his question by looking at the open doors down the hall. A quartet of men

lounge in the doorway, ties and jackets off. Beyond them were more gaggles of partygoers.

“We could go back,” I said.

“Too late,” he said, and steered me toward the party.

“We’ll cut straight across to the main exit,” I said as we moved. “From there, the first left will take us to ceramics.”

We squeezed past the drunken quartet who were ill-inclined—or too unsteady—to move out of our way. Once inside, I motioned to our goal across the room. We were passing the buffet table when I caught sight of Douglas, less than ten feet away, still talking to the Bairds.

Seeing me, Douglas blinked, and looked beside him. Figures. Here I was, worrying that he’d been searching for me, and he probably hadn’t even noticed I’d been gone.

Marsten reached for my arm, to steer me away from Douglas, but I waved him back and veered onto a new course myself. Douglas only lifted his brows in polite question. When I gestured to the buffet table, he smiled, nodded, and turned back to the Bairds.

“Don’t mind me,” I muttered. “I’m just passing through, killers in hot pursuit. No, no, it’s okay. You go back to whatever you were doing. I’m fine.”

Beside me, Marsten chuckled. “Your mother knows how to pick them, doesn’t she?”

As I rolled my eyes, Marsten’s gaze shot back to the door, and I saw Tristan and the other guard brush past the drunken quartet. At that moment, Douglas turned and lifted a finger, motioning me over. Probably wanted me to grab him something from the buffet.

When I hesitated, trying to gesture back, Marsten grabbed the back of my dress and nearly yanked me off my feet. I backpedaled as fast as I could to keep from tripping, as Marsten dragged me into a large group of people and out of Douglas’s sight.

“He’s coming,” he hissed by my ear, as I spouted apologies to the partygoers whose circle we’d invaded.

Tristan’s guard was striding around the back of the buffet table, moving as fast as he dared without calling attention to himself. How he’d seen us in the crowded room, I couldn’t imagine.

As we broke free from the group, Marsten gave me a shove, none too gently, toward the main door. With him behind me, I hurried out it, then left, toward the exhibits.

When I rounded the first corner, Marsten caught up and pushed something at me. A tuxedo jacket, which presumably he had grabbed from a chair in the gala.

“Take it,” he said when I made no move to do so. “Put it on.”

I almost said, “But I’m not cold,” an automatic response that, under the circumstances, would have made me sound like an idiot. Instead, I settled for an equally idiotic “huh?” stare.

“Your dress,” he said.

My...? Oh shit. My canary yellow dress. How had Tristan spotted us in that crowded room? Well, duh. When I'd bought this dress, I pictured myself as a glowing beacon in the black night. Now, I had my wish.

Marsten steered me through around the next corner.

"No," I said. "The ceramics are the other—"

"I know. We're circling back. He won't expect that. Now put this on."

I took the jacket as we jogged into a room of Grecian urns. The coat fell past my short skirt, and wrapped around me easily... could have wrapped around me twice. The sleeves hung past my fingertips.

"A bit big," I whispered.

"No, you're just a bit small. Now move—"

He grabbed my arm and stopped me from moving. Before I could comment, I caught the distant sound of footsteps—running footsteps, growing louder. Marsten pushed me into a gap between two stelae, and squeezed in with me.

When only one set of footfalls entered the room, Marsten's eyes narrowed, and his fingers flexed against my sides. As he tracked the steps, his face went taut and a glimmer of that icy rage I'd seen earlier seeped into his gaze.

What had Tristan said about a cornered werewolf? That they were ten times as dangerous as any other supernatural. Looking up at Marsten's face, I knew Tristan was right, and I knew why: no predator willingly accepts the position of prey.

So when Marsten's lips moved to my ear, I knew what he was going to say.

"Wait here."

I opened my mouth, but took one look at Marsten's eyes, and stopped. He was right. Things had changed since the last time he'd halfheartedly tried to keep me from following him into danger. Two men had died and I'd learned this wasn't some movie jewel heist caper. As much as I wanted to help Marsten and stop Tristan, now wasn't the time to redeem past stupidity.

So I nodded, and let him slip off into the darkness alone.

The footsteps had stopped as if our pursuer had paused to look around. Was it Tristan or his guard? I wished I could tell, but trusted Marsten's nose could. It would make a difference—facing a sorcerer versus a half-demon... presuming that's what the guard was.

I should have tried harder to figure out the guard's race when we'd been tying him up. I'd need to practice more.

Practice for what? You're not—

I stifled the voice and concentrated on listening. With the other man gone still, the room was silent, but

Marsten managed to move without breaking that silence. I could see his white shirt gliding—

His white shirt? Why hadn't I offered him the jacket? I told myself he must have known what he was doing, and prayed I was right.

Pulling the jacket tighter around me, I eased forward enough to glance out. There, about fifteen feet away, by a gilt statue of Athena, was the guard we'd originally knocked out and handcuffed. He faced the other side of the room, his profile to me...and his back to Marsten.

Marsten crept forward, his gaze fixed on the guard, managing to skirt obstacles as if by instinct. His feet rolled from heel to toe, soundless. The guard's gaze swept a hundred and eighty degrees, and I fell back, but Marsten only froze in place.

The guard took three steps, then peered around another statue. Marsten kept pace less than five feet behind, so close I half-expected the guard to feel Marsten's breath on his neck.

Marsten took one last step. He tensed, then sprang. At the last second the guard turned, too late to fire his gun, but soon enough to throw Marsten off his trajectory.

Marsten checked his leap at the last second and smacked the guard's gun arm back hard and fast. The guard let out a hiss, part pain, part rage, and dove for the gun as it spun across the room.

Marsten knocked the guard flying. The guard crashed into a vase stuffed with replica scrolls. As he reached up, sparks flew from his fingertips, and I knew his power. Fire.

The guard's hand closed around the scroll. Even as my lips were parting to shout a warning to Marsten, the paper burst into flame. The guard swung the fiery torch at Marsten, who was already in mid-leap, coming straight at him.

The scroll caught Marsten in the side of the face, and he fell back. The guard dropped the paper, now nearly ash, and dove for Marsten, his good hand going to Marsten's throat. Marsten drilled his fist into the guard's stomach. As the guard fell, he grabbed Marsten's arm, and Marsten yanked away, but I could see the guard's scorched handprint on his white sleeve.

It was then, as the two men launched into a full supernatural strength versus fire brawl, that I snapped out of my chaos intoxication and realized that I, too, had a weapon—a loaded gun lying, forgotten, less than twenty feet away.

So I left my hiding place. Instead of dashing across the open room to the guard's gun, I crept along the shadows, moving from exhibit to exhibit. While I'll admit I was worried about the guard seeing me and deciding I made an easier target, I was even more worried about Marsten seeing me out of my hidey-hole and being, if not concerned, at least distracted.

Whether Marsten could be distracted was another question. He fought with a single-minded purpose of someone who's done a lot of it. Not what I would have expected. But was I surprised? No. I'd seen that look in his eyes as the civilized skin sloughed away, and I hoped never to be on the receiving end of it again.

As the two men fought, I circled around the outside. The gun had slid under a scale model of Pompeii. I managed to get behind the low table, then stretched out on my stomach. I reached into the narrow opening until my shoulder jammed against it, then swept my hand back and forth, feeling nothing but gum



wrappers and dust.

I peered under the display table. In the dim emergency lighting, I could see the gun, its barrel pointed toward me, still inches from my fingertips. I wriggled and stretched and twisted and finally brushed the gun's barrel. Another wiggle, and I got my index finger into the lip of the barrel. Not the safest thing to do with a loaded gun, I'm sure, but I managed to tug it forward an inch or two, enough to grab it from a safer angle and pull it out.

As my hand slid around the grip, I envisioned myself leaping from behind the table, gun trained on the guard, giving Marsten the kind of distraction he could use to get the upper hand.

I crouched, steadied the gun, then jumped up—

Marsten was sitting beside the guard's prone body, surveying the burn damage to his own shirt. He looked over at me. I was poised Dirty Harry style, gun drawn, hair wild, still drowning in the oversized tux jacket. His lips twitched.

"I, uh, have the gun."

"So I see."

"And I see you have the situation, uh, under control. So I'll just..."

I let the sentence trail off as I lowered the gun and moved from behind the table, ignoring his barely stifled laughter.

"If you can stand guard, I'll hide this one," he said as I approached.

I looked down at the dead guard, and pushed back the initial stab of "did we really need to kill him?" regret and doubt. This had long passed the point of "just knock him out" solutions. We already had knocked this guard out, and handcuffed him, and he'd still come after us, ready to kill. A solid justification, but still, if I had leaped up from behind that table, what if I'd needed to do more than distract him? Could I have pulled the trigger?

You've been carrying a gun for a year, and you don't know whether you could have fired it? What did you think it was? A fashion accessory?

"Hope?"

Still crouched beside the body, Marsten touched my leg, gently prodding me back to reality.

"If you are not up to it—" he began.

"Guard duty. Got it."



11

The burning scroll hadn't triggered any firealarms, nor had the grunts and punches of combat been loud enough to bring partygoers running. AsMarsten stowed the dead guard, I concentrated onboth exits , looking, sensing, and listening. I caught a supernatural vibe just asMarsten looked over.

"Footsteps," he said. "Supernatural?"

I nodded. "Are they coming—?"

"This way," he said. "From the direction we did."

I glanced toward the far exit but knew without asking thatMarsten had no intention of fleeing. Only Tristan was left, and when he realized he'd lost both his guards, he wouldn't walk away. He'd call in reinforcements.

"Hide back where you were. Keep the gun ready but—"

His eyes narrowed as he turned to track the approaching footsteps.

"More than one set," he murmured. "Probably partygoers. Can you tell?"

I concentrated, but my heart was pounding, reminding me with each rib-jangling beat that those footsteps were getting closer, and I didn't have time to dawdle. My powers caved under the pressure, and I couldn't even pick up one vibe anymore.

"It doesn't matter,"Marsten whispered when I told him. "We'll see them soon enough."

The last word was leaving his lips as Tristan came into view, flanked by what could only be two additional guards.Marsten let out an oath, biting it off mid-syllable. He propelled me back to our original hiding spot between thestelae . This time, when we heard footsteps into the room,Marsten didn't move. One opponent was fine, two maybe, but three at once? Not if we didn't have to.

As they passed, Tristan took his cell phone from his ear and scowled.

"Russell still not answering?" one of the guards said.

Tristan shook his head. "I'll try Mike. See if he can go look for Russell."

Marstenand I looked at one another, then at the spot whereMarsten had hidden Mike's body—less than three feet from us. As Tristan finished dialing,Marsten tensed and I fumbled to get the gun from my pocket,then leaned out to see Tristan as he kept walking, phone to his ear. Seconds ticked past. He

stabbed the disconnect button.

“Vibrate,” Marsten whispered.

That made sense—that they’d have their phones set to vibrate. Nothing blows your cover faster than The Ride of the Valkyrie resounding through a supposedly off-limits hall.

When the three were gone, we headed back the other way, across the main hall and into the “biodiversity” wing, a.k.a. the stuffed animal gallery. On the other side was the ceramics exhibit. Halfway across the biodiversity room, we caught strains of a lively monologue coming from the ceramics gallery. The midnight behind-the-scenes tour.

Marsten frowned at the direction of the voices, as if debating joining them and taking refuge in numbers. That depended on how likely he thought Tristan was to avoid public confrontation. After a moment, he shook his head and prodded me toward the narrow opening between a pillar and the African savanna diorama.

When I stepped into the gap, he tugged me out, then backed in and crouched, sitting on a fan box. He motioned for me to turn around and back onto his lap. As I did, I knew why he’d picked the lower position—we’d be hidden from casual viewers by a nearby meerkat display.

As I shifted onto his lap, his arms went around me, holding me steady... or that’s the excuse I let him have. We settled in for what could be a long wait. As things went quiet, I struggled to hold back all the thoughts I didn’t want to think, all the regrets and self-recriminations I’d deal with later. My heart raced, filling the void by indulging in replays of the running, the fighting, those delicious spurts of chaos that only sent my heart tripping faster still.

As I luxuriated in the memories, other visions crept in: a vulture circling overhead, an ocean of long, dry grass whispering, a breeze bringing the heavenly scent of musk, my stomach growling, tail twitching in anticipation—

Marsten shifted, his fingers accidentally brushing my hardened nipples and I groaned, my breath coming faster.

He chuckled. “Not immune to me after all, I see.”

“Hmmm?”

He cupped his hand under my left breast, and pressed it there as my heart raced beneath his fingers. When those fingers climbed to my nipple again, I let out a soft moan.

“Sorry,” I said. “It’s not you.”

Another chuckle. “If you want to tell yourself that...”

I closed my eyes and saw the lioness crouch, hind quarters twitching, mouth watering in anticipation. I could feel her excitement, pulse racing, and my own raced to match it. I moaned again, as Marsten’s hand slid up to my shoulder.

He hesitated. “Either you have some strange erogenous zones, or you’re right. It’s not me, is it?”

I opened my eyes. "It's—" I waved at the display. "I pick things up, from the past...chaos."

Another brush against my hard nipples. "And this is what happens?"

"Mmm, yes." My eyes closed again. "Strange, I know..."

"Actually, no, not to me, at least. Should I stop?"

"Mmm, no."

A soft laugh. He unzipped my dress and tugged it off my shoulder, pulling the bra down with it. A wave of cool air rushed over my bare breast and I shivered, backing against him as his hand went to my breast, lips to my neck, tongue sliding over the sensitive spot behind my ear, raising more shivers. I shifted again and he put his free hand around my waist and repositioned me on his lap. I felt his erection hard against my rear, and pushed against it, thrusting softly. He let out a low growl and moved his lips to my ear.

"Tell me what you see," he whispered.

When I hesitated, his free hand moved to my leg, pushing up my skirt, fingers tickling up the inside of my thigh. He traced the edges of my panties, then slid a finger under it. I parted my legs to let him in, but he only teased me with his finger.

"Tell me," he said.

"It's...a hunt."

"Mmmm." A growling chuckle. "Nothing like a good hunt. What do you see?"

I told him, the words coming hesitant at first, then flowing faster as his finger slid in, moving expertly as he thrust against me, egging me on when I slowed, my excitement feeding his. As the lioness sprang for the kill, I felt the first wave of climax—

Then he stopped.

"It's still not me, is it?"

"Wh—wha—?"

His lips moved down my neck. "It's insufferably vain of me, but if I'm going to seduce you, I want to be the cause of your arousal, not passive recipient."

"You don't seem all that passive to me."

He laughed, but shook his head, fingers on my thigh.

I craned around to look at him. "So you're just going to leave me hanging?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "That wouldn't be very gentlemanly of me, would it?"

"Not at all."

“Hmmm.”

He still hesitated, toying with the edge of my panties.

“Well...?” I said.

“I’m trying to decide...”

“I say yes.”

He laughed. “I doubt it, and I doubt we’re thinking of the same question.”

“Which is...?”

“Control. As in, can I help you without helping myself to you.”

I stood, turned around and repositioning myself on his lap, facing him, squarely straddling him, hands around his neck. “What if I’m offering?”

He growled deep in his throat and reached for me, pulling me against him, hands tugging up my skirt as I unbuttoned his pants—

An alarm rang, so fast and sudden I almost toppled backward off him.

I looked around. Smoke wafted from the hall. I pictured the fire demon again, reaching for the vase of scrolls, sparks raining from his fingertips. A few must have fallen into the vase, smoldered there and caught fire.

From the other room came the shrieks of people hearing alarms, smelling smoke, and reacting as if the building had transformed into the Towering Inferno. I caught the first lick of chaos and shivered, then shut it off.

Marsten’s arms went around me, pulling me back against him with a hard thrust and a soft growl. I rotated to face him, my hands going around his neck, mouth finding his, drinking in the chaos arising around us. Burning building? Who cared? I had a more urgent fire to put out.

Marsten growled again, this one harsher as he pulled his lips from mine.

“I hate to be the one to bring this up, but...”

“The building’s on fire?”

“Unfortunately.”

I slipped my hands under his shirt. “How fast can it burn?”

A low growling chuckle as he pressed against me. “You have no idea how badly I’m tempted to test that. But I have to remind myself that you’re acting under the influence of something.”

“Something other than you, you mean.”

“There’s that, too.”

“Vain,” I said, poking him in the chest.

He caught me up in a hard, deep, tongue-diving, groin-grinding kiss, then put me back on my feet.

“Time to go,” he said, and started across the room.

“Tease.”

He tossed a smile over his shoulder. “Just giving you something to remember, once all this interference is out of the way.”

We reached the main hall to find it log-jammed with people. Marsten hesitated, then took my arm and led me straight into the heart of the mob. The crowd buoyed us along, and before I knew it, the cool night breeze was rippling through my hair. I looked up, and only then, seeing the stars winking against the city’s glow, could I truly believe it.

We were out. Free.

If Tristan and his guards were here, they’d be watching with dismay as the museum expelled a steady river of white shirts and black jackets and nary a yellow dress to be found. The crowd was so thick that even if I hadn’t covered my dress, they’d probably never have picked me out.

As fire engines and taxis competed for curb space, sirens and blaring horns rose above the din of partygoers yelling for their lost spouses and friends. A few taxis managed a passenger snatch-and-grab before the police cordoned off the area.

We let the crowd carry us across the road, where the taxis were regrouping. Marsten’s grip suddenly tightened, and he ducked sideways, nearly plowing me into a white-haired woman with a walker. As I glared at him, a voice cut through the din.

“Hope? Hope!”

“Don’t look,” Marsten muttered by my ear as he steered us into another pocket of people. “Just pretend you don’t—”

“Hope?”

Douglas cut between a couple. He smiled at me. There I was, bedraggled and dirty, hair flying everywhere, wearing a tux jacket, running from a burning building, and he only smiled, as if I’d just popped back from the buffet line.

“The Bairds have invited us for drinks,” he said.

I stared, the words not penetrating, certain I was mishearing and somehow the din around us had turned “Oh my God, are you okay?” into an invitation for post-inferno cocktails.

“I—I have to go,” I said finally. “The—the paper. The fire. I need to—”

“Oh, you’ll need to write it up, won’t you?” He smiled and winked. “For a cause, I’d go with spontaneous human combustion.”

“I was thinking more of fire demons,” I muttered.

“Sure. That’s different. I’ll let you go, then. Have fun, and don’t work too hard.”

Marsten yanked me backward again, as Douglas slipped off through the crowd. When we reached the sidewalk, Marsten body-checked a young man and shoved me through an open cab door, then crawled in after me and slammed it.

He looked over. “Your address?”

I gave it.

To the driver, though, Marsten just said, “Head east.”

“Oh, Riverside is beside the river,” I said. “Which is north.”

Marsten didn’t correct the driver, just shut the panel between the front and rear seats and buckled up.

“To be safe, you should spend the evening someplace else. Your mother’s maybe? Is she in the city?”

“Yes, but if I’m in danger, I’m certainly not taking it to her, no matter how slight the risk.”

“Friend, sibling, cousin...”

I shook my head. “Same thing. This is my problem, so until it’s resolved, I’m keeping it that way. We should find a hotel or motel on the outskirts of town, and get some rest before we figure out how to resolve this, because I’m assuming Tristan won’t just give up and go away.”

“He won’t. All right then. We’ll find a hotel, and I’ll make sure it’s safe. Then, when I come back—”

“Back? Where are you going?”

He patted his pocket, where the jewels were. “I need to take care of these tonight. I shouldn’t be more than an hour or so—”

“Just long enough to hunt down Tristan and kill him.” When Marsten looked over sharply, I said, “I may be foolish, but I’m not stupid and, after tonight, not nearly so naïve. The only way to end this is to kill Tristan, so that’s what you’re going to do. That why you said you’d retrieve my bracelet ‘later’—you meant once I was out of the building and you went back for Tristan.”

He hesitated and studied my expression, then nodded. “I’ve tried walking away twice, and he refuses to leave it that. As much as I hate to bother with someone like Tristan Robard, I can’t walk away again.”

“That’s why you asked for my address, isn’t it? Because you think that’s where he’ll go. Right now, I’m the more urgent threat, the one who could let his Cabal know about his extracurricular activities.”

Marsten nodded.

“Well, you know I’m not going to any hotel.” I held up a hand against his protest. “Have I interfered yet?”

“No, but—”

“And I won’t. I am so far out of my league—” I shook my head. “Let’s just say I won’t embarrass myself further or endanger you by interfering. But Tristan wants me, and if you show up alone at my townhouse, he’ll know something’s up.”

For a moment Marsten and I just looked at each other, then he nodded and gave the driver my address.



12

I live in a brownstone backing onto the river and surrounding parkland. Not your typical twenty-something, tabloid journalist digs. The house technically belongs to my mother. I say “technically” because her ownership is really only a technicality...and a contentious one at that.

My mother had bought the place while I’d been in J-school, only a mile away. She’d called it an investment, but when I’d graduated, she’d wanted to give it to me. College had been a struggle—not academically, but personally, coming at the worst time in my life, when I’d been dealing with my demon powers. I think the brownstone was Mom’s graduation gift...and a hoped source of stability for a daughter sorely in need of it.

I love the townhouse, love the area, love my beautiful riverfront “backyard” with its winding forest trails—an escape route whenever I needed it, which seemed often. So I’d agreed to keep living there, as a property manager of sorts, maintaining the building and protecting Mom’s investment. But I refused to take the deed, and insisted on paying all expenses and upkeep—though the property taxes alone were nearly enough to bankrupt me. Thank God I had two jobs—

Two jobs? As the taxi disgorged us on the front lawn, I stared up at my beloved brownstone and realized I no longer had two jobs, and probably not even one.

Of course my mother could—and would—step in and pay the bills. I so desperately didn’t want that.

I’d given my mother enough sleepless nights to last a lifetime. I often wondered whether, at some level, she knew my problems were rooted in something she’d done, that brief post-separation encounter that no one could blame her for. Even if she didn’t know the true nature of my trouble, I think she blamed herself, and I didn’t want that. I wanted to be strong and independent and stable, and to be able to take her for lunches on my dime and say, “See Mom, I’m doing fine.” And I had reached that point, stuffed



with the newfound confidence my council job had given me—

“We’d better get inside,” Marsten whispered as the cab pulled away.

He looked around, nostrils flaring, body tense, as if we’d just stepped into a trap. . . which we probably had. Definitely not the time to worry about my life’s recent crash and burn. When this was over, I should just be thankful I still had a life to repair.

“Good security,” Marsten whispered as I undid the dual deadbolt. “Are the other doors and windows—?”

“All armed. Motion detectors in every room, too. My mom worries.”

I hurried in to disarm the system. It was still active. If Tristan had beat us here, he’d backed off when he’d seen the security. This wasn’t the kind of neighborhood that ignored screaming sirens. Better to wait for us to disarm the system.

“What now?” I said as Marsten relocked the front door.

“Turn on a couple of lights, and stay away from the windows. Is that open land out back?”

“A park,” I said. “Mostly forest.”

“Good. That’s where I’ll try to get him then. Away from the houses. We’ll stay here for a bit, give him time to arrive and stake out the house. Then I’ll change and lead him into the forest.”

“Change?” The words “but I don’t have anything for you to wear” were on my lips when I realized what he meant. “Into a wolf.”

He nodded. “By far the preferred way for dealing with these things. Easier to track, easier to fight and”—a quick smile—“a built-in disguise if anyone sees me.”

I flipped on the living room and hall lights.

“What about the television?” I said. “Should I turn that on, too?”

A brow arch. “We escape death, flee to the safety of your townhouse. . . and watch television?”

“So what would Tristan expect?—” I followed his gaze to the stairs leading to the second level. “Ah, of course. You’d want a good night’s rest.”

“And that’s probably all I’d get,” he muttered. “Unless I set the place on fire first. From Tristan’s point of view, though, we just had a harrowing evening, I saved your life—”

“You did?”

“Play along. You take me upstairs—”

“Oh, reward sex.” I paused. “But for proper reward sex I wouldn’t take you upstairs. We probably wouldn’t even make it past the front door. I just push you against the wall, get down on my knees—”

He cut me off with a growl. "I'd suggest you stop there unless you plan to follow through."

"Oh, but I would follow through... if you'd saved my life." I swung around the banister onto the stairs. "Not that you'd let me, though. No sex unless it's you I want, remember? No chaos sex. No reward sex. That's your rule."

He muttered something and followed me up the stairs.

At Marsten's suggestion, the first thing I did was remove my dress... which sounds a whole lot more interesting than it was. As he pointed out, heels and a slinky yellow dress didn't make good late-night commando gear. While he cleaned up, I put on jeans, a T-shirt, and sneakers. Then we headed for my bedroom. Yes, I have a separate dressing room. It's a three-bedroom townhouse—I'm just trying to make efficient use of space. Really.

I walked into my darkened bedroom, flicked on the light, then made a face.

"Sorry," I said. "It's a mess. I wasn't expecting company."

"Poor Doug." Marsten walked to the unmade bed, plunked down on it, and gave it a test bounce. "Doesn't get a lot of use, I'll bet."

"I'm picky. Sorry."

A wolfish grin. "Don't be. I like picky." He pushed to his feet. "Well, no, usually I don't like picky, but this time, I think I do."

With a sidelong glance through the window, he put his arms around my waist, leaned down, and kissed me. It was a slow kiss, easy and relaxed, with none of the practiced attention to art of his first one.

"Setting the scene?" I murmured with a nod toward the window.

"A good excuse." He kissed me again, then sighed. "You really are immune, aren't you?"

"To what?" I caught his look and rolled my eyes. "Oh please. You really are vain, aren't you?"

"I already admitted that. I can't help it—I'm accustomed to having my attentions returned."

"Ah."

"Not even going to bite for that, are you?"

I stepped back and sat on the edge of the bed. "What? You admit that you find me attractive, so I'm honor-bound to return the compliment? Fine, yes, you have your charms."

A twist of his lips. "Oh."

"That's not good enough? Okay, let me try again. I think you're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen and I can barely keep my hands off you... well, not when there's a decent source of chaos around."

He growled and scooped me up off the bed, kissing me again.

“Enough already,” I said, squirming free. “I admitted you were—”

“Charming.”

“I said you had your charms.”

“Which means you find me charming.”

“No, well yes, you are charming, but I don’t find that charming.”

He laughed and shook his head. “All right, you find me physically attractive then.”

“Yes, you are, but, no, I don’t find that particularly attractive.”

He bared his teeth in a quick grin and stepped closer. “My wit?”

I moved back and shrugged. “Witty enough, though not as witty as you think you are.”

“Ouch.” He gave an almost self-mocking grin. “Then it must be my undeniable sense of style.”

“Because you can pick out a decent tux?” I snorted. “There’s what, one color option and two or three styles?”

A feigned look of shock. “You mean you don’t find me irresistibly suave, debonair—”

“Where I grew up, guys learn suave from the cradle.”

His grin only grew. “Then whatever you find attractive about me has nothing to do with any of this—” He waved his hands over himself. “This infinitely polished package?”

“Nope. Sorry.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Very good.”

He caught me up in a kiss. As he did, a distant vibe twanged through me.

“They’re here,” I whispered.

Marsten glanced out the window, his body blocking mine, gaze scanning the dark street.

“They’re across the road,” he murmured as he turned back to me. “They must have just arrived. On the count of three, I’m swinging you past the window and onto the bed.”

He did. As soon as I hit the mattress, I rolled to the far side and dropped onto the floor. Marsten followed. We crawled into the hall, down the stairs, and to the back door, arriving just in time to duck

behind the kitchen cabinets when we heard footsteps on the rear deck. The guard tested the door, peered in, then moved on.

“Quickly,” Marsten murmured. “They’ll be back in a minute. This is the safest place to break in.”

As we slipped out the door, I started pushing in the handle, to relock it when it closed. But Marsten caught my hand.

“We want them to know we came out this way,” he whispered.

Hunched over, and darting from bush to tree to garden shed, I led him across my tiny yard, and down the small hill to the woodland beyond. Marsten found a place for me to hide. He made sure I had my gun, and warned me to stay where I was, whatever happened. Then he gave me a card from his wallet, and told me if he didn’t return in an hour, I was to run to a public place, call the handwritten number on the back, and explain everything.

A moment later, he was gone.

I stayed where I was. As impotent as I felt cowering in those bushes, I knew if I tried to help, I’d more likely get us both killed. So I hid and I listened.

I listened as the soft lullaby of cricket and frog calls went silent under the heavy footfalls and guttural muttering of Tristan and his guards. I listened as those mutters gave way to orders and oaths. I listened as those trudging footsteps divided and turned into running feet. I listened as a scream shattered the night, a scream cut off by flashing fangs.

That wasn’t my imagination working overtime. I saw those fangs flash, smelled bowels give way, felt hot blood spatter my face, and the visions brought not a split second of chaos bliss. With every cry, every scream, every silenced pistol shot, I was certain Marsten had been hit. The death vision came twice, and still I heard multiple running feet and voices. My God, how many were there? How would he ever—

Another shot. Then the sound that broke my resolve: a piercing canine yelp of pain.



I broke from my cover then, but I resisted the urge to run pell-mell toward the noise, toward the laughs of triumph. Instead, I gripped my gun tight and slunk through the shadows until I was close enough to see a flashlight beam cutting a swath through the dark forest. The beam stopped, and my gaze followed its path.

A black mound of fur lay motionless at the end of that flashlight beam. A guard stood beside the mound, gun pointed down.

Oh God. God, no—

Something flashed near the top of the heap, a blue eye reflected in Tristan's flashlight beam. The eye rolled, following Tristan. I took another three steps until that dark mound became a massive wolf lying on his belly, his head lowered but not down, his ears and lips drawn back as he watched Tristan's approach. The fur on Marsten's shoulder was matted with blood. The guard had his gun pointed at Marsten's head, and I couldn't tell whether he was staying down because of that gun or because he was too badly injured to rise.

"Hope!"

Tristan's voice rang out so loud and sudden that I jumped. Only the barest rustle of dead leaves gave me away, but Marsten's ears swiveled in my direction. His black nostrils flared. Then he let out a low growl, and I knew that growl was for me. As clear a "get the hell out of here" as if he'd shouted the words.

"Hope!" Tristan yelled again. "I know you're out there."

Marsten's muzzle turned sharply as the bushes across the clearing crackled. The top of a head bobbed from the darkness. Tristan waved for the guard to stand near Marsten.

"Hope! Don't you think you've caused enough trouble tonight? Two men dead and another to follow? All because you couldn't do your job and catch one man—a thief, no less. Isn't that what you'd signed on to do? Help us put away scum like Karl Marsten?"

As Tristan tried to guilt-trip me into giving myself up, I looked around for a better position. He had no intention of letting Marsten go—this was more about his vendetta against Marsten than about shutting me down—so I wasn't stupid enough to even consider turning myself over. Marsten was alive, and would stay that way until Tristan got me, too.

If I could find a better position, with a better view, I might be able to help Marsten. I still had the gun.

Oh, right, the gun... a weapon you've never even fired.

Didn't matter. It was still a plan... and the only one I had.

When Marsten had found hiding spots, he'd emphasized protecting my back. If your back was open, anyone could sneak up behind you. So where could I safely...?

I looked up. The trees.

While Tristan shouted for me again, I scurried to the nearest candidate, grabbed the lowest branch, and channeled my inner tomboy. In minutes, I was lying on my stomach on a thick branch about seven feet off the ground. Perfect. In the darkness, someone could walk right under me.

"Hope! You have thirty seconds to show yourself or I put a bullet in this mutt's head."

Yeah, sure. Kill the only way you have to get to me. Right.

My sight line into the clearing was less than ideal. I could make out heads and torsos, but nothing below waist level, including Marsten. I wriggled farther along the branch. Ah, there he was, still on the ground at the guard's feet, his head up, glowering at Tristan.

Tristan walked over to Marsten and lowered the barrel of his gun. Marsten tensed. The guard put his foot on Marsten's neck to hold him down, but the move was halfhearted. My gut twisted as I realized Marsten was badly hurt—he had to be if the guard was so unconcerned with restraining him.

“Hope? Last chance.”

Tristan's finger moved on the trigger and even as I told myself it was a ruse, that he had no intention of pulling it, my mind washed back the reassurances with a tidal wave of doubt. Tristan wanted Marsten dead, wouldn't leave this forest until he was dead, so why not just kill him now—

“Wait!” The word flew out before I could stop it.

Tristan smiled and lowered his gun. “That's my girl.”

Oh Christ. Now what? Maintain position and think. Think fast. And stall.

“I want to negotiate,” I said. “I—I made a mistake.”

“Yes, Hope, you did.”

Tristan lowered the gun and hand-signaled for one guard to search in the direction of my voice.

“Uh-uh,” I said. “I'm not coming out. Not yet.”

Tristan jerked his chin, motioning for the guard to circle around from behind.

“And don't tell him to sneak up on me, either,” I called, my voice ringing in the stillness. “I can sense him, remember? He comes anywhere near me, and I'll do what you threatened to do to Karl. Put a bullet in his head.”

“Ah, a bullet,” Tristan said with a laugh. “From your gun, I presume.” He reached into his pocket. “This gun, maybe?”

I unscrewed the silencer and fired the guard's gun into the ground below. “No, this gun.”

“So you have a gun. Wonderful. It would be even better if you knew how to use it. But they don't teach marksmanship in debutante classes, do they?”

I laughed. “Do you really think I'd let you get me a gun, and not even learn how to use it? I'm a keener, Tristan, remember? I was at the gun club an hour after you handed it to me. And yes, the West Hills country club does have marksmanship facilities. Excellent facilities. You'd like it... if they ever let you in.”

Tristan stiffened. Found a weak spot there, didn't I? Now if only I had some clue what to do with it...

“I made a mistake,” I said. “Karl tricked me.”

Tristan smiled. “Charmed you, more like.”

“No, he lied to me,” I said as I looked around, babbling while I searched for a way to help Marsten. “He told me I wasn’t working for the council. He said I’m working for a Cabal.”

One of the guards shot Tristan a confused look, mouthing “Council?”

They didn’t know...

The other two guards had been in on Tristan’s scheme, but these ones had no idea what I was talking about. Marsten said Tristan was working on personal revenge, that the Cabal would never have sanctioned his death. The other two guards had known that, had been moonlighting outside the Cabal with Tristan. But these two weren’t. Interesting.

I called down again. “I don’t know what you hope to gain by killing me, Tristan.” I pulled out the business card Marsten had given me. “We’ve already called—”

I squinted at the card. Earlier, I’d glanced at it just long enough to register the last name—Cortez—and I’d remembered Marsten saying he’d done work for Benicio Cortez’s son, the one who wasn’t part of the Cabal. So that’s the name I expected. When I saw what was really printed there, my heart thudded.

I turned it over. A handwritten phone number. Oh God, was that real? What if it wasn’t?

“Yes, Hope? You were saying?”

I’d been about to say that I’d called the person on the card and told him everything. But that wouldn’t work now. Had I really called already, these guards wouldn’t be here.

Think...think...

“Who am I really working for, Tristan?” I said. “Who sanctioned this job?”

His gaze shot to the guards. “The Cortez Cabal, Hope. You already said that.”

“Yes, but I...I’m confused. You two down there. When you were called in, what did Mr. Cortez say Karl’s crime was?”

The guards looked at one another.

“Wait,” I said. “Mr. Cortez didn’t give the order, did he? That came straight from Tristan. So what did Tristan say Karl’s crime was?”

“He’s a thief,” Tristan said, between his teeth, surveying the forest as if trying to pinpoint my voice.

“Okay...but—well, he’s been a thief all his life, right? And his father before him. But now, out of the blue, Mr. Cortez decides he deserves to die for it? Right after Karl joins the Pack. Right after the Pack joins the interracial council. Isn’t that a diplomatic crisis in the making? I thought Mr. Cortez was pretty careful about stuff like that.”

The guards turned to Tristan, their eyes narrowing, but still expecting a logical explanation.

“I don’t question my orders,” Tristan said.

“Maybe, but I do. I’m going to call Mr. Cortez. Got his card right here.” I read off the office numbers, so they’d know I was telling the truth. “And, while I’m sure those numbers would get me through to some flunky eventually, I can probably save some time by using the number on the back. Benicio Cortez’s personal number.”

“How’d she get—” one of the guards began.

“She didn’t, you—” Tristan clipped off the insult. “It’s a stalling tactic. You really are a naïve little girl, aren’t you, Hope? Where did you get Benicio Cortez’s number? The phone book?”

The second guard snickered, but the first took out his cell phone.

“Here,” he said. “Give me the number and I’ll call.”

Tristan smiled in my direction. “Yes, Hope. Give him the number.”

I resisted the urge to rattle it off, and stammered it out instead, as if I was making it up. Where had Marsten got this number? What if someone had given it to him as a joke? I looked down at him, trying to gauge his reaction, but his eyelids were flagging, as if he was struggling to stay conscious.

My hesitant delivery made Tristan smile, and he made no attempt to stop the guard from dialing, just leaned back against a tree and awaited my downfall.

Ten seconds after the guard finished dialing, his head jerked up.

“Mr. Cortez?”

Tristan chuckled and shook his head.

“This is Bryan Trau,” the guard said. “SA Unit 17. I’m sorry to disturb you, sir, but we have a situation here.”

Tristan jumped so fast he nearly tripped. His hand flew out, and he motioned for the guard to hand over the phone, but the guard stepped away. Tristan started to lift his gun, then stopped as the second guard raised his halfway, the threat respectful but clear.

The guard explained the situation, and I swore I could see Tristan sweating. When the guard finished, he listened, said, “Yes, sir,” then held out the phone.

“Mr. Cortez would like to speak to you.”

Tristan stepped back and looked ready to bolt. Then he caught sight of Marsten and must have, in that second, seen a possible way out, the elimination of the only person who could confirm the entire story. He lifted his gun.

A shot sounded.

I didn’t think. I jumped from the tree. The second I started falling, my brain screamed “Idiot!” and I saw the gun still in my hand. I managed to fling it aside before I landed on top of it and shot myself in the gut.



I hit the ground hard, but scrambled up, grabbed the gun, and ran. As I made it to the clearing, I heard,

“Yes, sir.”Pause.“No, sir. He’s gone.”

I flew into the clearing to see the guard kneeling beside a body. Tristan’s body. In the guard’s other hand, he held his gun.

“Yes, sir, I did. You said if he made a move—” A pause, then the guard nodded and glanced over at me. “She’s here now.”

The guard held out the phone. I hesitated, then took it.

“Is this the young woman who was with Karl?” a voice asked. A pleasant voice. Calm and alert, as if he hadn’t been woken in the middle of the night.

He asked a few questions about me, whether I was hurt and what had happened, his tone mild but concerned, almost avuncular, not what I’d expect from the head of the most powerful Cabal. After a few questions, he said,

“You’ve had a very long night, and I’m sorry you had to go through this, but I can assure you, Mr. Robard was acting outside his jurisdiction. Since he is an employee, though, I take full responsibility for his actions, and will do everything I can to put things right, starting with looking after Karl. Is he badly hurt?”

Oh God, I’d been so shocked I hadn’t even checked. I blurted an apology, and raced to Marsten. The second guard was already there, tending to Marsten, who was unconscious. He’d been shot through the shoulder, and his entire side was wet and sticky. Blood must have been pumping out the whole time he’d been lying there.

Mr. Cortez assured me a doctor, one from his local satellite office, would be on the way. Then he left me to help the guard bind Marsten’s wound as we waited.



14

The guards took Marsten back to my house, then left me there to wait for the doctor while they returned to the scene to clean it up. They weren’t even out of the backyard when the doctor arrived. He got the wound cleaned and covered, left antibiotics and painkillers, and told me to call if Marsten’s condition worsened.

The two guards stopped back at the house to let me know everything was cleaned up. They brought

something for me, too—my purse, left by Tristan in the van. My bracelet was still in there, as were my wallet and gun. Everything back in order, just as Mr. Cortez had promised.

We'd left Marsten in the living room, on a blanket. I found a second blanket and laid it over him. He looked ridiculous, of course, this huge wolf on my living room floor with a pink and white knit afghan tucked in around his muzzle. At least I didn't get him a pillow... though I did consider it.

I lay down on the sofa above him, intending to keep watch until he woke, but, within minutes, I was asleep.

I awoke to the sound of running water. Marsten was gone.

"Up here," he said when I called for him.

I climbed the stairs. He was in the bathroom, with the door open a crack.

I stopped a few paces from the door. "You need your clothing, don't you. Let me get—"

"Found and on... mostly. What's left of them, anyway. Now, if I can just—" He growled. "This bandage fit me better as a wolf."

"Here, I can—"

I started pushing the door open, then stopped, realizing he might not want the help. He kicked it open the rest of the way as he quickly shrugged on his shirt.

I laughed. "Feeling shy?" I gestured at the shirt. "I can't fix your shoulder like that."

He hesitated, then let the shirt fall off. His chest and upper arms were a loose patchwork of scars. He tensed, as if waiting for me to comment or react. I grabbed bandages and iodine from the closet, and set to work fixing him up.

"The Cabal sent a doctor over," I said. "I'm not sure he did a very good job. He didn't seem to know much about werewolves."

"That's fine. I know someone who does." He glanced at me. "So I didn't imagine that, then. You contacted Benicio Cortez."

I nodded. "And that's all it took. Tristan's dead, you're alive, the mess is cleaned up, and Mr. Cortez has promised to look after any fallout. Which, of course, led me to wonder, if you had that number, why didn't you use it right away. I think I know the answer, but I'm hoping I'm wrong."

"Probably not," he murmured.

I looked up at him. "As nice as Mr. Cortez was, I'm guessing he didn't get where he is by playing Santa Claus. Cleaning this up for us wasn't a free gift, was it?"

Marsten shook his head. "We owe him. He wouldn't say that, because it would have been crass, under the circumstances, but it's a chit owed." He rubbed his shoulder, adjusting the bandage, and made a

face, then looked at me. “When I turned down Tristan’s offer, Benicio came to me and made one personally. He was much more persuasive—”

“He threatened you?”

Marsten laughed. “Benicio Cortez does not threaten. He knows a lollipop can be a better motivator than a swat on the behind. He made me a lucrative offer, and when I respectfully refused, unlike Tristan, he let it go, but gave me that card, in case I ever ‘needed help.’”

“And now I’ve accepted it on your behalf, putting you in his debt. God, I’m so sorry—”

“If I hadn’t wanted you to use it, I wouldn’t have told you to. Given the choice between being dead and owing Benicio Cortez, we’re better off with the latter, as uncomfortable as it may be. He will eventually call in the chit, but, in the meantime, you can go back to your life, including your job at the paper, assuming that’s what you want.”

“It is.” I sat on the edge of the counter. “I’d like to—well, maybe I’m kidding myself thinking I could do anything on my own—”

“You could still monitor and report problems. To the real council this time. They have someone doing something similar, another journalist, and I know she’d love the help.”

I shrugged, torn between not knowing if that would be enough and not knowing if I could offer more, if I still had more to offer.

Marsten stepped in front of me and leaned forward, a hand on each side of me, balancing against the counter. “It’s a start,” he murmured. “Take it slow and start there. The only drawback, I’m afraid, would be the pay... or lack of it. The real council isn’t a group of white-haired philanthropists. Most of the delegates aren’t much older than you, meaning it’s pretty much a no-budget operation.”

“That doesn’t matter. I never even wanted Tristan to pay me. I get paid well enough—” I stopped and shrugged. “Well, you know...”

“In chaos dollars.”

My cheeks heated. “I know that sounds awful, helping others because I get something out of it—”

He put his hands on my hips and leaned closer to me. “You need an outlet. Do you think I don’t understand that?” He reached into his pocket and took out the jewels. “This is mine. A way to get my regular adrenaline shot without ripping apart strangers in alleyways. And, with you, it isn’t all about the chaos. You have balance. The good impulses with the bad. Me?” He grinned. “A little more inclined to the latter.” His eyes glinted. “Though not irredeemably so.”

I laughed. “Something tells me that would be a fun, but futile challenge.”

“Challenge is good.”

I shook my head. “If you’re happy with what you are, then anyone who wants you would need to accept that.”

He ran his fingertips along my jawline. “Wouldn’t be easy, I’m sure.”

“No, but if you look hard enough, I’m sure you’d find someone willing to try. You know, my mom’s great at finding dates—”

He growled and kissed me. When he pulled back, he ran the tip of his tongue over his lips, as if sampling the kiss.

“The immunity is breaking down,” he murmured. “But still has a ways to go.” He leaned toward me again. “I’d ask if I should stay for a while, but I suspect the answer would be no. A reluctant no, maybe, but a no nonetheless. So instead I’ll ask whether I can come back.”

I smiled. “Yes, you can come back.”

“Good. Better, actually.”

“Better?”

“Much.”

I laughed and shook my head.

Marsten stepped back. “I should go. I have a doctor to visit and goods to dispose of. . . not necessarily in that order. And I will make those calls for you—ensure the termination from your old job and the start of your new one go smoothly.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” I caught his hand and met his gaze. “I really do, Karl.”

He leaned over for a kiss, little more than a brushing of the lips, but very. . . nice. When he pulled away, he backed up to the door, started to turn, then stopped.

“I’m too old for you.”

“Too old for what? To come back for a visit?”

A dramatic sigh. He shook his head, and walked out of the bathroom. From the hall I heard a murmured “I’m going to make a fool of myself.”

“It’ll look good on you,” I called after him.

His chuckle returned. I smiled and listened to his footsteps recede down the stairs, across the floor, and finally disappear out the back door. Then I took a deep breath. One life gone. Another on the way. Was I up for it?

God, I hoped so.