

SHADOW STALKERS



SKY CROFT

Shadowstalkers

by

Sky Croft

Mystic Books

by **Regal Crest**

Texas

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Dedication

For Sue, with love and thanks for being my big sister.

Chapter One

EVE VALENTINE MOVED confidently around the bar, knowing exactly what needed to be done before they opened in one hour's time. Though running slightly later than usual, she knew she would easily be able to complete her tasks before the first customers came through the steel-plated, double front doors.

There were steel bars covering the windows too, as in all the rooms, though they were on the inside, so the two-story house looked like any other from the outside—though perhaps more run down. Not that there were many other houses to compare it to, as the nearest town was more than an hour's drive away.

Eve liked the privacy that was afforded to them by their home's remoteness. They needed it. Her family's business—a pub called The Smoking Gun—thrived because of that remoteness. The authorities never bothered with anyone out this far, and so her patrons were able to trade arms, make deals, whatever they wished, without the added hassle of the law butting in.

The surrounding land was barren, completely desolate, with nothing of note or interest in the area for miles around. Because of that, civilians didn't come near, and they'd certainly never had one enter The Smoking Gun. The clientele was strictly shadowstalkers. And since shadowstalkers only heard of this place by word of mouth, and shadowstalkers were tight-lipped folks, there was little to no chance that a civilian would ever just drop in. Eve had been running this business for nigh on twenty years, and she'd never had one yet.

It helped also that the house was a good distance from the country road that went by them. An un-signposted single track led across their acres of flat, dusty land and eventually led to their house, where the track simply came to a dead end.

Eve walked out from behind the bar, heading toward the two large, wide bay windows that sat on either side of the main entrance. She wanted to see what the weather was like outside. She stepped on a discarded chewing gum wrapper, hearing it crinkle underfoot. Picking the paper up, Eve scrunched it into a ball, planning to dispose of it when she returned to the bar. Reaching the window, she leaned on its sill and peered out. The sun's setting rays filtered in through the glass, the metal bars on the windows throwing striated shadows across the room.

There wasn't much to see outside: the landscape bleak, lifeless. Eve had never attempted to plant anything in the surrounding acres; if nature herself hadn't managed to grow anything there, she didn't think she would have much luck.

Most people would likely think that the surrounding land was ugly, but Eve thought it was beautiful. It was home. She had raised her two children here, and those times would always be cherished memories for her.

The fine powder from the dry earth blew about in the light breeze, though it was by no means cold for this time of year— autumn.

The even plains had often proved useful to the Valentines, allowing them to see if anyone or anything was approaching. And giving them time to prepare if there was any oncoming threat.

Eve's gaze shifted, flitting around the inside of the pub. The walls were cream, faded from white long ago. Old paintings decorated the walls, along with muskets, swords and numerous other ancient, outdated weapons. The bar itself was mahogany, as were the barstools that sat along its length. The bar was on the right side of the room upon entering the front door. The rest of the room was filled with tables and chairs, ranging from two to six seaters, which were mostly made of the same matching wood. But as and when one had been broken, which was inevitable in a pub, with careless drunks and disputes often occurring, the replacement furniture wasn't of the same wood, making several clusters of tables and chairs look mismatched, and somewhat thrown together.

The wall opposite the bar housed a gray stone fireplace. In its hearth sat a log fire, waiting to be lit. The fire was only ever used in the winter, on the coldest of nights. It wasn't often needed; the body heat from the numerous patrons was usually enough to warm the room.

To the right of the fireplace was a single door, which led through to the public toilets. At one time it had been a large storage room, but it had been converted along with the rest of the farmhouse, when Eve and her husband, Mathew, had been altering the expansive building to include the addition of a pub, so they could run a business. Eve certainly didn't want the clientele to be traipsing through the house every time they needed to relieve themselves. Though the toilets were small and basic, they did the job, allowing the Valentines to keep the part of the house that was their home separate, which in turn afforded them some privacy.

The well-worn wooden floor was easy to keep clean, and due to the amount of heavy wood used throughout, the whole room seemed dark and dingy despite its large size. The wide bay windows were the only saving grace, allowing plenty of natural light to flood into the room.

The clientele weren't at all bothered by such trivial matters as décor, as long as they had a drink and a place to sit, they were content.

Eve heard the stairs creak, and knew that one of her daughters was on her way down to help. She didn't hear the approach itself, Eve had taught them early on to be quiet on their feet. It was an absolute necessity to a shadowstalker. The slightest of noises was all it took for a creature of the night to learn of your presence.

Though her back was to the doorway that led from the pub to the rest of the house, and despite the lack of noise, Eve still sensed her daughter as she entered behind the bar. And from

the slight hesitation she knew which daughter it was: Cassie. If it had been Vicki, she would've come straight in and asked what needed to be done. With Cassie, she would silently appraise the situation, look around for herself to see what had already been done and what still needed doing, then she would get on with it herself. She didn't need to be told. She took the initiative. Cassie had learnt early on as a shadowstalker not to go rushing headlong into a situation. It had been a hard lesson, but she had learnt it well.

Sure enough, after a moment, Cassie started to check the bottles on the shelf behind the bar, removing any that had little or no liquor left in them. They'd be replaced with stock from the store room at the back of the house, off the kitchen. Bottles clinked together as she clutched more and more to her chest. Once her arms were full, Cassie took the empties out the back. Eve heard the clatter and breaking of glass as they were dumped into the large outside bin.

The full bottles that returned were more carefully carried, and it took a few trips before the shelf was fully stocked once more.

Leaning across a round table, Eve brushed long, wavy brown hair behind an ear. She scrubbed a sticky beer stain off the wooden surface, realizing as she examined the rest of the tables that Vicki hadn't done as she'd asked last night. Feeling her temper rise, she fixed her brown eyes on the doorway Cassie had entered by. The only route to the rest of the house. She wondered where Vicki was, or rather what she was doing instead of completing her share of the work. Her youngest daughter, at nineteen years old, was very good at shirking her responsibilities and had a knack for showing up after all the hard work was done.

Cassie usually ended up covering for her, or simply doing the chores herself. Not because she wanted to, it was simply to keep arguments from erupting. She was the peacemaker in the family.

Eve knew that Cassie already did more than her fair share, and Cassie never once complained about it either. But if unchecked, Vicki would take full advantage of her older sister's generous nature. And Eve simply wouldn't allow that to happen.

She checked the time on the clock above the maroon double doors, the house's main entrance; it was twenty past six. Eve had started at six, and Cassie a few minutes after that. She would give Vicki another five minutes before shouting for her.

Four and a half minutes later, Vicki ambled into the bar. Not hurrying herself in the slightest. She flashed Eve a defiant look, as if daring her to say something. Vicki idly twirled a long strand of brown hair, the exact same shade as Eve's, around one graceful finger. Vicki was the smallest of the Valentine women, but was by no means short, coming in at five foot eight inches. Her features were rounder than Cassie's, not as angular, or sharp. Eve often saw herself in Vicki, at least when it came to looks, they were remarkably similar, even down to sharing the same chocolate brown eyes.

Cassie's hair was a darker brown again, looking almost black. She'd inherited the hair and her ice blue eyes from her father, Mathew, though she still retained the look of her mother. It seemed Eve's genes were as dominant as her personality.

"What do you want me to do?" Vicki asked, her reluctance apparent to all.

The crumpled paper in her hand reminded Eve. "Check the snacks. We're out of peanuts."

Vicki went to fetch them. When she returned, after taking twice as long as was needed, she held a box in one hand—which she'd opened, and a bag of peanuts in the other, removed from the box. She was munching away, licking salt off her full lips.

She put the box underneath the bar and dropped the opened bag onto the counter. It was nearly a full bag, and some of the nuts fell out onto the counter's surface. A surface that had just been cleaned by Cassie.

Cassie silently shoveled the nuts back into the packet, ran the cloth across that area once more, then carefully laid the bag back down.

None of this had gone unnoticed by Eve. Her sharp eyes registered everything. Knowing that Cassie would get more done if Vicki was out from underfoot, she said, "Vicki, can you clean those corner tables?"

Cassie threw Eve a grateful look.

Vicki moved around to the front of the bar and perched on a stool. "I did them last night."

"Don't lie to me," Eve said flatly. Along with her words, her tone also made it perfectly clear that she didn't believe Vicki, and no amount of excuses would convince her otherwise. "I asked you last night, but I can clearly see that you didn't do it."

Vicki sighed, giving up the pretense. She spun around on her stool to face Eve. "I really don't see why we need to waste our time like this. It's pointless. They'll just get filthy again tonight."

"True," Eve said. The pub was always left in a state after the punters had gone home for the night. But though the pub may need a lick of paint, Eve made sure it was always clean. "Though that's hardly the point."

Vicki rolled her eyes, then swiveled back around to the bar, making no move to do anything further.

Where Vicki had inherited her reluctance for work, Eve had no notion, for she herself was a hard-grafter, and Mathew had been the same, certainly not shy of putting in extra effort. Cassie was cut from the same cloth. Vicki may look more like her mother, but Cassie was more similar in nature and temperament.

Eve opened her mouth to continue, but Cassie held her hands up in a halting motion.

“I’ll do it,” Cassie said, clearly not wanting an argument to break out. She lifted the hatch at one end of the bar and slipped through, taking the cloth with her. There was a hatch at both ends of the bar, allowing easy access.

Eve frowned. Though she knew Cassie was only trying to keep the peace, Vicki would never pull her own weight if Cassie kept bailing her out. Vicki was smirking cockily, and Eve’s disapproving look barely dampened it.

“I’m going to start calling you Vicki,” Eve told her eldest. “It seems you do most of what I ask of her.”

Cassie chuckled, giving Eve a wry grin over her shoulder. “She must think I need the exercise.” She glanced toward the bar. “That so, Vic?”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Cassie was a statuesque brunette, six foot tall, curves in all the right places, and incredibly fit, toned. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on her. Nor on any of the Valentines; as shadowstalkers, they had to be fit.

“No. Of course not.” Vicki spun around on her stool, making a show of looking at Cassie’s form. “Though you should be thanking me for your figure.”

“Oh?” Cassie said amusedly, a single, delicate eyebrow lifting. “How so?”

Vicki, it seemed, was quite serious. “You wouldn’t be so fit if you weren’t running after me all the time.”

Eve scoffed loudly, not quite believing the audacity of the girl.

Cassie merely rolled her eyes. “God forbid.”

“And then perhaps you wouldn’t have so many suitors after you,” Vicki continued.

“I doubt that,” Eve said, drawing closer to Cassie with each table she cleaned. There were a lot of tables, but between them it would soon get done. It would go even quicker if Vicki would only pitch in and help. Eve placed her hands on her hips as she looked at Vicki, who sat munching away on her bag of peanuts. Before Eve could say anything, Cassie responded to Vicki’s claims.

“I’m probably only fit because I spend so much time running away from those suitors.”

Eve broke into unexpected laughter, and Cassie gave her an irritated look. “I’d gladly have less. Take them all.” She waved a dismissive hand.

“Honey,” Eve tried to rein in her amusement, seeing Cassie’s annoyance. “Don’t say that. Half of what we make is from people buying you drinks.”

Vicki giggled. “Yeah. And if you actually drank all of what they buy you, you’d die from liver failure in one night!”

Cassie scowled at their raucous laughter. Vicki was laughing so hard she looked like she might fall off her stool.

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Cassie said.

Eve nodded in agreement. Her youngest did have a tendency to over embellish, and certainly wasn’t one for understating things.

“Not by much,” Vicki insisted.

Cassie focused on cleaning the tables. Eve went back to work too, knowing of Cassie’s aversion to the subject matter—her many suitors were a sore spot.

Cassie was cleaning the last table when Eve placed a glass of vodka and coke in front of her. “Take a load off.”

Eve patted Cassie’s shoulder, then pulled out one of the four chairs and sat down. Eve also placed a drink of her own, a whisky sour, on the table.

Vicki joined them, bringing her peanuts and her own personal, stylized glass mug, which was filled to the brim with beer. The writing etched on to the glass read, You’re not drunk, I really am this attractive.

They all sat around the table, chatting about anything and everything. It was the same every evening. No matter what happened during the day, they always tried to fit this in. This was their family time. The time to be together.

“QUIT YOUR BITCHIN’.” Cassie grinned and reeled in the haul of money from the center of the circular table.

“Every damn time,” Ric moaned, looking around at his fellow poker players. “Remind me again why we let her play.”

He withdrew a pack of Marlboro cigarettes, fumbling around in his pockets; first in his navy shirt, then searching in his denim trousers for a lighter. Ric finally found it, but didn’t light up, apparently knowing he had to smoke outside. Eve didn’t allow smoking in her pub.

“Cause there are greater things than money, my friend.” A burly, full-bearded man named Sypher clapped Ric solidly across the shoulder.

“Yeah?” Ric grumbled, planting his wiry, tattooed arms on the table top. “Like what?”

Cassie was only half listening, watching as Eve’s hawk-like gaze slid across the room, assessing everyone and everything. Her mother missed nothing. Eve’s brown eyes warmed when they landed on Cassie, though they didn’t linger long, moving on to scan the rest of the room. Cassie’s attention returned to the men around her. Sypher was shaking his head critically, looking at his fellow card player as if he were mentally challenged for asking such a question.

Sypher, never one for discretion, boldly tipped his head to Cassie and raised both eyebrows, a lop-sided smirk forming. “How else are we gonna spend time with such a woman?”

Cassie laughed, shaking her head. Though what she really wanted to do was roll her eyes. This kind of attention was far from new to her, so she was able to restrain herself. She’d certainly had enough practice.

Her many admirers were a constant source of amusement to her family, though surely she didn’t have as many as they made out. According to them, one smile from her was all it took to make both men and women fall in love with her.

Cassie had lost count of the people who had told her she was the most beautiful woman they’d ever seen. She just thought they needed to get out more. She also thought that title should go to her mother—Eve was exceptionally beautiful. Though both she and Vicki had inherited her good looks, Cassie didn’t think she was any more attractive than they.

“And here I was,” Cassie feigned a hurt expression, “thinking you wanted me for my skill as a player.”

Sypher winked at her. “That’s merely an added bonus.”

Cassie stifled a sigh. “Aren’t you getting sick of trying to convert me? You should know by now that it’s not going to work.”

“I’m sure I could straighten you out,” Sypher bragged.

This time Cassie did roll her eyes. “Any experience with you, Sypher, is only likely to make me gayer.”

Sypher turned red as the men around him all laughed at his expense, but he soon joined in himself, good-naturedly. “You’ll never know until you try it.” It seemed he didn’t give up easily.

“I’ve never been set on fire either, but I know I won’t like it just the same.”

Sypher guffawed along with the rest of the table. “A man could get offended.”

“You do know you could have hired a woman for the money you’ve just lost. All of you could’ve.” Cassie glanced to each of the five men at the table. “And I’m pretty sure the encounter would’ve been a hell of a lot more satisfying than having me take your money.”

Cassie stood, pushing the chair backward. Its feet scraped across the floor. Rising to her full height, she added, “Something to think about fellas.”

She selected a few of the larger notes and dropped them back onto the table. “Next round’s on me.”

The men hollered their approval with cheers, and by banging their drinking glasses against the table top.

“Same time next week?” Sypher called out.

“I’ll be here,” Cassie said over her shoulder.

Though it wasn’t directed at her, Cassie still heard Sypher’s comment to his fellow poker players. “I swear, that woman is the stuff dreams are made of.”

The smell of the pub washed over Cassie as she walked. Alcohol mixed with the sweat from the shadowstalkers, some of whom, given their dirty, torn clothes, had clearly just returned from shadowhunts. Many of the stalkers were black and blue, bruised and cut. Injuries were commonplace, and went with the territory. Scars were worn with pride amongst this community, and were often being compared and shown off.

“Have fun hustling?” Vicki asked as Cassie joined her behind the bar.

Cassie waved the small bundle of cash at her. “Sure did.” She tucked the money into her jeans back pocket. “I’ve had my break. Go take yours.”

Vicki was off like a shot, never needing to be told twice when it came to taking a break. Unlike Cassie, who spent her break chatting with the patrons, Vicki disappeared upstairs, never spending one moment more than she had to with the shadowstalkers. She hadn’t always been so averse to being around fellow stalkers, but everything had changed when their father, Mathew, had been killed. Now, Vicki wanted nothing to do with that lifestyle. If they hadn’t been such a close-knit family, Cassie had no doubt that Vicki would have left by now. She would’ve moved away and started a new life.

Most shadowstalkers, like the Valentine sisters, had been raised by shadowstalking parents, and had been initiated young into that way of life. Some people became shadowstalkers because they’d lost a loved one or family member to a creature, and that cruel initiation into the supernatural world usually made the person want revenge, and they got into shadowstalking as a way to avenge that death. Many of those didn’t last long, for they tended to get in over their heads too quickly, often assuming that all they needed was a gun and to go in shooting. They nearly always underestimated the creatures, thinking of them as little more than dumb animals.

That was the last mistake they made. Of course, some creatures were more intelligent than others, but none were actually dumb.

It wasn't a particularly busy night, and there were only a couple of people waiting at the bar to be served. It didn't take Cassie long to see to the orders, preparing the drinks with a well-practiced skill.

The last man waiting to be served was Clyde Hooper. Eve had warned her on numerous occasions to stay away from him. Cassie didn't need the warning, she could see for herself that something wasn't right with the man. Clyde's black eyes were empty, soulless, his face vacant of all emotion. The only time emotion appeared was when Clyde was killing; Clyde loved to kill. It was why he'd become a shadowstalker in the first place, and it seemed to be his sole purpose in life. Clyde not only enjoyed killing, he got off on it, and if he didn't get his rocks off by killing creatures, he would likely be a killer of people, assuming he wasn't already.

Cassie put his drink on the counter, forcing her face to remain neutral when Clyde put money into her hand, lingering longer than was necessary and prolonging the touch. Not many would've dared, not with Eve being so close. Eve kept a constant vigil over her daughters, and would personally deal with anyone who stepped out of line. Clyde was the only shadowstalker who wasn't the least bit afraid of Eve, and for that reason alone Cassie labeled him as insane. Either that or he was suicidal, and Clyde just wasn't that type.

His cold gaze unsettled Cassie, and she was relieved when Clyde took his drink and swaggered away.

As Cassie began to wipe down the bar, laughter caught her attention. Her mother's laughter. Except for her daughters, Eve only ever let her guard down like that to two other people.

Cassie looked down the length of the bar, her eyes lifting in hope. Whoever Eve was talking to was on the end side of the bar, and Eve's body was blocking their form from view. Cassie eagerly started toward them, though tried not to let her disappointment show as she drew alongside Eve. It wasn't who she'd hoped for. However, Cassie still managed a smile for Garrett, one of the most respected shadowstalkers around.

"Cassie." Garrett greeted her with a warm and friendly smile, creasing his weather-worn face. His kind eyes were gray, like his hair, which was cropped so short it was one step away from being a military buzz-cut. From his hairline, a scar ran diagonally down from the center of his temple and through his right eyebrow, coming to a stop midway down his cheek. The scar, faded with time, was now only a white line. It wasn't at all ugly; in fact, Garrett often boasted that many women had told him the scar made him look dashing. He went on to say that, ironically, the large scar had actually improved his looks, since before he could've only been described as plain at best. Garrett was solidly built, sturdy, like his character. You could rely on Garrett.

Cassie nodded to him, feeling her smile grow. She'd known Garrett her entire life; he and her father had been best friends. Eve had once told her that the pair had been inseparable until

Mathew had met her and fallen in love. And though things inevitably changed, all three parties got along well, so the friendship between the two men stayed its course. Even after Mathew died, Garrett still called in from time to time to check on them.

Garrett traveled a lot, like many shadowstalkers did, tracking whatever creature he was hunting across country, until he was able to kill it. Despite the fact that he often wasn't around, all of the Valentines knew that if they were to need him, he would come running.

Cassie noted the surprised looks that a few of the patrons were giving her mother. They weren't used to seeing her laugh. They were lucky if they got a smile off Eve. Not that Eve was at all rude, she wasn't. But she was incredibly reserved, and only allowed a very select few to see the other, more compassionate side of her.

"Garrett was telling me what happened on his shadowhunt," Eve said to Cassie, chuckling to herself. "He got lost in the swamp."

"Quiet down!" Garrett hissed, hastily looking about for nearby eavesdroppers. "And don't say it like that! Everyone will think I'm inept."

Garrett wiped the condensation from his drink off his hand and onto his jeans. These jeans were the only trousers he ever wore, though Cassie assumed he had several pairs. They were all the same color: black. His T-shirts were nearly as restricted, though he had a couple of different colors, but all were still dark shades. Today's was burgundy. All stalkers wore dark clothes on a shadowhunt; it helped with stealth and camouflage. Stalking was Garrett's life, and Cassie knew he was a man of simple tastes, so she imagined he never saw much point in having a variety to his wardrobe.

"Didn't you take a map?" Cassie's tone inferred that he should have.

Garrett frowned, clearly annoyed that Cassie would even think he could be that careless. "Of course I took a..."

Cassie locked on to her mother, trying to keep a straight face. "This is the guy you're saying Vic and I should learn from? Seriously?"

"Now hold on a second," he flustered, turning crimson.

Eve interrupted him. "You're right," she told Cassie, turning to examine the other patrons. Her eyes twinkled devilishly as she gestured toward two men stumbling and staggering toward the toilets. "Perhaps Steve or Ernie would be a better choice?"

Cassie's hand rose to her chin, pretending to mull it over.

Garrett took one glance at the heavily drunk men and clenched his fists on top of the counter. "Those two?" His voice rose in indignation. "They couldn't find their way out of a paper bag."

Deadpan, Cassie said, "But I bet they could manage a swamp."

Eve erupted into laughter, clapping Cassie on the back.

Garrett looked livid for a moment, then noticed Cassie's broadening grin. "Very funny." He scowled, creasing his scar. He pointed accusingly at Eve. "She's just like you. Twisted sense of humor."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Giving Cassie an amused glance, Eve continued on with the story. "To be fair, Garrett was being chased by a pack of crawlers at the time."

"A large pack," Garrett added. Crawlers were vile creatures, named so because even though they could stand erect, they chose to run on all fours. Crawlers could reach incredible speeds. Even Cassie, the fastest of the Valentines, thanks in part to her long stride, wouldn't be able to outpace a crawler.

"And I didn't get lost, I was only disoriented for a minute. And to make it clear I did have a map," Garrett said to Cassie, taking a swig of Guinness and narrowing his eyes at her.

Cassie only grinned wider. "I believe you. Thousands wouldn't."

Garrett smiled, despite his obvious attempts not to.

"Here." Eve handed Cassie a wet cloth. "Clean your hands. God only knows where Clyde has been."

Cassie smiled disbelievingly at Eve. "You saw that? You had your back to us." She thoroughly wiped her hands, grateful to remove Clyde's slimy touch from her skin. When her hands felt clean once more, she dropped the cloth onto the counter. "I don't know why I'm surprised. You see everything."

Eve smirked and winked at Cassie.

Vicki suddenly reappeared, coming over to see who they were talking to. As soon as her eyes landed on Garrett, she turned around to leave.

"Hi there, Vicki," Garrett greeted her, stopping her retreat.

Vicki had little choice but to face him. She smiled, though they could all see it was forced. "How are you, Garrett?"

Garrett's own smile was keen, eager. "Great. And you?"

"Fine, thanks. I'm just..." Vicki quickly snatched up a tray. As if she wanted the prop to back up her words. "Collecting empty glasses."

“It’d be nice to catch up,” Garrett tried. As he always did. “If you have a moment?”

“Sorry, I don’t,” Vicki said bluntly.

“I’ll collect the glasses, honey.” Eve held her hands out encouragingly for the tray.

“No. That’s all right. I’ve already had my break,” Vicki lied. She shot a warning glance to Cassie, who knew she was meant to be on her break right now, but she followed Vicki’s wishes and kept quiet. Vicki gave Eve a small smile. “You’re always telling me to pull my weight.”

Cassie sighed internally. That in itself was testament enough to show how uncomfortable Vicki was around Garrett—the fact that she would choose work above a mere conversation.

Vicki darted away, leaving Garrett with nothing but a crestfallen expression. In consolation, Eve patted his hand, which was still on the bar counter.

“It’s not you personally, Garrett,” Cassie said, as she had numerous times before. “She just relates you to Dad, and it’s too painful for her to be around you.”

“I know,” Garrett said quietly. “But we used to be so close.” He shook his head sadly. “And now she can barely look at me. She actually flinches when she sees me.”

Cassie didn’t know what to say. Vicki had always looked up to Garrett. Admired him. Idolized him. And though Garrett had never said it, she knew that he considered Vicki to be the daughter he’d never had. They’d been that close.

“I’m sorry,” Eve said sincerely. “I hoped in time she’d come around.”

“It’s been five years.” Garrett finished his drink. “Maybe it’s time I gave up.”

Eve frowned, fixing him with a stern look. “It’d be the first time in your life if you did. That’s not who you are, Garrett. The Garrett I know never walks away from anything.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. Then nodded. “As always, Eve, you’re right.”

“Damn right,” Eve said confidently. “And don’t you forget it.”

Garrett mock saluted her.

“Careful, soldier,” Eve warned. “Or I won’t re-fill your beer.”

THE KITCHEN'S AROMA was one of cleanliness and soap, or apple-scented washing up liquid to be more precise. It was a pleasant fragrance, quite contrasting to the sweaty odor of the pub. Though to be fair, the smell in the pub didn't linger long after the punters left.

The hallway that separated the pub from the kitchen was quite long, and surprisingly wide for such a simple passageway. Three people could comfortably stand beside one another without spanning the hall's entire width. Built into the hallway on either side were two deep cupboards, reaching from floor to ceiling. They were stocked full with supplies of the shadowstalking variety; ranging from guns and ammunition to spare medical kits. These were only the basics of course, things they might need in a hurry. The rarer, specialized items were kept upstairs in the fourth bedroom, which was used only for storage.

The décor in the hall had been carried on from the pub; the cupboard doors were wooden, and the walls were cream, with age rather than intent.

The kitchen, as part of the Valentines home, had a completely different feel to the pub; it was warm, lived-in and cheerful. The substantial L-shaped kitchen was rustic, as one would expect from a farmhouse; the kitchen units were plain, white and unassuming, as was the wooden work surface that rested across the top. The matching wooden floor was the same as in the bar, and it continued throughout the entire ground level. The walls were painted burgundy, the rich color bringing the warmth out of the wooden surfaces.

Opposite the hallway entrance, cut into the work surface, was a white ceramic sink, and above that a picture window, framing nothing but the night sky: it was a little after midnight.

A circular table, not unlike the ones in the bar, sat in the center of the room, four chairs tucked neatly underneath.

Another window was on the front wall of the kitchen, letting in further light. Though not as much as it could have. The steel bars covering both windows hampered the light somewhat.

Two gigantic appliances, one a fridge, and the other a separate freezer, sat to the right of the window, alongside one another. They were white, in-keeping with the surrounding units, but were of such a large size they dwarfed the much smaller units. Since the nearest town was more than an hour away, it was essential for the Valentines to be able to stock up on food.

To the back of the kitchen was a doorway that led into another storage room, which was used to house the liquor and the bar's general supplies. The back door to the house led off the storage room, and this, with the exception of the main entrance, was the only way into the building. The back door was also steel-plated like the front doors, so the house was well-secured.

Staring out the window, admiring the night sky, was Vicki Valentine. She spent a few moments watching the twinkling stars overhead before returning to the vitally important task at hand. She removed another glass from the bowl of hot soapy water and placed it on the sink's draining board. She despised washing up. The repetitiveness of scrubbing dozens upon dozens of glasses nearly bored her to death.

Plus, Vicki was in a bad mood. Though it had nothing whatsoever to do with washing up. It was Garrett's fault. The man had that effect on her. She was pleased he only visited every few months, for to her, he was a constant reminder of her father, Mathew, and how things used to be, but could never be again. Garrett's presence did nothing but upset her. It was painful for her to be around him. Vicki knew it was unfair of her to treat Garrett in this way, especially since he wasn't to blame for the incident that had taken her father's life. However, knowing that and acting on it were two entirely different things. Each time Garrett left, Vicki promised herself that the next time she saw him she would put in more of an effort, but each promise turned to ash when she actually laid eyes on him.

Vicki couldn't help how she felt, no matter how hard she tried. This only compounded her feelings and made her even more frustrated. And even after Garrett had left the pub, returning to whatever motel he was staying at, she couldn't simply dismiss her emotions, and it usually kept her off balance for the rest of the evening. Hence her bad mood.

Eve set down another tray of glasses that needed to be washed. Vicki would've usually sighed in annoyance at the extra load, but tonight it didn't bother her. She'd rather be kept busy when her thoughts were in turmoil.

Eve laid a hand on Vicki's back. Her mother, Vicki had learned, could always tell when something was bothering her or Cassie—she knew them well.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Vicki did sigh now, loudly. “It's nothing you haven't already heard. I'd just be repeating myself.”

“I don't mind,” Eve said.

“Well, I do.” Vicki whirled around to face Eve, water dripping off her hands and onto the floor. “I just want to put the whole thing with Dad behind me, and every time Garrett comes in it brings it all back! How am I supposed to move on?” Her anger rushed to the surface, boiling over like lava from an erupting volcano. “No, scratch that. Every shadowstalker I see brings it all back. Garrett's just worse. I don't understand why we can't just pack up and leave. Leave the pub, these people, this whole bloody life!” Vicki was shouting now, furious. “Why can't we just go? The fact that we're still shadowstalkers is ludicrous in itself! Didn't we learn our lesson from Dad?” She drew a ragged breath. “Or are we simply expected to keep on fighting until there's no one left?”

Only when the rant finished did Eve reply, as if she'd been letting Vicki get it out of her system. “First of all, stalking is what we've always done. It's what we do. It's in our blood.” Eve leaned against the countertop. “Secondly, I've never forced you to do it. Before your dad died you were keener than any of us.”

“I was a kid!” Vicki heard her voice rise again. “I didn't know jack shit.”

“Maybe not. But it’s been five years since your dad died, you’re still stalking.”

Vicki drew her wet hands frustratedly through her hair, sweeping several strands away from her face, using the moisture to plaster them down onto her head. “I don’t want to let you or Cassie down.” She shrugged, trying for nonchalance.

Eve shook her head. “You wouldn’t be. I’ve told you that. I would never force you to do something you didn’t want to.”

Vicki held up a glass to refute the point. She never wanted to wash up.

Eve impatiently rolled her eyes. “Anything of note.” She held Vicki’s gaze for a long moment. Her voice softened. “And we both know that’s not the real reason you continue to come with us on shadowhunts.”

Vicki blinked. No one but she knew of the reason, not even Eve. She’d never spoken of it. Though despite that, apparently Eve knew she was holding something back. Eve’s perceptiveness sometimes unnerved Vicki, especially when she was trying to keep something from her. It was as if her mother had a sixth sense about these things. Vicki wouldn’t be at all surprised if she learned that her mother had the ability to read minds. It felt like that sometimes. Eve could read her like an open book.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Vicki turned away, putting her back to Eve, inadvertently proving her mother’s point. She re-focused on washing the glasses.

Eve ran a tender hand through the back of Vicki’s brown locks, the same precise shade as her own hair. “You know where I am if you change your mind.”

THE BITTER WIND carried voices to Cassie’s overly sensitive ears—angry voices. She’d just returned from taking the rubbish around to the large bin at the back of the house. She’d gone by way of the front entrance since she’d heard her mother and sister arguing and, for a change, decided to stay out of it.

She paused by the double front doors, listening. Turning her head toward the sound, she spotted a light in the distance. Since there weren’t any other houses close by, the area was usually devoid of man-made light. Her interest piqued, Cassie headed off to investigate. Her hand ran across the holstered Beretta pistol at her hip. She wasn’t checking the gun was there, for she always carried it. The touch of the cold metal simply reassured her.

The voices were muffled, and if she hadn’t been outside she wouldn’t have heard them. It was dark, past midnight. There was no moon or stars to see by for the sky was overcast with

clouds. Poor visibility made no difference to Cassie, who knew every bit of this land like the back of her own hand.

Breaking into a fast jog, she followed the sound of voices, which were becoming more and more heated. The bitter wind assaulted her body, only made worse by the speed she was now running. Cassie was incredibly fast on her feet, and despite the wind barraging her tall frame, she found she was enjoying herself. The exertion soon began to warm her, and the fact she was only wearing jeans and a fitted shirt no longer bothered Cassie. The warmth meant she now didn't have any need for a coat.

She ran for some time, Cassie's long stride making short work of the ground underfoot. Because of the flat plains, sound carried a good distance, and Cassie found herself nearing the edge of their large expanse of land as she closed in on the light. The light was static and on the public road.

Cassie could make out the words now, and from the argument recognized who they were. Two new shadowstalkers, not of this area, had disagreed earlier in the bar and had got up to fight. The regulars, some of whom were local to the surrounding area, knew better than to start a fistfight inside, and had advised them to do otherwise. Nearly all shadowstalkers had heard of the Valentines, so the newcomers paid heed to their words. Though disputes were commonplace in a pub, especially amongst a bunch of fighters, the regulars had learnt early on that Eve had no patience for it and simply wouldn't tolerate that kind of behavior in her pub. If you made the mistake of ignoring that unspoken rule, you were just as likely to be shot by Eve as you were by your opponent.

Normally the fight would be taken outside The Smoking Gun, and into the parking area at the front of the pub. These two men had taken it one step further and actually removed themselves from the Valentines' entire property. That allowed for two different possibilities: either they didn't dare risk Eve's wrath, even in the parking area, or that the dispute was so serious, they didn't want to be disturbed because the fight was to the death.

The light, Cassie saw, came from vehicle headlights, two vehicles in fact. They were parked side by side—the car on the single track road, the motorcycle on the dirt. Two figures stood in front of the vehicles, illuminated by the headlights.

The argument abruptly stopped, and Cassie could see the exchange of blows. Picking up her pace, her feet soon crossed from the dry earth onto tarmac. The men were so engrossed in their fight neither even registered her unexpected presence.

“Hold it, fellas,” she heard herself say, though she had absolutely no authority to do so. They weren't on Valentine territory.

Harley, nicknamed so because he was never away from his precious motorbike—a Harley Davidson—was a large brute of a man, built like a bull. His massive shoulder muscles bulged under his black T-shirt as he delivered a powerful uppercut, sending Earl, a red-head with a wiry build, staggering backward.

Harley leveled an impatient look at Cassie. "This has nothing to do with you, Valentine," he spat. "Disappear."

"Yeah," Earl added, spitting out a tooth and a mouthful of blood. "Get gone."

Cassie knew little about either man, only knowing their names because she'd overheard them earlier in the pub. She had hoped Earl would've sided with her, since it was painfully apparent who was winning, and it wasn't him. His macho pride wouldn't allow him to back down from the fight though, even if he was losing.

"Who said I'm here to interfere?" Cassie asked innocently. She sat back against the car's bonnet, striking a relaxed pose. "I like to watch a good fight."

This seemed to appeal to Harley; she could practically see his ego inflate.

"Well it's your lucky day, babe. I'll try and draw it out for you." He smirked cockily, flexing his huge biceps. "Don't think it'll take long."

Cassie batted her eyelashes at him, holding him enraptured. "Finishing too soon leaves the woman unsatisfied you know."

Earl sniggered. "I'm sure many a woman's told him that."

It took Harley a moment to realize he'd just been insulted. In a rage, he launched himself at Earl, who barely managed to dart out of his way.

Cassie silently cursed Earl, here she was trying to save him from a beating, and he kept prodding the bear. She'd had Harley distracted.

"If you ask me," Cassie said to Earl, "it sounds like you're speaking from your own experience."

Harley guffawed loudly, stopping his attempts to grab Earl.

Earl reddened in embarrassment. "What?"

Cassie gave him a stern look that told him to keep his mouth shut. Earl sensibly swallowed both his indignation and his retort.

Harley appraised Cassie's figure openly. "And I thought you were just a pretty face."

She forced a smile. "So, is someone gonna tell me what this is all about?"

Harley crossed his massive forearms in defiance. Since Harley wasn't forthcoming, Cassie nodded to Earl, giving him permission to speak again.

“We...Harley, myself and Ed, teamed up to tag-team a group of screechers.”

Screechers used sound as their weapon, screeching at such a high frequency it makes a human’s ears bleed, and causes them to pass out. While unconscious, the screecher moves in and begins to feast on its helpless victim.

Earl took a breath before continuing, “Harley got separated from us. Ed and I were ambushed. Outnumbered five to one. I knew we didn’t stand a chance. We were going to die.” He sounded certain of that, as if whole-heartedly convinced that what he said was true. He took another breath. “I had an opportunity to escape.” Earl gave a small shrug, though it was sad rather than dismissive. He clearly wasn’t proud of what he’d done. “I took it.”

“You left Ed!” Harley yelled, his fury returning with full force. “You ran! You’re a coward. Ed died because of you.”

Cassie swallowed, hard. This subject was bringing up bad memories for her. As she fought to regain her focus, Harley laid into Earl, striking him repeatedly with his huge fists.

The power behind each hit was immense— Earl was already bleeding heavily from his head and face. Earl stumbled, and another blow from Harley sent him sprawling to the ground. He curled into a ball, trying to shield himself as Harley kicked and stomped with his steel-tipped boots.

The attack suddenly ceased, as Cassie threw herself at Harley and tackled him to the ground. She got up quickly and positioned herself in front of Earl, who was trying unsuccessfully to get to his feet.

“I told you to keep out of this.” Harley’s voice rose, though he made no attempt to go around her. “I heard you knew Ed? You know he was a good bloke.”

Cassie nodded. “He was. And I’m sorry he’s dead. But Ed knew the risks, we all do.”

“Ed didn’t deserve to die like that. Abandoned. If this coward here,” Harley jabbed his forefinger sharply in Earl’s direction, “had stayed, they might’ve both gotten out. They might’ve survived.”

“I agree,” Cassie said, seeing surprise appear on Harley’s face. “Though it’s unlikely.”

Harley glared down at Earl, who was still on the ground, but had managed to sit himself upright. “You said five to one. That’s doable. You leaving made it ten to one, which is nigh on impossible. You left him, and that’s what got him killed.”

From the sheath attached to his belt, Harley withdrew a wicked looking Bowie knife. “And in so doing you signed your own death warrant.”

“Now hold on a minute.” Cassie made a halting motion with her hand. She tried to calm the fast approaching confrontation, sensing that this time only bloodshed would stop it. “I’m sure Earl’s sorry for what he did.”

“I am,” Earl said quickly. His macho pride had vanished now. It was clear he had no wish to die.

Harley didn’t waver in the slightest. “Doesn’t bring my friend back.” He took a step forward, raising his knife. “Move, Valentine. I have no quarrel with you.”

Cassie didn’t budge an inch. They were of equal height, so were eye to eye with each other. They stared one another down. Though Cassie was carrying a gun, she knew Earl and Harley would be similarly armed, and it would be dishonorable for any of them to draw a gun when engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Besides, even if Cassie did pull her weapon, it wouldn’t change anything—Harley might be delayed, but he would still want his pound of flesh from Earl.

“You know,” Harley said after a long, tense moment. “I don’t know why I even bothered trying to explain it to you. I should’ve known you’d be on the coward’s side.”

“I’d be very careful of what you say next.” Cassie’s eyes flashed dangerously, like bolts of lightning in a stormy sky.

“I’d forgotten that you were one.” Harley shook his head critically. “And if I remember correctly, it was much worse than Earl here. You left your own father to die, didn’t you?” It wasn’t a question. Harley sneered at her. “He must be awfully proud of you.”

Cassie’s reaction was so explosively violent Harley didn’t even have time to wipe the smirk from his face.

With a long leg she kicked the Bowie knife clean out of his hand. She delivered blow after blow to his face, chest, and abdomen. The onslaught was so relentless Harley had no choice but to go on the defensive, shielding himself as best he could from her furious assault.

Harley uncovered his face long enough to deliver a right-cross and it connected solidly with her jaw. Cassie felt her head snap to the side with the impact, but the pain hardly registered, and amazingly, it barely slowed her down, the rage fueling her only building further at the blow.

Harley was a trained fighter, Cassie could tell from how he moved, but he was no match for her. His brute strength should’ve been an advantage, but she was too fast for him, so he couldn’t use it effectively—that single blow was all Harley managed to deliver.

Suddenly, the fight was over. Harley crashed to the ground with a loud thud, his eyes blinking slowly as if struggling to stay open.

Cassie stood above him, fists clenched, knuckles white with barely contained rage. Her eyes throwing sparks, she fought to regain control, wanting nothing more than to continue the fight,

though her opponent was well past the point of being able to defend himself. Her willpower alone stopped her from continuing, though the anger his words had caused still churned away beneath the surface. She focused on taking deep breaths, calming herself.

When she had control, Cassie knelt over Harley, slapping his face to rouse him and get his attention.

“You’re barred from The Smoking Gun.” She couldn’t forgive what he’d said. “And leave Earl be. If something happens to him you’ll have me to answer to.”

Fear was a good motivator, and Cassie hoped that her threat would be enough to dissuade Harley from taking this feud with Earl any further. She’d barely finished speaking when Harley’s eyes rolled back in his head. Cassie let unconsciousness take him; she’d said her piece.

Cassie walked toward Earl, tentatively moving her sore jaw from side to side, checking to see if it was broken. She was relieved to find it wasn’t. She ran her tongue across all her teeth, pleased that none were loose. She wasn’t undamaged though—her lip was split, and blood gushed from her nose. She helped Earl to stand. His face, bar being covered in blood, was etched with awe.

“It seems I was the one who saw a good fight.” Earl shook his head in amazement. “I’ve never seen anyone fight like that.”

Cassie scoffed. “Hardly. That was barely a scuffle.”

Earl’s ginger eyebrows crawled into his hairline. “I would love to see your definition of a fight.”

Cassie picked up Earl’s car keys, which must’ve fallen out of his pocket amidst the fight. “Are you all right to drive?”

Earl nodded. “I’ve had worse beatings.” He grew timid, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously. “I know you saved my life. I owe you one.”

Cassie tossed his car keys over. “Do you know where Harley’s staying?”

“I do. A motel called The Winding Road.”

Cassie recognized the name, but hoped she was mistaken. “In Juniper Creek?”

Earl nodded.

She stifled a sigh. That was a three hour drive away. Harley had been on his travels. Cassie had no intention of driving there now; since it was past midnight she wouldn’t get back until morning. Not only that, her jaw throbbed, and she wanted to get some ice on it. She soon thought of a solution.

“I’m calling in that favor now.”

Earl blinked in surprise at how quickly she was calling in his debt, but he didn’t falter. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Take Harley back to his motel. I’ll swing by in the morning and drop off his bike.”

“That’s it?” Earl sounded doubtful. “You saved my life, and all you want in return is for me to drive a guy back to his motel? Surely you want more than that?”

“Nope. That’s it.” Cassie noticed that Earl looked strangely disappointed, so she added, “Buy me a drink next time you’re in if it’ll make you feel better.” To Cassie, it was a symbolic gesture, nothing more.

Earl smiled keenly, wincing when it pulled on the cuts to his face. “I sure will.”

Cassie retrieved the motorbike’s ignition keys from Harley’s leather jacket, draped across the bike’s seat. She assisted Earl in getting the unconscious shadowstalker into the back seat of Earl’s car, which wasn’t without its difficulties given Harley’s large size, and then tossed his leather jacket in as well. It was way too big for Cassie, and she had her own leather jacket at home. She would wear that when returning the bike. It wasn’t far to travel home, so Cassie left the helmet where it was, in its storage box behind the seat.

With a nod to Earl, Cassie roared away on the motorbike, gunning it toward home.

THE HOUSE GREW in size as Cassie rode toward it. Though the inside had been drastically changed, the exterior just looked like an average farmhouse. The gray stone walls had been left exposed, retaining the property’s character and rustic charm. On top of the two-stories, gray roof tiles blended effortlessly in with the rest of the building. Six well-proportioned windows; three on the ground floor, three upstairs, lined the front of the house. All were the same size, except for two, which were bigger; the bay windows of the pub that sat on either side of the double, maroon-painted front doors.

Above the doors swung the pub’s sign, the title of which was written in gold, and the picture beneath was fittingly of a smoking gun—a double-barreled shotgun. That was also fitting, since that was Eve’s weapon of choice. Though unlike the picture, the barrels of Eve’s 12-gauge shotgun were sawn-off, making it easier for Eve to maneuver in close confines. Eve’s shotgun had been a gift from her father. Cassie knew she treasured it not only for its sentimental value, but because it had saved all of their lives countless times. In Eve’s expert hands it had never missed its mark, had never once failed her.

As Cassie expected, her mother was in the doorway, shotgun at the ready, aiming at the unexpected late night, or rather early morning visitor.

Eve lowered her weapon when Cassie drove into the revealing light from the house.

Cassie stopped in the pub's expansive parking area, to the front of the property. The area wasn't tarmacked or anything as grand, the dry earth was just more worn and compacted from regularly being used by many vehicles. Cassie kicked the bike stand into place and dismounted.

Eve came swiftly to her. "Where on earth have you been? I was just on my way out to look for you." Concern knitted her brow when Cassie turned around, revealing her bloodied face. "What happened?" Eve lightly gripped her chin, holding Cassie still for a better look. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just took a punch. A couple of the guys were settling a dispute."

"With you?" Eve asked in surprise. "You get on with everybody."

"Not with me. But I disagreed with their reasoning. It's all sorted now." Cassie waved a hand, dismissing it.

Eve refrained from asking anything else, though Cassie could tell she badly wanted to. She appreciated the restraint, though frankly she was surprised Eve hadn't demanded to know who had laid a hand on her so she could go and knock seven shades of hurt into them. Clearly Eve's concern for Cassie meant her heart overruled her temper, and the realization made Cassie smile.

"Come on, let's get you inside." Eve linked an arm through Cassie's, and led her toward the house.

"Whose is the hog?" Vicki appeared in the doorway. "Jesus, what happened to you?"

"Fistfight." Cassie didn't elaborate further. Her jaw was painful, and it hurt to talk.

"Are you keeping the bike?" Vicki openly admired the motorcycle. The bodywork was black, shiny. The chrome framework was also polished to a high degree. There wasn't a mark on the bike, and it was obvious that the machine was well taken care of.

"No. Harley's not in a fit state to drive, so I'll return it in the morning."

"Aww." It was apparent Vicki wanted to hang on to it.

Eve's eyes narrowed at the mention of Harley's name. Her jaw clenched.

Vicki moved out of the doorway for them to enter, since only one of the double doors stood open, then closed and bolted it, securing the house. It wasn't often that they used both main doors, one was nearly always left closed, bolted to the floor.

Heading toward the kitchen, Cassie caught sight of herself in the horizontal mirror behind the bar, which ran the bar's full length. Harley certainly had a good right hook. She'd bled a lot—crimson coating under her nose and her entire chin—though she knew blood always made things look worse than they actually were. Her jaw was starting to bruise, and no doubt would be black and blue by morning.

Sitting herself down at the round kitchen table, Cassie gave her sister a grateful nod when Vicki thoughtfully handed her a bag of frozen peas, which she'd retrieved from the freezer and wrapped in a towel. Cassie pressed the ice cold package to her jaw, hoping to keep the swelling to a minimum.

Eve fetched the first aid kit from a kitchen cupboard and sat next to Cassie, scooting the chair closer. She gently started to clean the blood from Cassie's face, then raised her eyebrows expectantly.

Cassie's lips twitched in amusement. "You're waiting to hear the full story, aren't you?"

Eve's smile was all the answer she needed.

Chapter Two

"NO WAY."

"OH come on, it's not even yours."

"Exactly. I want it to get back to its owner in one piece." Cassie gave her sister a playful shove. "Now, off."

Vicki, straddling the Harley Davidson, didn't budge. "I can drive safely." She smiled impishly. "When I want to."

"Look, I took the bike, it's my responsibility. That's all there is to it. You're driving the Land Rover." Cassie gestured with her thumb to their car—a ten year old green Land Rover that had high mileage and several rust spots. Since they didn't have a garage, the car was out in all weather conditions, and there was no protection on the harsh, open plains. The poor car took a beating, both by the weather and because the Valentines used it over all terrains. On shadowhunts they often had to go off-roading, so the Land Rover was somewhat battered, dented in a variety of places.

“I don’t see why you’re so bothered.” Vicki withdrew a penknife from her trouser pocket and flipped the blade open. She pressed it to the bike’s black petrol tank. “When I see what Harley did to your face, I want to...” A dark smile formed. “Well, kick the shit out of him.” She shrugged. “But since he’s not here I’ll settle for peeling the paint off his beloved bike.”

Cassie grabbed her hand, holding it still. “Believe me, Vic, he came off a hell of a lot worse than I did. I saw to that.” Though Cassie appreciated that Vicki’s defensive attitude was on her behalf, she also knew that any action taken now would just make things a whole lot worse. They had more than enough trouble in their lives, without inviting more. “You’d just be stirring the pot. I barred Harley; we won’t be seeing him again.”

With some reluctance, Vicki closed and re-pocketed the penknife. With a dramatic sigh, she dismounted the motorcycle. “That’s two for two. You’ve won both disputes this morning. I’m amazed you managed to stop Mom from coming.”

“Me too,” Cassie said. Eve had been all but set to come along, expressing that she simply wanted a private word with Harley. Cassie knew what that meant. Her mother was extremely protective. Cassie had asked what she would’ve done had she been there last night. Eve said she’d have beaten the tar out of him, then banned him from setting foot on the premises. Cassie pointed out that was exactly what she herself had done, so there was no need for her to take things further. Eve had still tried to tag along, saying she wouldn’t touch Harley. But Cassie knew that if she even saw the man, her temper would likely get the better of her. After further deliberation, Eve had conceded the point and promised to stay behind.

Cassie removed the helmet from the storage box behind the seat, but didn’t put it on, instead hooking it over the handlebars. She took Vicki’s place on the bike. Since she and the owner were the same height, the motorcycle was a perfect fit for her.

Vicki nodded approvingly. “You look good on that.”

Cassie glanced knowingly at her. “I’m not keeping it.”

Vicki grinned. “You said that. But I was just thinking, you must have a bundle saved up from all those poker games. I’ve never once seen you lose.”

Cassie zipped up her leather jacket. It wasn’t at all cold, a nice sunny day for a ride, the azure sky clear and cloudless. But she knew it would soon become chilly as she picked up speed, which is why she’d also worn a warm, turquoise jumper above her black jeans. Amusedly, she noted that Vicki had worn a similar outfit, though her jeans were blue and her jumper was lilac. She’d even worn her black leather jacket, which Vicki usually reserved for shadowhunts. It was obvious that Vicki had assumed Cassie would cave in and let her have her way and drive the motorbike. In any other circumstance, Cassie would have done just that. She was a soft touch where her sister was concerned. But given Vicki’s hostility toward Harley for his actions last night, Cassie wouldn’t put it past her to intentionally crash his bike. Cassie couldn’t have that, hence why she was driving it.

She could see that Vicki had more to say. “And?”

“So what are you saving up for?”

“Things we need.”

Vicki didn't look convinced. “Like what?”

“I don't know yet.” Cassie shrugged. “Practical things. I use a lot of it re-stocking our weapons and ammo. That stuff's not cheap.”

“What's more practical than having a second vehicle? We'd be screwed if the Land Rover broke down.”

“A car, maybe.” Cassie easily saw where she was going with this. “A bike, no.”

“Why not?” Vicki didn't give Cassie a chance to answer, quickly continuing to try and convince her. “A bike's much faster. It can get in and out of places that a car can't.”

“It only carries two for starters. There's not enough space for supplies.” Cassie listed them off on her fingers. “We don't have good weather around here, and there's no roof on a bike. We'd always be wet.”

“It still has advantages. It'd be great for a diversional tactic.”

“It would,” Cassie said. “I'm not saying it doesn't have its advantages, I just don't think there's enough to warrant buying one.

Especially since we have limited money. I'd have to save up for years to buy a bike like this.” A small frown formed. “I wonder how Harley managed to afford it?”

Vicki snorted. “Don't be naïve. He likely stole it.”

Cassie didn't have to think long about the man's character before arriving at the same conclusion. “You're probably right.”

Vicki released a loud, frustrated breath. “And you're still gonna return it.” She shook her head in disbelief. “What a waste.”

“What can I say?” Cassie lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I'm not like Harley, or any other stalker with questionable morals.”

“You know, considering the life we lead, you and Mom have such outdated views.”

Cassie raised and pointed a finger at her. “Don't pretend like you'd steal, Vic, because I know you wouldn't.”

Vicki's brow creased. "Of course not. I didn't mean that. I was referring to your stubborn insistence of just scraping by. Mom, too. It's not like we don't have a better option. We're friends with a multi-millionaire for God's sake."

"We've been through this, Vic." Cassie's voice hardened. "Let it drop."

"Hell, we're more than friends, Raven's family. She's practically your girlfriend. I've lost count of the times Raven's offered to help us out. But you and Mom won't have it. It's stupid."

"She's not my girlfriend, don't get started on that."

"I said *practically*." Vicki sighed. "Though I don't know why you're not dating. That's stupid too."

"Leave it, Vic," Cassie said in a warning tone. "And regarding the money, it's the..."

"...principle of it, I know." Vicki rolled her eyes. "I've heard it a thousand times. And you say you don't want Raven to think we're only friends because of the money. Raven would never think that. We've known one another for at least," she thought for a moment, "four years."

Vicki gave the motorcycle an affectionate pat. "I bet Raven would buy us a bike."

Cassie's eyes narrowed. "The day you ask Raven for anything is the day you and I have a serious falling out." She didn't need to mention what their mother would do.

"Fine." Vicki huffed. "Don't get so touchy."

She paused, her tone softening. "But as family, we take money off one another all the time. I'd have thought you of all people would consider Raven to be one of the family."

Cassie nodded easily. "I do."

"Well then." Vicki walked backward, toward their rusty, battered car. "The only problem I see is that your pride won't allow you to accept any help." She threw the car keys up in the air and caught them. "Maybe you're not as different from other shadowstalkers as you thought."

CASSIE HOPPED DOWN from the Land Rover, leaving her leather jacket in the car. Vicki did the same, since it'd only gotten warmer as the day went on.

They'd stopped at Long Meadows on the way back, the nearest town to their home. Eve had given them a list of groceries and other supplies that they were running low on. They'd already been to Juniper Creek, and left the motorcycle outside The Winding Road—the motel Harley

was staying at—leaving the keys with the motel’s desk clerk for safekeeping. They’d had no trouble, Harley didn’t even show his face.

The town of Long Meadows was actually more of a village, its small, diminutive size more fitting of that title. There was only a handful of shops, including a post office, allowing the locals to send and receive things from the outside world, a single, essential grocery store, which was always the busiest place in town, a petrol station and garage, also vital since the townsfolk had to travel long distances if they wanted to go anywhere, and it maintained and repaired their vehicles. Finally, a bakery, which made fresh bread and cakes for the locals’ consumption. There was also a church, set in a humble, but well-tended graveyard.

The single main road ran straight through the town, parking to either side offering easy, unrestricted access to the few shops. The people of Long Meadows took pride in their community, and it showed—there wasn’t a single overgrown garden, a single fence that needed painting, or even a single piece of litter. The shops were as well-maintained as the houses: neat, orderly, smart. The community spirit meant everyone pitched in, everyone got involved, and they all took care of one another.

Most of the residents were middle-aged, their children, if they had any, were grown up, and had either moved away or bought their own house in town. Quite a few of the residents were older retirees. The younger generation were the minority. There were not many under the age of twenty-five in town. Oddly, there were no children in Long Meadows.

Vicki nodded to one of the townsfolk who was passing by the front of the car.

“Ladies,” he greeted politely.

Cassie caught the man looking at her bruised jaw, though to his credit he was trying to be discreet about it. He was the only one who would bother; no doubt every other person here would ask what had happened. Because Long Meadows was such a small town, the residents here all knew one another. Everybody knew everyone’s business and the Valentines, though made welcome, were somewhat of a mystery to them as they kept to themselves, which was an unknown concept here.

Though the man had been discreet to her, Cassie was certain that her bruised face would be the gossip of the day. And juicy gossip at that. There would be much speculation about what had happened, each theory becoming more ludicrous than the last. Cassie didn’t mind, she couldn’t blame them—it’s not like they had much else to occupy them way out here. Though not nearly as remote as The Smoking Gun, the town was still pretty isolated, cut off from the rest of the world.

“Better think of a story,” Vicki said beneath her breath. Since nobody knew they ran a pub, Cassie could hardly tell the truth about how she’d acquired the bruise, or else the townsfolk would be stopping by for drinks, and civilians simply weren’t part of the clientele.

“I’ll just say you did it,” Cassie joked.

“Don’t you dare! I’ll get the stink-eye for months.”

They both slowed their pace as they headed for the general store to pick up the grocery shopping. They had to come up with a story before going in. Since it was the middle of the afternoon, it would be busy inside. The drive to Juniper Creek had taken up much of the day, being a good three hours’ drive each way. They hadn’t yet had any lunch, and were eager to get something to eat. A trip to the bakery was in order.

“I’ve got it,” Vicki said. “Say someone tried to hi-jack the Land Rover.”

Cassie glanced over her shoulder, thrusting a thumb in its direction. “Have you seen our car, Vic? Who in their right mind would want to steal that?”

Vicki chuckled as she looked the green, rust-covered vehicle over. “A crazy person?”

Cassie shook her head, her expression conveying to Vicki that she’d have to be crazy herself to try and get away with such a story. “It has to be believable.”

“People here are always bitchin’ about Allensville, say you got mugged there.”

Allensville was the next town, an hour and a half away from Long Meadows, and ten times its size. Due to Allensville’s larger numbers, the crime rate was higher—being that they actually had one. The peaceful folk here were always worried that the ‘delinquents’, as they called them, from Allensville would spill over into this quiet community, and ruin it for everyone living here.

“Yeah. They’ll believe that.” She bumped Vicki with her hip. “Good thinking.”

Vicki smiled. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

Cassie opened the store door for an elderly woman. She tried to recall her name—a Mrs. Frye, if she remembered correctly.

“Thank you, dear.” Mrs. Frye shuffled through the doorway, only looking up when she was through. “Oh it’s you, Cassie.” A warm, grandmotherly smile creased her wrinkled face further. She wore thick glasses, and Cassie hoped she wouldn’t notice her bruised jaw.

“Good heavens!” A hand went to Mrs. Frye’s mouth in shock.

The bruise must be more prominent than she’d thought—Mrs. Frye had terrible eyesight.

Mrs. Frye unloaded her shopping bags onto a startled Vicki.

“How could you let your sister go out like this?” Mrs. Frye withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed it on her tongue. “Bend down, dear,” she said to Cassie, who was much taller than she was. “You have some dirt on your face.”

Cassie had no intention of bending down, the last thing she wanted was for Mrs. Frye to try and rub the bruise off. Though her jaw no longer throbbed, it still ached, and hurt enough without Mrs. Frye prodding at it. Cassie didn't particularly relish the idea of having saliva dabbed on her face either. She gave Vicki an evil look—her sister apparently found the situation hilarious, and was doing her best to smother her laughter.

"It's not funny, child," Mrs. Frye said. "How would you like it if someone allowed you to walk around with dirt smeared across your jaw?" She re-focused on Cassie. "However did you manage it?"

Fortunately, the shop's assistant, Claire, chose that exact moment to step outside, and Cassie was saved from answering.

"Mrs. Frye, you forgot your apples." Claire's bright auburn hair, which normally tumbled down around her shoulders, was today tied back in a ponytail. She handed the bag of fruit over with a smile, causing dimples to appear on her elfin face, giving her the look of a teenager rather than a woman in her late twenties. Unlike most redheads, Claire had no freckles, just pale, milky-white skin.

"Oh, thank you, dear." Mrs. Frye bent to put the apples in one of the shopping bags, which Vicki was still holding. Vicki tried to pass them back, but Mrs. Frye ignored the attempt. Whether it was intentional or genuinely due to her bad eyesight, no one could tell.

"Victoria." Claire tipped her head in acknowledgment.

Now it was Cassie's turn to chuckle, seeing Vicki's jaw clench in annoyance. Vicki hated to be called by her full name. She'd repeatedly asked Claire to call her Vicki, but the woman had ignored her requests time after time, until Vicki had simply given up—which was a feat in itself.

Claire's gaze fixed on the bruise. "Who did that to you, Cassie?"

"Got mugged. Over in Allensville."

Mrs. Frye's head whipped up. "Oh, that's simply terrible.

Terrible." She pointed to the shop assistant. "I always say Allensville's nothing but trouble, don't I, Claire?"

"You certainly do, Mrs. Frye." Claire stepped closer to Cassie, lifting a hand to indicate her face. "May I?"

Cassie nodded, pleased she had at least asked. A lot of the townsfolk were overly familiar with one another. They were a very tight-knit community, but on occasion they forgot that the Valentines were separate from them, and could at times encroach on their personal space. The only time the Valentines got physically close to someone, bar family members, was when they

were going to fight. The intrusion to their personal space, though not at all malicious, made them uncomfortable.

Claire, with a hand to Cassie's chin, turned her head to get a better look at her bruised jaw. "Big guy, was he?" She asked the question, though it was clear she already knew the answer.

Cassie gave a slight nod. "It's not that bad."

Mrs. Frye tutted. "And on such a pretty face."

"Quite." Claire locked onto the clear blue eyes in front of her.

Due to their close proximity, it was hard to mistake her meaning, so Cassie took a step back. She genuinely liked Claire, and didn't want to mislead her in any way. She was relieved when Claire smiled, not looking particularly upset by Cassie's gentle rebuff.

"It'll be gone in a couple of days," Cassie said, more for something to say than anything.

"Let's hope so." Mrs. Frye didn't seem to notice the discreet exchange, and took back her shopping bags from Vicki, who looked all too happy to give them up. "I'm going to tell Moira and Keith about this. Shocking business. It really is." She began to shuffle away, muttering to herself. She hadn't gone far when she called back, "I would stay away from that awful town if I were you."

"Will do, Mrs. Frye." Cassie waved good-bye, chuckling quietly. She noticed Vicki counting on her fingers, a quiet smile playing on her features. To anybody else it looked innocent, but Cassie knew what Vicki was inferring—she was adding another person to Cassie's never-ending list of suitors.

Cassie scowled at her as she followed Claire inside the store.

Vicki teasingly whispered in Cassie's ear as she passed by, "I could stay out here, if you'd prefer?"

"You've got the grocery list," Cassie said, ignoring her bait. She picked up a shopping basket from the stack by the door and thrust it into Vicki's chest.

SHOPPING HAD TAKEN a lot longer than either Cassie or Vicki expected. It seemed Mrs. Frye had told everyone she met, and many came in to see Cassie for themselves, and to give her their best wishes.

Cassie was touched by their display of affection for her, and could easily see why their friend, Raven, had chosen to settle in this town. Being wealthy, Raven could've lived anywhere, though not many places had the quaint charm of Long Meadows.

Placing the last of the groceries inside the car, Cassie closed the boot, slamming it shut. She spotted Mrs. Frye farther down the street, talking to another three people, no doubt filling them in on the situation. Cassie shook her head, laughing.

Vicki followed her line of sight. "You've made her day." She chuckled along with Cassie. "Mrs. Frye will be the most popular person in town. At least until they get some fresh gossip."

Cassie took a bite of her hot, corned beef pasty, savoring its taste as the pastry crumbled and melted in her mouth. She heard her stomach rumble in appreciation—she was starving.

Cassie passed across the paper bag from the bakery. They'd stopped in on the way back to the car to get some belated, and much needed lunch. Vicki bit into her own pasty, both sisters munching in silence for a while. For dessert, Cassie had a chocolate éclair and a flapjack, while Vicki ate a chocolate muffin and strawberry tart. They washed their meal down with Coca-Cola.

When finished, Cassie brushed the leftover crumbs from her hands. "I wanted to ask Mrs. Frye if Raven had returned, but I couldn't get a word in." Cassie missed her friend greatly, and was impatient to see Raven again, but she was away on a business trip.

Vicki seemed just as keen. "Well, let's go and see." She eagerly moved to the driver's door.

"It's only up the road," Cassie said. It was a short walk; there was no reason to take the car.

Vicki gestured to Mrs. Frye's amassing group. "We'll get stopped a dozen times before we even get there. Hop in."

Cassie realized she was right, and clambered in without further protest.

Vicki started the engine and pulled away. "You should stay in the car until I see if Raven's home. You might get ambushed."

Cassie laughed. "You talk as if I'm gonna be facing a pack of werewolves."

Vicki gave her a serious look, though her twinkling eyes gave her away. "The gossips in this town can talk for hours. They could even hold you here for days!"

Feigning horror, Cassie jabbed the door lock down, causing Vicki to giggle. "God forbid. Okay, you've convinced me, I'll stay in the car."

Vicki soon pulled up outside the last house, on the very edge of town. It was an old, detached, two-story building, oozing charm and character, like all of the other houses in Long Meadows. They were all very similar in appearance: the top half of the house was painted cream,

interspersed with weathered, wooden beams, and the lower half was simple bricks. The only main difference between each house was the front door color.

Vicki knocked on the forest green door, impatiently bobbing on the balls of her feet. She knocked again, but got no response.

“I HATE THIS.”

Cassie looked amusedly at Eve. “You say that every night.”

Eve raised a skeptical eyebrow, then chuckled in surprise. “I do, don’t I?” She passed another wet glass to her eldest, who deftly dried it off with the towel. “After the bar shift, the last thing I feel like doing is washing up dozens upon dozens of glasses. I’m too tired.” Eve shook her head at herself. “I’m clearly getting old.”

Cassie scoffed. “You’re forty-three, not ninety-three. You could wipe the floor with every shadowstalker that drinks here, including those in their prime. Myself included.”

Eve removed a soapy hand and patted Cassie’s cheek, leaving water and bubbles on her face.

“Gee, thanks, Mom.” Cassie scrubbed her cheek with the towel.

“That’s sweet, honey. But don’t sell yourself short.”

Eve knew for a fact that she wouldn’t be able to wipe the floor with Cassie as she modestly claimed, no one could—Cassie was an exceptionally talented fighter. When they sparred together, Cassie often came out on top, though not always. Eve had an extra nineteen years of experience than her daughter. Eve was certain that Cassie would surpass her in fighting ability, and was immensely proud of her eldest for her hard work and focus. Though it was true that Cassie had inherited her innate talent for fighting from Eve herself, she’d also had to train doubly hard in view of the obstacles that she’d had to face. On the same shadowhunt that killed her father, Cassie had been seriously wounded—a leg injury that was so severe the doctors weren’t sure she’d regain full use of the limb. Sheer willpower and a stubborn constitution, also passed down from Eve, allowed Cassie to triumph, her dedication and constant effort enabling her to overcome the injury. But that wasn’t enough for Cassie—she became obsessed with her training, fighting day and night to better both her skill set and technique.

While Cassie trained harder, Vicki became complacent, wanting little to do with shadowstalking after their father died. Teaching Vicki had been difficult, and it was testament to Eve’s skill that Vicki was as good as she was, given her unwillingness to learn. Vicki was better than a lot of shadowstalkers, Eve had made sure of that, but she wasn’t in the same league as her

sister. The result of Cassie's hard work was remarkable; Cassie was excelling well past Eve's expectations and becoming a renowned shadowstalker in her own right.

Eve washed another glass and placed it on the sink's draining board. Her thoughts were interrupted when Vicki entered the kitchen, browsing through a magazine—no doubt one of her flashy clothes catalogs.

"What do you think of this?" Vicki said to no one in particular. Thrusting the magazine up for Cassie to see, her finger tapped the image she wanted her to focus on.

Cassie blinked. "Top or trousers?"

"Both," Vicki said. "The whole outfit."

"You always did have expensive taste. Jeans, yes. But where on earth would you wear that top? It's indecent."

Vicki rolled her eyes dramatically. "Hardly. Mom, what about you? Do you like it?" She held the magazine up for Eve, who snatched it out of her hands upon seeing the picture.

Eve's eyes widened as she got a better, close up view. The woman on the page was wearing tight-fitting, boot-leg jeans, and a black lace bodice top that left very little to the imagination. "Indecent is an understatement." She shared a look with Cassie, a look they had shared many times over the years—which stated they disapproved, and had to try and talk Vicki out of it.

"Well I think it's me." Vicki took back the catalog from Eve. "I'd look great in that."

"I'm sure you would," Cassie said, clearly trying to appease her. "But you didn't answer my question. Where would you wear it? On a shadowhunt?" She laughed. "I can just see that. You'd freeze to death."

Vicki swatted her with the magazine, visibly unamused. "Ha ha. I'd wear it around here of course, when I'm working."

Eve nearly choked on her own tongue. "You're joking?" Her voice was an odd mixture of hope and desperation. "Please tell me you're joking?"

"No. Why would I be?" Vicki didn't seem to have a clue as to what the issue was.

Eve covered her face with a hand, not minding the water on it.

"You're asking for trouble if you wear that, Vic." Cassie scrunched up her nose. "You'd be leered at all night."

Vicki scowled. "And how is that any different from how men look at you?"

Cassie frowned, obviously not liking the comparison. “Well, for one, I’m fully dressed!” Her voice lifted. “And I certainly don’t encourage it, which is exactly what you’d be doing.”

“Enough!” Eve uncovered her face, taking the outstretched towel Cassie was offering and drying her hands and face on it. The towel was then discarded, dropped onto the counter. “Is there someone in particular you want to impress, Vicki?” Eve asked, trying a different tack. “Is that what this is about?”

“What? No.” She shook her head. “There’s no one special. I just want to look nice.”

“You always look nice.” Eve smiled to back up her words.

Vicki folded her arms across her chest, her lower lip protruding in a sulky pout. “Not that anyone notices. They’re all too busy looking at Cassie.”

“Not by my choice,” Cassie said.

Eve leaned back against the counter. “So that’s what this is about.”

“Men don’t even notice me when Cassie’s around.” Vicki’s expression was part annoyance, part sadness. “It’s like I’m not there.”

“I’d gladly swap with you,” Cassie said, her tone conveying she was dead serious.

Vicki made a face. “And you don’t even appreciate it. It’s completely wasted on you.”

“What’s to appreciate?” Cassie shook her head in disbelief. “People checking you out constantly. Perverted guys three times your age leering and ogling over you. Talking about what they’d like to do to you behind your back, or even to your face!” Her voice had risen with each sentence—she was shouting now. “Tell me, Vic, what about that sounds appealing to you?”

Vicki’s voice rose also, as if in contest. “You’re just twisting it.”

“No. That’s the simple truth.”

“You just don’t want the competition!” Vicki yelled.

“Victoria!” Eve shouted, silencing her. She knew from her own experience how her eldest felt, and she’d never received half the attention that Cassie did. Cassie was also a lot more sensitive than Eve herself was, and she knew her daughter found it extremely difficult at times to always be at the center of unwanted attention.

Cassie yanked out several notes from her back pocket and slammed them down onto the round dining table. She left more money than was needed to buy the lace bodice. “Don’t come crying to me when you get more than you bargained for.”

“Cass,” Eve called after her as Cassie stormed out of the kitchen and up the stairs. A few moments passed, then Eve sighed. “Vicki. You’re a very beautiful girl. And you know it. You could have anyone you want. You don’t need to dress like that to get attention from the opposite sex.”

“You would say that. You’re my mom.”

“True. But it’s also simple fact.” Eve reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Vicki’s ear. “I find both my daughters equally beautiful.” She let that sink in.

Vicki smiled softly, clearly touched by her words. “Thanks, Mom.”

Eve nodded, scooping up the towel and tossing it at her. “Take over for your sister.”

For once, Vicki didn’t protest, and she began to dry the glasses. On several occasions, Eve caught her looking longingly at the clothes magazine. Vicki always had liked attention, even from an early age, but what she thought she was missing out on from not having Cassie’s level of attention, Eve didn’t know. Being the center of attention wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. Eve realized that it was a lesson Vicki would have to learn for herself. Letting out a heavy breath, Eve gathered the money and lifted Vicki’s hand, placing the notes into her palm.

“Really?” Vicki’s eyebrows lifted hopefully. “You won’t complain when I wear it?”

Eve shook her head. “I won’t say a word.” She held up a warning finger. “But I’m telling you now, you’ll be disappointed.”

Vicki pocketed the cash, rolling up the magazine and slapping it excitedly into her hand. She repeated the action. “This is gonna be great.”

Though her youngest was nineteen years of age, in some ways Vicki was very young for her years. Eve sometimes found the difference in maturity between her and Cassie startling—though there was four years between them, Cassie had been more mature at sixteen than Vicki was now. And being present for her father’s death when she was eighteen had made Cassie grow up even quicker still.

Eve patted Vicki’s shoulder, somewhat consolingly. “I hope it’s all you expect it to be.”

Vicki seemed happily confident. “It will be.”

Chapter Three

A SUDDEN SILENCE fell over the pub, chairs grating across the wooden floor as many shadowstalkers turned in their seats to see who had entered. Some went for their weapons, though none were actually drawn—their hands hovered uneasily, ready for attack.

Eve looked to the door, though she knew who it was from the tense silence that had fallen.

Violet strode purposefully toward the bar, her feminine swagger exuding confidence. Because of what she was, danger flowed just as freely, and one look into her unwavering, violet-flecked eyes confirmed her as a killer. Violet was a vampire, and the only shadow creature allowed inside The Smoking Gun.

She'd left the door wide open, as usual, and the cold night air seeped into the room. Temperature was of no concern to any creature. The shadowstalkers who sat on the stools at the bar quickly moved aside, going to join their compatriots at the tables. Though they went swiftly, they walked backward, never putting their unguarded backs to the female vampire.

“Please,” Violet’s smirk was derisive. “As if I’d suck off any of you.” It was a double entendre and she laughed at her own joke. Her laughter was like silk, smooth and caressing.

“Violet.” Eve nodded casually, setting an empty wine glass in front of the stool that Violet chose to perch on. The vampire brought her own drink.

From a pocket of her leather trench coat, Violet withdrew a silver flask, and took her time to pour out the crimson liquid. Making a show of it, she smelled it first, her fangs revealing themselves at the scent. She flashed them at Eve in a smile.

The room was still deathly silent, the patrons were clearly listening to every word.

“I took this from a little foreign boy. I thought he’d taste divine.” Violet sipped from her drink, visibly savoring it. “The younger they are, the sweeter the blood tastes.”

From a table near the center of the room, a large shadowstalker named Burt jumped to his feet—the words obviously infuriating him. He was often referred to as Burly Burt, because of his formidable size.

“Hold it.” Eve grabbed her shotgun, which she kept under the counter for such occasions, and had leveled it at Burt before he’d even managed to draw his gun. Bullets couldn’t kill a vampire, but they could injure one.

Violet hadn’t moved an inch, seemingly uncaring about the unfolding situation. Eve had long ago given her word that no harm would come to Violet while in her pub, and Eve was a woman to keep her word. Eve knew the threat of violence meant little to Violet—if she did somehow

sustain an injury, she would heal fast, like all vampires. Still, Violet placed her trust in Eve just by entering her pub, and Eve endeavored to keep that trust.

“I won’t drink in here with that monster.” Burt headed for the door. He was careful to keep his hands away from his holster, as if knowing Eve wouldn’t hesitate to shoot.

“Caught sight of yourself in the mirror, did you?” Violet sniggered.

Eve frowned at her. “Don’t make my job harder.”

Violet grinned, then made a zipping motion across her fang-filled mouth.

“Keep walking, Burt,” Eve said. The man had whirled around at the insult, hand twitching dangerously close to his gun.

Vicki, who’d been busy collecting empty glasses when Violet entered, placed her full tray onto a nearby table and sidled up to Burt from behind, thrusting her Colt’s gun barrel into his neck. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

Fortunately for everyone involved, Burt was smarter than he looked, and he slowly raised his hands, showing his cooperation.

Several other stalkers stood, most of them from the same table as Burt.

Anthony, one of the older men who had stood, and also a regular, held up his dark hand appeasingly as Cassie advanced on their table. Her gun wasn’t drawn, but with Cassie it didn’t need to be. Even in their group, Eve knew she would prevail in close quarter combat. Cassie was a natural fighter, taking to combat like a fish took to water. In all of her years as a shadowstalker, Eve had never seen anyone who could rival Cassie’s fighting skills. She didn’t think she was likely to either. Anthony himself had once expressed his awe regarding Cassie’s fighting prowess, and he was a former martial arts instructor.

“We don’t want any trouble.” Anthony raised his deep, gruff voice, addressing Eve. “It’s nothing personal. All of us here know you have your reasons. And I understand those reasons. But that doesn’t mean I have to agree with ‘em. I don’t share your debt. So I certainly won’t share a room with...” He looked distastefully to the vampire at the bar. “It.”

To her credit, Violet kept her mouth zippered shut.

Eve tipped her head, grateful for his candor. “That’s fair enough. Those who feel the same feel free to leave with him.” As she’d expected, every shadowstalker in the pub got to their feet.

No one dared to move first, so Anthony shoved the nearest men into motion, following them toward the door. Anthony was the last one to leave, and he stopped in front of Eve, completely ignoring Violet. Showing no fear of the vampire, he drained his glass of Guinness and rested it

on the counter. Since Anthony was African-American, the contrast between his dark skin and Violet's unnaturally pale skin was vivid, making Violet look more like a ghost than a vampire.

"Same time tomorrow?" Anthony asked.

Eve nodded. "See you then."

Vicki closed the door behind Anthony and drew the bolts across, locking it tight. Cassie peered out the window, as if to make sure they all left and none backtracked. Numerous cars roared to life, the sound fading into the distance as they departed.

Eve replaced her shotgun beneath the bar. They'd been lucky that all of the patrons tonight were regulars and knew the Valentines' reasoning. The regulars also knew the women would loyally defend Violet, and if they tried to hurt her, they would be the ones who came off worse. Newcomers often started shooting as soon as they laid eyes on Violet—the extreme, abnormal pallor of her skin alone informing them as to what she was, never mind her countenance or fangs. Those encounters usually ended up unpleasant for most involved, though they didn't occur regularly, as Violet only dropped by infrequently.

Eve looked around at her now deserted pub, then latched a cold glare onto the vampire. "The younger they are, the sweeter it tastes," she mimicked. "Really, Violet, why do you always have to stir things?"

"When you get to my age, it's the little things that give you pleasure."

Eve shook her head in despair. "You're bad for my business."

A delicate, fine eyebrow rose on a porcelain face. "I suppose I am. But it's not like I can visit you during the day. And I can hardly be held accountable for your clientele's narrow-mindedness."

"No. But you can be held accountable for driving them away on purpose."

Violet raised a dainty looking hand to her chest. But Eve knew looks could be deceptive, Violet was anything but dainty. She was incredibly strong, like all vampires. "As if I would do such a thing!" She batted her long eyelashes innocently.

"Oh, you would," Vicki said, pulling up the stool next to Violet and sitting down.

"That's just charming." Violet shook her head. "I save your life and this is the thanks I get? Remind me not to bother next time."

"Are you still harping on about that?" Vicki waved a hand in disregard. "It was years ago."

Violet looked shocked. "Eve, I didn't know you'd raised your daughters to be so ungrateful."

A wry smile. "I didn't. She got there all by herself."

"*Daughter*," Cassie said, joining her mother behind the bar. "Don't clump me in with her."

Violet smiled, enhancing her unorthodox, vampiric good looks. "Cassie."

"Hello, Violet. It's nice to see you again. How've you been?"

Violet's smile grew, and she directed it at Eve. "I'm pleased to see you at least got one daughter right." She shot Vicki a displeased glance.

Cassie smirked in self-satisfaction, sticking her tongue out to torment Vicki.

Vicki was the first to break, bursting into laughter. They always ribbed one another in this fashion. But it was all taken in good spirits.

"That mirror joke was genius." Vicki slapped Violet solidly on the back.

"Who was joking?" Violet said. "Really, Eve, you need to bring some better looking stalkers into your pub."

"I'll get right on that." Her tone dripped with sarcasm. "At least they bring in money."

"Back to that, are we? Heavens, Eve, it was a joke. You mere humans take this whole mortality thing far too seriously." Violet shook her mane of dark, curly hair. "Honestly, can't a girl have a little fun?"

She finished off her blood, wiping it from her colorless lips. She tapped the glass against the counter's surface. "And if you supplied my drink, I'd bring in money too."

Eve threw the vampire a droll look. "I'll just go rob the nearest hospital for blood bags."

"Why not?" Violet said. "That's what I do." She regarded both sisters seriously, as if imparting words of wisdom. "You never know when you're going to get caught short."

Vicki giggled. "I'll remember that."

Violet winked at her. She refilled her glass. "Aren't you all going to share a drink with me?" Clearly seeing their repulsed expressions, Violet tucked the flask back into her leather trench coat. "Not my drink. It's far too good to be wasted on your feeble, human taste buds. I meant your own tasteless mush."

"Sounds appealing." Cassie withdrew three fresh glasses from under the counter.

"Speaking of drinks," Violet pointed to Cassie's discolored jaw. "Do you want me to kill someone, sweetie?"

Eve's lips twitched in amusement. Violet was all talk.

"Thanks for the offer, but no thanks." Cassie filled the three glasses, then passed the drinks out.

Eve raised her glass in a toast. She smiled at Violet. "To old friends."

The vampire grinned back. "To old friends."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you would even suggest that."

Since all of the patrons, bar one, had left early, the Valentines had closed up for the night. They'd remained in the pub with their guest, and were currently gathered around a circular table, nursing their drinks.

"Why?" Vicki said. "Surely the other shadowstalkers wouldn't feel as strongly about you if they knew you didn't feed from humans."

"I do feed from humans." Violet shook her head vehemently. "Let's not insult me further. Next you'll be saying I feed off animals, which is a disgusting notion."

"You know what I mean..." Vicki's brow scrunched up in thought, as if searching for the right words.

"You don't feed *directly* from humans," Cassie added helpfully. "Or do them harm of any kind."

Vicki nodded. "That's what I was trying to say."

Violet frowned in annoyance. "There's no need to make me sound weak. Eve, your girls have a way of belittling me."

"I'm sure that's not their intention."

"How is pointing out that you wouldn't harm a fly belittling you?" Vicki's smirk betrayed the fact that she was overexaggerating.

Violet tapped her nails testily against the table. "To a vampire it is. We pride ourselves on our strength. Much like you shadowstalkers."

Vicki's brown eyes glinted with mischief. "I'm merely expressing how nice you are compared to the rest of your kind."

Violet's jaw clenched. "Well don't." She looked beseechingly to the girl's mother. "Eve, please?"

The request, in itself, proved Vicki's teasing words to be true. Any other vampire, let alone an annoyed vampire, would throw you bodily across the room and rip out your jugular without a second thought. They were violent creatures, their base nature only to kill and feed. Violet was the only, singular exception to that rule that the Valentines had come across. They'd never even heard stories of a reasonable vampire, never mind one that didn't kill. When asked why she was different, Violet shrugged and put it down to her centuries' old age. She'd learned to control her bloodlust. Eve partly believed her, but mostly thought she was just special: one of a kind.

Since a simple exchange of blood turned a human into a vampire, vampires were one of the most common creatures that shadowstalkers hunted. There was a lot of in-house fighting amongst their kind, and rivalry for dominance was rife. That helped keep their numbers controllable, and despite their immortality, not many lasted to Violet's age.

"Stop rubbing salt in the wound, Vicki." Eve's gaze flitted to her youngest, staying there as she spoke, "The reason why Violet doesn't tell other stalkers the truth is simple." She paused, holding Vicki's undivided attention. "Bar the fact that they know Violet's under our protection, there's only one thing keeping them from trying to kill her."

At Eve's raised eyebrow, Vicki said, "They're afraid of her."

Eve nodded. "Exactly. And they wouldn't be if they knew Violet had no intention of draining them. They'd think it was a free-for-all. Lots of shadowstalkers have lost people to vampires. They'd gladly take their revenge out on Violet, especially if they knew she wouldn't even fight back. They'd think of her as neutered."

Violet downed the rest of her blood. "Well I now know what it is to be emasculated."

"Sorry." Eve reached across the table and briefly touched Violet's pale, cold hand.

"And for your information," Violet pointed a perfectly manicured finger at Eve. "If they were trying to kill me, I most certainly would fight back."

"I know that," Eve said. "I just meant you wouldn't kill them."

Violet lowered her finger, seeming satisfied with that response. "So basically what your mother's saying is, if they were to find out the truth, I'd be deader than I already am."

Vicki laughed at her joke. "Properly dead."

A fanged grin. "Precisely."

"But they know you saved Vic's life," Cassie said.

“Yes.” Eve nodded. “But they don’t know the reason why or the situation, I’ve never told any of them. They assume Violet was merely in the right place at the right time, and saved Vicki’s life to spare her own. I’m not going to correct them. Let them think what they want.” A shrug. “It works both ways—we don’t lose face with other shadowstalkers because they think we owe Violet a blood debt.”

Violet’s finger pointed again. “Which you do. I haven’t forgotten.”

“Neither have we,” Eve said, though she knew Violet was only kidding, she would never actually call the debt in. Originally, they had been as wary of Violet as the rest of the shadowstalkers, only pardoning her because she had saved Vicki’s life. With time they had come to trust the vampire, and eventually came to think of her as a friend.

Eve continued, “Stalkers have their honor. Most of them anyway. The blood debt we have to Violet allows us to bypass the fact that she’s a vampire. At least in their eyes. And they better go on believing that, for the few shadowstalkers I’ve heard of that consorted with creatures...” She broke off, hesitating. “Well, let’s just say they were treated worse than the creatures themselves.”

Cassie felt razor sharp talons slide into her flesh, sinking in so deep they scraped bone. The horrific pain almost caused her to black out, and a piercing cry tore from her throat.

Then suddenly she was on the move, running away, though a more accurate description would be dragged. Her mother was beside her, half carrying, half dragging her along. Cassie assisted as best she could, using her uninjured leg when she was able. Blood was coursing out of the ghastly wound in her thigh, and she knew without doubt that if left untreated, it would be fatal.

The pain was unlike anything she’d ever experienced before, it was white-hot, searing. Tears flooded her cheeks.

And then something much, much worse happened. Something that would haunt Cassie until the day she died. She forgot the unforgettable pain, as her father screamed in the distance behind her. A scream that was filled with both raw anguish and pure agony.

Cassie bolted upright in her bed, jumping again when her door was thrown open. It bounced off the wall, the bang resonating around the bedroom.

Vicki charged in, her Colt .45 revolver held out in front, ready for action. Eve entered only an instant later, though her own bedroom was at the other end of the house.

Despite the fact that she’d clearly just awakened, Vicki’s eyes were alert as she scanned the room for intruders. Finding none, Vicki slapped on the light, changing the room from black and white tones into color. The pale blue bedroom was undisturbed, everything tidy and in its place. A chest of drawers and a chair with neatly folded clothes on its seat sat untouched. A tall, triple wardrobe, its birch wood matching the drawers exactly, hid no lurking threat. Directly opposite

the doorway was a window, but its glass panes hadn't been broken, and the steel bars covering it were still in place.

While Vicki was checking the room, one look at Cassie's sweat-soaked, bedraggled form apparently told Eve all she needed to know—Cassie had cried out during a nightmare, not because she was under attack—for she headed straight for the bed.

Eve laid her shotgun down on top of a set of drawers. "Cass?" She sat next to her.

Cassie's mind swam with confusion. She struggled to shake herself free of the dream. She ripped the blue, checked duvet cover off, hands frantically going to her right thigh. She raised the leg of her cotton pajamas. There was no blood, only three long ragged scars.

"You're all right, sweetheart." Eve's calm, reassuring voice soothed Cassie.

"It was a nightmare." Vicki sat opposite Eve on the bed. She'd left her Colt alongside the shotgun.

Taking her time, Eve gently ran her fingers through Cassie's damp, sweat-soaked hair, brushing it back into some semblance of order.

Cassie's grip on her thigh slowly relaxed, the phantom pain there rescinding. Her cheeks felt wet. She found tears there, and realized she must've been crying in her sleep. Cassie wiped them angrily away with a trembling hand—she didn't allow herself to cry, not about this.

Without a word, Vicki encased Cassie's hand between her own, squeezing it supportively. Cassie wanted to smile at her, but all that emerged was an uneven, shaky breath.

Eve enfolded Cassie into a hug, her embrace warm and comforting. Cassie felt a kiss being placed in her hair, and tears formed in her eyes at her mother's unselfish and unwavering affection. Under the circumstances, Cassie knew she didn't deserve that affection, and wondered how Eve was able to look past what had happened.

She withdrew from her mother's arms abruptly, wrenching her hand free from Vicki's and clambering out of bed.

"Cass," Eve looked hurt by the brush off. "Come on now. Can't we talk about this?"

Cassie grabbed her dressing gown from a hook on the back of the bedroom door and slipped it on, fastening the tie. "There's nothing to talk about."

"We all know your nightmare's about Dad," Vicki said. "You've had it enough times. Maybe if you talked about it, you'd stop having them."

Cassie scoffed. "You're one to talk. Garrett, anyone?"

Vicki's eyes narrowed. "That's different!"

"Hypocrite." Cassie was nearly out the door when Eve's quiet voice stopped her. Or at least her tone did—it was pleading.

"I wish you would talk to me."

It was one of the few times Cassie had seen her normally confident mother look lost, and it killed her to see it, especially knowing she was the person who had caused it. The weight on her shoulders increased, and it was all Cassie could do to keep herself from racing out of the room. She wouldn't do that though, she at least owed her mother a response.

"Talking won't change anything." Cassie managed a tight smile, trying to reassure. "I'm fine. I'm sorry I woke you." She looked to Vicki, now apologetic. "Both of you."

Vicki shrugged, making light of it. "It's not like I need my beauty sleep."

Cassie slipped from the room, unable to meet Eve's searching gaze. She went downstairs, heading straight for the bar—she needed a drink.

Chapter Four

"I HEARD YOU had a visitor the other night."

Eve simply nodded. She wasn't surprised that Garrett had found out—a lot of shadowstalkers respected him, and would gladly talk freely over a beer.

He didn't mince his words. "What did the filthy bloodsucker want?"

"She just wanted to remind us of our debt." In truth, Violet had just stopped by for a friendly chat, to see how they were getting on. Eve hated lying to Garrett, but he was a shadowstalker through and through—he didn't see shades of gray. Just black and white. Stalker versus creature. He wouldn't understand. Though Eve knew he would never betray her confidence, for it would endanger her and the girls, his knowing would still put Violet's life at risk, as he would likely go after the vampire himself. Garrett would think he was protecting them.

Garrett's scar crinkled along with his brow. "Shame I wasn't here. I'd have set her straight."

“I managed just fine, thank you.”

“I didn’t mean to infer that you couldn’t,” Garrett said quickly, as if hearing the annoyance in her tone. “I just meant I could’ve backed you up.”

“I had my daughters for that.” Eve didn’t need any further help than they. It irked her when Garrett indicated she needed help from him. She was perfectly capable of looking after herself and her family. It was her job to protect them. She’d managed by herself for years, and in Eve’s own humble opinion, she was bloody good at it.

Garrett wisely decided to change the subject. “Earl told me what Cassie did for him. She’s a good kid.”

Eve smiled with pride. “She is.”

“You might want to warn her though, Earl’s thinking of asking her out.”

“Him and half the rest of the people in here,” Eve said with a chuckle.

He raised a bushy eyebrow. “Only half?”

She gave him a droll look. “The other half have already tried.”

Garrett laughed, slapping the bar counter. “I knew that was one rumor that wasn’t exaggerated.”

“Afraid not,” Eve said. “She has quite the following.”

“Oh, I’ve heard.” Garrett leaned closer. “Had to knock some teeth in now and then over their phrasing.”

“You and me both.” Eve’s sharp eyes found Earl, who was sitting in the corner nursing a beer, his own eyes glued to Cassie. Since Cassie was behind the bar with Eve, it didn’t take Earl long to feel Eve’s gaze.

They locked eyes with one another.

Eve stared him down, giving a firm shake of her head—warning him off. Earl held there for a moment longer, then nodded and lowered his gaze, focusing instead on his beer.

Garrett seemed fascinated by the interaction. He sniggered as he shook his head at Eve. “That’s an intense stare you’ve got there. No wonder Earl backed down.”

Eve released a sigh. “You’d think the guys at least would quit trying, most know she’s gay. And I’m sure the rest will have heard by rumor.”

“Until Cassie has a woman on her arm, they may think it’s just that—rumor. Besides, most of the blokes in here are that full of themselves they probably think they can change her.”

Brown eyebrows drew together. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t think it,” Garrett was quick to voice. “But you know what some men are like.”

“Mm.” Eve knew many of her patrons fit that arrogant mold.

“I heard that Cassie has never taken a single shadowstalker up on their offer, that true? She obviously hasn’t with the men, but what about the women?” Garrett glanced around the room, gesturing to numerous shadowstalkers who were female.

“Yes. Cassie declines all offers.”

“All of them?”

Eve frowned at his persistence. She didn’t like to have to repeat herself. “Why’d you ask?”

“I simply wanted a heads up. I want to be there when the rumor becomes fact—so many hearts are going to break over Cassie, I might even get to see some tough men bawling their eyes out in the corner!” He began to laugh. “It’ll be priceless!”

“That would be pretty funny,” Eve said.

“Funny? It’ll be hilarious.” Garrett dramatically pouted, then pretended to cry, as if imitating their imagined reactions. This only made him laugh harder. “You have to give me a heads up, Eve. When Cassie meets the right gal, you let me know, all right?”

Eve signaled him closer, leaning in and whispering secretively, “The right girl’s already shown up.”

Garrett’s eyes widened in intrigue. “Really? Who is it?”

He was practically salivating at the mouth he was so eager, so naturally, Eve kept him waiting. Finally, she said, “That’s all I can tell you.”

“What?” Garrett’s voice went up a notch in disbelief. “Surely you’re not gonna leave me hanging like this?”

Eve’s answer was a taunting smile.

“No!” He smacked the counter in annoyance. “You’re an evil woman, Eve Valentine.”

Eve chuckled as she sauntered away.

Garrett called desperately after her, “At least tell me this, is it someone I know?”

Eve merely threw him a playful wink over her shoulder.

“IT’S NOT LIKE you to turn down a job, Garrett.”

“I didn’t turn it down, I simply passed it on.”

“Even so.” Eve looked her old friend over. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes. I just decided to listen to you, that’s all.”

Eve widened her eyes, feigning shock. “My God, you must be ill.”

“Very funny,” Garrett said.

Eve laid off, sensing Garrett’s indecision about his choice. “Listen to me about what?”

“Vicki.” Garrett watched Eve intently, clearly judging her reaction. “I thought I should hang around for a while. Try harder with her.”

“It’s not like you haven’t tried, Garrett. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I know. But I thought if I stayed for a block of time, instead of only a few days here and there…” He shrugged. “I hoped her resolve might weaken slightly.”

Eve’s tone was dry. “Good luck with that.”

“You don’t think it’ll work?” Garrett’s disappointment was written all across his face.

“I didn’t say that.” Eve rested her chin in the palm of her hand, elbow propped on the bar. “But you know how stubborn Vicki is. You’ll have a real fight on your hands. And even if she stops fighting, she still may not let you in.” Eve shared a rare, open look with him. “She won’t let me in.” She shook her head dejectedly. “Not over this. I honestly don’t know how to get through to her.”

Garrett reached across and patted Eve’s hand, resting idly on the counter. “What about Cassie? Would Vicki confide in her sister?”

“Cass is just as bad. Maybe even worse. Where their father’s concerned, they both just clam up. Cass has terrible nightmares.” Eve ran a frustrated hand through her brown hair. “And no

matter how hard I try she won't open up. She's never even cried over her father's death. Not once."

Garrett looked shocked. "Surely in private?"

Eve's headshake was firm. "Not once."

"That's not healthy."

"I know that," Eve said. "What do you expect me to do? I've tried everything I can think of." Exhaling an angry breath, she held up an apologetic hand—it wasn't Garrett's fault. She just felt so helpless, and Eve hated that feeling. More so when it concerned her daughters.

Eve was disheartened that neither daughter would open up to her. Mathew's death had been difficult for all of them, but it hurt to know they felt unable to confide in her about the matter. "I'm out of ideas, Garrett." The anguish she felt slipped through for a moment, Eve heard it in her own voice. She consciously pulled herself together, nodding as she came to a decision.

"Why don't you swing by during the day?" she said. "It's too easy for Vicki to avoid you when she's working."

Garrett tipped his head in agreement. "Good idea. Tomorrow okay with you?"

"Fine." Eve's lips twitched upward. "And bring your vest."

"My vest?" He looked confused to her meaning.

"Your Kevlar®." At his alarmed look, Eve shrugged. "You never know."

Garrett chuckled, obviously assuming she was teasing him. He quickly sobered. "I hope you're joking?"

VICKI STORMED INTO the bar, her face furious. "Garrett's car is driving up the track. What the hell is he doing here?"

Eve sighed internally. On the outside, she remained calm. "You may have a problem with Garrett, Vicki, but I don't. He's our friend, and has every right to be here."

Vicki didn't have a comeback for that. Though it was clear she was livid.

Cassie entered from the kitchen. "We have a visitor. It's Garrett."

“You don’t have to look so pleased about it,” Vicki said.

Cassie examined Vicki’s angry posture. “Ah, you already know.”

The engine noise grew louder as the brown Volvo estate car approached the pub.

“I’m going out.” Vicki went into the hall. She gestured to the empty peg on the key rack. “Where are the car keys?”

Eve had pocketed them earlier, knowing Vicki would try this move. She’d also hidden the spare set of keys.

“Vicki,” Cassie said. “That couldn’t be more obvious. Garrett will know you’re leaving because of him. It’s rude.”

“I don’t care.” Vicki searched behind the bar, and then moved into the kitchen. “He was here only last night,” she yelled through to them. “How much more can he have to say?”

Drawers could be heard opening as Vicki rifled through them, before frustratedly slamming them closed. “Damn it, Cassie, you had them last. Where’d you put them?”

“On the peg,” she called back.

“Try and convince her to stay,” Eve whispered to her eldest.

“How?” Cassie’s voice rose a pitch, as if she considered the task to be near impossible.

“If I knew I wouldn’t be asking you!” Eve heard Vicki curse, and the bad language continued as she came back up the hallway. “Just try, Cass. Please. It’s for her own good.”

Cassie regarded Eve for a long moment. “You and Garrett have planned this entire thing, haven’t you?” She didn’t wait for a response. Cassie darted over and held out her hand, palm up. “Keys.”

Eve hesitated, not knowing which side Cassie would take. After all, Cassie wasn’t exactly appreciative when Eve tried to help her work through her own issues regarding Mathew’s death.

“She’ll want to check our pockets. She’ll suspect it’s a set-up.” Cassie waggled her fingers. “Keys.”

Eve quickly passed her the car keys.

Cassie bent and slipped them underneath her foot, inside her right shoe. “Act normal.”

Eve had no idea what that meant. How else was she going to act? She didn’t have time to ask though, as Vicki re-appeared from the hallway.

Cassie pretended to be searching also, limping about along the length of the bar. “I can’t find them, Vic.”

Eve suddenly understood that there was a clear reasoning for why Cassie had chosen her right side. And she now knew what Cassie had meant by her words. She always worried when Cassie favored her bad leg. The injury she’d sustained had been so serious her leg hadn’t been right since. Though it didn’t particularly hinder Cassie— she could run and jump on it without issue, but at times, if she overused it, it caused her discomfort and she walked with a pronounced limp. It didn’t happen that often, but it wasn’t a rare occurrence either.

“Is your leg bothering you again, honey?” Eve knew Cassie was limping because the keys were likely digging into her foot as she walked, but if she said nothing it would likely draw Vicki’s attention.

“A little,” Cassie lied.

“You should rest it if it’s hurting,” Eve said, as she normally would have.

“Right, who’s got them?” Vicki studied them both, hands on her hips, her gaze darting back and forth.

Cassie gave her a blank look, scratching her head in puzzlement. “I thought I’d put them on the peg.” She hobbled past Vicki, heading for one of the tables. She pulled up a chair and sat down, pretending to rest her leg. “I’d have sworn I did. I can’t think where else I’d put them.”

Vicki turned to Eve, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Empty your pockets.”

Eve feigned indignance. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t act all innocent. I wouldn’t put it past you to set this whole thing up!”

“You’re getting paranoid, Vic,” Cassie said, betraying nothing of her inside knowledge— Vicki was after all, spot on the mark.

Vicki ignored her. “You’re always trying to get me to sit down and talk to Garrett.”

“And what’s so wrong with that?” Eve asked.

“Don’t try to distract me.” Vicki clicked her fingers. “Pockets.”

Eve sighed. “Fine. Here.” She turned out her pockets, revealing nothing thanks to Cassie— she really did know her sister well.

“You, too.”

Cassie didn't argue, emptying her pockets and laying the items on the table for Vicki to see. "Satisfied?"

The car's engine finally silenced. Garrett had parked outside.

"Fine. If I can't drive, I'm going for a run. Come on, Cassie."

"With my leg?" Cassie shook her head. "I don't think so."

Eve had to work to keep the smile off her face. Cassie had it worked out perfectly, knowing fine well that Vicki hated running by herself. Eve now understood why the men Cassie played poker with lost so much money to her—she was three steps ahead.

"What's wrong with it?" Vicki sounded skeptical. "You can't have overused it, you've just got up." Cassie had clearly expected such a question, for she had the answer ready and waiting. "I twisted it getting out of bed."

Vicki was direct, as always. "That was stupid."

"Thanks for the sympathy," Cassie said sarcastically. "Now are you gonna run away and hide in your room? I think that's the only option left available to you. God forbid you actually join us to sit down and have an adult conversation with Garrett."

A knocking came at the front door.

"Your cheap reverse psychology won't work on me," Vicki said.

"I wouldn't bother wasting my breath." Cassie began to massage her thigh, simulating discomfort as she did so. "You'll only do what you want to, Vic. Screw what anyone else wants. But before you inevitably dash off, could you at least see your way to opening the door? My leg's really hurting."

Though Vicki could be insensitive at times, she wasn't cold, so couldn't bring herself to refute her sister's request. Despite her reluctance to see Garrett, she headed for the door.

Once Vicki's back was turned, Eve held up her hands and silently applauded Cassie. It was only a small step, but it was a start. Cassie had provided Garrett with a chance. It was now up to him.

"HELLO, VICKI." GARRETT looked surprised that she'd answered the door, as if he'd expected her to be holed up in her room. "Are you going somewhere nice?"

Vicki clenched her jaw. Even Garrett expected her to leave. He had good reason to of course—she'd been purposely avoiding him for the past five years. She wanted to go on avoiding him too, but the fact that both he and her family thought they could read her every move annoyed her. She wasn't a predictable person, quite the opposite. Vicki made up her mind there and then to stay. She'd show them. She'd show all of them.

All she had to do was sit down and talk to Garrett. She could do that. Hell, she'd even go one step further and be nice to the man. That would really throw them off guard. It was only one conversation. Then she could go on as before. Who knew, maybe her mom would lay off for a while, and stop going on about her issues with Garrett? Vicki mentally steeled herself—she could do this.

"I'm not going anywhere," Vicki said. She threw his assumption back at him. "Why'd you think that?"

Garrett gestured to her outfit: she was wearing a pretty, white long-sleeved blouse, with intricate multi-colored embroidery decorating the front panels. Plain black slacks completed the ensemble. "You look nice is all. Figured you were heading somewhere special."

"Afraid not." Vicki opened the door wider, allowing him entry. "Pull up a chair. We're over there." She loosely indicated where Cassie and Eve were seated.

Garrett nodded in greeting as he joined them at the table, sitting between Eve and Cassie. Vicki sat in the seat opposite, farthest away from Garrett's position. She would put in the effort, but there was no need to go overboard.

Vicki looked around the table. Eve looked nearly as surprised by her behavior as Garrett did, which gave her no small amount of satisfaction. Cassie had a small smile playing on her lips, but Vicki thought perhaps she was just pleased to see Garrett. Cassie was difficult to read.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the table. Vicki had no idea what to say, and it was clear Garrett didn't either, not now he was put on the spot.

Fortunately, Cassie spoke up, "So how exactly did you manage to get lost in that swamp, Garrett? You never did tell us."

"You got lost?" Vicki looked to him in surprise. She snorted derisively. "Didn't you take a map?"

"That's what I said." Cassie laughed, helping to ease the tension.

Garrett received an encouraging nod from Eve, and he leaned forward, beginning his tale.

“NO WAY!” VICKI said in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Cross my heart.” Garrett crossed himself as he spoke. “Its head exploded like a watermelon.”

Vicki gave an impressed whistle.

“Trust you to like that part.” Eve shook her head, amused and disgusted at the same time. Her youngest always had had a fondness for the macabre.

As Garrett continued, Cassie made a move to stand. “Anyone want a drink?”

Garrett shook his head. “No thanks.”

Vicki declined by waving her off, clearly impatient to hear the rest of the story.

Cassie swiftly stood, though she stumbled a little. “Ow. Shit.”

Garrett’s strong arm darted out to steady her. “You okay?” He started to stand, when a hand to his shoulder pushed him back down into his seat.

“I’ve got her,” Eve said. She felt Cassie drape an arm across her smaller shoulders. Eve was only a couple of inches shorter, so was still easily able to support Cassie’s taller frame.

Garrett questioningly tipped his head to them, looking at Vicki for an answer.

“She twisted her bad leg,” Vicki said. She turned to Cassie. “Go and put some ice on it.”

“I’d better.” Cassie held her gaze. “I don’t think I can manage by myself…” She trailed off, letting Vicki know that she’d be left alone with Garrett, while simultaneously giving Vicki the option to go with her if she’d prefer.

Vicki seemed to think it over. “Mom’s perfectly capable. I’m not missing the rest of this story.”

Garrett beamed, looking extremely pleased she’d chosen to stay. He quickly continued his tale when Vicki looked expectantly at him.

Eve led a hobbling Cassie out of the bar, down the hall and into the kitchen.

Now out of earshot, Eve said, “Remind me to never play poker with you.” She shook her head in awe. “Cass, that was genius. Not only did you get Vicki to talk to him, you actually got them alone together.”

A humble shrug. “It was Vicki’s choice.”

Cassie took the car keys out from her shoe and placed them inside a nearby drawer, tucking them at the back. She then crossed the kitchen and removed an ice pack from the freezer, just in case Vicki came along. As she often did in the kitchen, Cassie hitched herself up onto the countertop, as if she preferred to sit there instead of on a chair. She removed her shoe and began to rub her right foot.

“And besides, it wasn’t that genius, I simply forgot I’d placed the keys in my shoe. It worked out okay though.”

Eve didn’t believe a word of it. “Modest, too.” At Cassie’s smile, she said, “I don’t know why you sell yourself short like that.”

“To compensate for my tall height.” Cassie slipped the shoe back onto her foot.

Eve frowned. “Well I wish you wouldn’t. Honestly, Cass, you act as if you don’t deserve praise of any kind.” She’d said it in jest, but when Cassie’s gaze dropped to the floor, Eve knew her words to be on the mark. She moved closer, stopping only when she was directly in front of Cassie’s perched form.

“Cass,” she whispered, heartbroken to realize her daughter felt this way. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Maybe because it’s the truth.”

There was such resigned sadness in her voice, Eve had to forcibly restrain herself from wrapping her arms around Cassie. She resisted the urge, having the feeling that would drive Cassie away, and Eve wanted to talk this through.

“I don’t believe that. And you shouldn’t either.” Eve cupped Cassie’s cheek, tilting her head up until they were eye to eye. Cassie still kept her gaze downcast, so she said, “Sweetheart, look at me.” It was a request, and a patient one, letting Cassie know that Eve wasn’t moving until she co-operated.

Cassie’s blue eyes lifted, locking with Eve’s brown.

“Please. Talk to me.”

“There’s no point.” Cassie’s words were flat, quiet. “Talking won’t change anything.” She jumped down from the counter.

Eve placed a hand on Cassie’s stomach, stopping her retreat. “You can’t keep running, Cass. Sooner or later you’ll have to face it.”

Cassie brushed past her. “Then it’ll be later.”

“I HOPE YOU took note of the rest of Garrett’s story?” Cassie said as she entered the kitchen. She switched the kettle on to boil. “I still haven’t heard the complete tale.”

“I did.” Vicki followed her into the room, and plonked herself down in the nearest chair, leaning back against the wooden slats. She casually flicked her hair back. “And if you’re really nice to me, I’ll tell you the end.”

“I can feel my wallet shrinking as we speak,” Cassie joked, smiling at Eve as she broke into laughter.

“You’ll never hear it at this rate,” Vicki said, annoyed by Cassie’s flippancy.

“Okay.” Cassie held out an appeasing hand. “I’ll be good.” The kettle boiled, and she poured the water into three mugs. She looked at Vicki, as if gauging her mood. “You did well with Garrett today.”

Cassie sat down at the table, placing the three hot steaming mugs of coffee down on the old, chipped wooden surface. She also brought a bowl of sugar. The smell of coffee mingled with the delicious scent of bacon, which still hung in the air from the fry-up they’d had for lunch.

“Surprised you all, didn’t I?” Vicki was chuffed with herself. She’d even exceeded her own intentions, and she hoped that her family would now stop badgering her about Garrett.

“You certainly did.” Eve smiled as she handed Vicki one of the milked coffees. She took the black coffee for herself.

Vicki smiled back, momentarily basking in her mother’s praise. Without hesitation, she took the offered sugar from Cassie, though Cassie herself hadn’t used it, and dumped several more spoonfuls of sugar into her drink. Unless Vicki made it herself, her coffee was never sweet enough, and she always added more sugar.

Cassie sipped at her hot drink. “You seem to have come through it in one piece.”

“It wasn’t so bad.” Vicki was startled to find she actually meant her words. She hadn’t intended to enjoy herself; she’d only wanted to disprove her family’s expectations of her. She’d forgotten how much fun Garrett could be. Though she had purposely chosen to forget.

It’d been easy to fall back into sync with Garrett—they’d always gotten along really well. He’d been like a second father to her. Despite her years of forced distance, Vicki knew that it wouldn’t take much to get things back to how they used to be, for it to feel like old times again. She simply couldn’t allow that to happen. She wouldn’t.

Chapter Five

RAUCOUS LAUGHTER CAUGHT Cassie's attention, though she didn't turn to examine the culprits behind it. She was already aware of who was making the racket—a group of four newcomers whom she'd never seen before. The group had been rowdy all evening. And the drunker they got, the worse their behavior became.

Working at a pub every night, Cassie was more than used to drunken disorder, but something about this group of men had set her alarm bells ringing. She couldn't put a finger on what it was, but she'd learned to trust her instincts.

“Another round,” one of the group yelled, banging his glass against the table top. He was the largest and loudest man at that table, and also the ugliest. Scars lined his face, which wasn't unusual amongst shadowstalkers, but he had a particularly nasty one that went through his bottom lip, making it curl out and down in an unpleasant, unnatural way.

Cassie was at the table next to them, clearing away empty and discarded glasses. Vicki was also collecting glasses, though she was farther across the room.

Cassie knew her sister would be relieved that Garrett wasn't present at the bar tonight. It was clear to Cassie that Garrett was giving Vicki some space, obviously not wanting to push her too fast. Cassie gave him credit for that. She'd seen how much it meant to Garrett to have Vicki simply spend time with him, and she hoped for both their sakes it was the start, or rather continuation of, their previous relationship.

Cassie glanced to her mother, serving drinks behind the bar. It was busy, and there was a queue forming. Despite that, she noticed that Eve was keeping an ever-watchful eye on the rowdy group.

Several of the patrons were giving the bunch displeased and impatient glares.

Cassie was passing by the table when Scarface grabbed her forearm, wrenching her around to face him. She barely managed to keep the glasses balanced on the tray. They rattled and clinked together, sounding a protest about the rough handling.

“I said we want another round.” Scarface sprayed spittle as he talked, a side effect from his curled lip.

“I heard you,” Cassie said. “But we don’t wait on you. You can go up to the bar and collect your own like everyone else.”

“I don’t want excuses.” He spat more on the ‘s’ sound. “And I’m not standing in a bloody queue. Just get me a drink.”

“No.” Her tone hardened. “You’ll have to queue. When it’s your turn, you’ll be served.” Cassie glared down at the hand that still clutched her arm. “Now, let go.”

“Not until I get my drink.”

Fred, a regular sitting nearby, spoke up, “I would do as she says.”

Scarface whirled on him. “Nobody asked you!”

“Tell me, genius, how would you expect me to fetch a drink if you’re not willing to release me?” Cassie asked.

“That other wench can bring it.” Scarface tightened his hold, his grip becoming painful on Cassie’s arm. He looked for a reaction, clearly wanting her to cry out. She didn’t give him either.

Cassie was growing impatient, wondering whether she should simply smash the drink tray she was carrying into his spittle-spraying face. She glared at his restraining hand. “I won’t ask you again.”

Scarface ignored her warning tone. “Drink first.”

Cassie slowly placed the tray on their table. With her now free hand, she roughly yanked his fingers back off her arm. With a startled cry, he released her. Grabbing his arm, she twisted it behind his back and slammed his face into the table. She kept twisting until he cried out again.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Scarface said, a touch desperately. The obvious pain he was in seemed to sober him somewhat.

“That’s much better.” Cassie patted his back condescendingly. “Now remember your manners, and I’ll remember mine.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will.”

The rest of the men at his table laughed loudly at his feeble submission. She released him, and Scarface sat up, rubbing his shoulder.

Cassie collected her tray of glasses, then simply turned and sauntered away, leaving Scarface to a barrage of taunts and insults. She wanted to rub her sore arm, but wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing that he’d hurt her. Besides, it would only bruise.

Cassie returned to the bar, rolling her eyes at her mother as she placed the tray on the countertop.

“I wonder if he realizes how lucky he is,” Eve said. “I was about to smash that drink of his directly into his face.”

Cassie didn’t doubt it. Eve would have, glass and all. “It was a tray for me.” She smirked. “Yours is better.”

Eve shrugged. “I have more experience. Plus, you’re a lot nicer than I am.”

Cassie laughed, but it didn’t last long. Two of the shadowstalkers jumped to their feet and started throwing punches at one another. Cassie recognized Scarface as one of them—clearly the wrong insult had been delivered.

“Hey,” Eve yelled. “Hey! Take it outside!”

The skinhead that Scarface was fighting stumbled backward at a blow, colliding solidly with Vicki.

Vicki dropped her tray of glasses and fell heavily to the floor. The glasses shattered noisily, sending shards of glass everywhere. Vicki put her hands out to catch herself, crying out when her palm landed on some glass.

Eve grabbed her shotgun from behind the bar.

Cassie kept herself low, lower than the counter since she knew her mother would be aiming across the top of it, and headed for her sister’s side.

The men were still grappling with one another, though they were now near the back of the room, upending tables and chairs as they went. They were too busy to notice that all of the other shadowstalkers had wisely moved out of their way.

Eve fired the shotgun into the solid stone fireplace directly behind the scuffling men. Bits of stone shrapnel flew everywhere, covering them with bits of grit and dirt. The skinhead cried out as a piece of sharp stone cut him, though it didn’t appear particularly deep.

“I said take it outside!” Eve yelled. “You’re barred from my pub.”

Cassie reached Vicki and squatted down next to her, helping her to sit up.

“I’ve got it,” she said to Jack Wilks, recognizing the regular customer easily from his trademark Stetson hat. Jack was moving in to assist Vicki, but he nodded and stepped away instantly at Cassie’s rebuff. Though Jack had been an acquaintance of the Valentines for years and actually was one of their closer patrons, she still wouldn’t trust him with the care of family members—it was just a stalker’s way. They had to be constantly on their guard.

Cassie briefly examined the piece of glass stuck in Vicki's left palm. It was bleeding quite heavily.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Cassie needed to get them clear of the situation, but didn't want to move Vicki if she were badly hurt elsewhere. Eve had taught her daughters medical skills, and they were both quite able to deal with a variety of injuries. Still, should things escalate further, this was the last place they wanted to be.

Vicki must've read her intentions, for she said, "No, I can move."

Cassie nodded, giving Vicki's shoulder an affectionate squeeze before helping her to stand. She guided her back behind the bar via the other, now closer route. This way, they didn't have to go in front of Eve's shotgun, or by the men who stood arguing with her.

"I'll pay for the damage," the skinhead said. "And we'll leave now. But don't you think barring us is a bit much?"

Eve's voice was as cold as ice. "You hurt my daughter."

"It was an accident!" Scarface said.

"I know that." Eve nodded calmly. "That's why you're still breathing."

It was obvious to Cassie that the duo thought Eve was joking at first, but one look into those unyielding brown eyes conveyed that she was deadly serious. The duo glanced around, as if suddenly noticing that the other patrons had all moved away from them, clearly not doubting that Eve would fire. Some patrons had their hands warningly on their own weapons, though their hostility was directed at the duo, not the Valentines.

Cassie knew the regulars had a lot of respect for the Valentine name, and would join in on Eve's side should she need it. Though it was painfully apparent that she didn't.

Both fighters kept their hands well clear of their guns as they walked to the door. When the door slammed shut behind them, Jack and Anthony went to watch out the window, as if to make sure they were truly leaving.

"Cass." Eve handed her the shotgun.

Cassie was carrying a pistol, but she gladly accepted the more powerful shotgun. She would be alone behind the bar while Eve treated Vicki, and the tension between the remaining shadowstalkers was tense and strained.

She tipped her head. "I'll watch the bar."

“WE’LL SOON HAVE this sorted, sweetheart,” Eve said, as Vicki sat down at the kitchen table. Eve assessed her injury, which was difficult with the glass still embedded in her skin. She quickly fetched the medical kit from a drawer, which contained all of the supplies that she needed. They had another kit upstairs in the bathroom, and another kit in their car. You could never be too prepared. All of the kits had been used at one time or another.

Eve washed her hands thoroughly before rejoining Vicki at the table, sitting next to her. She took Vicki’s injured hand in her own, holding it open. With her other hand, Eve carefully removed the glass, pleased when it came out in one piece. The glass left a one and a half inch gash in its wake, running horizontally across Vicki’s palm. The wound itself was deep, filling and spilling over with blood now that the glass was out.

“I’ll have to put stitches in,” Eve said.

Vicki frowned. “Must you?”

“Afraid so.” Eve caught her grimace. “I’ll be gentle, honey.” She knew Vicki would feel little pain, as she intended to inject her hand with a local anesthetic to numb the area before she began to stitch.

Vicki let out a heavy breath. “It’s not the pain I’m bothered about. I hate scars.”

“I know you do.” Her youngest was always concerned with her looks. Scars never bothered Eve, and Cassie thought they added character. As shadowstalkers, scars were a by-product of their job.

Eve had just finished cleaning the wound when her shotgun was fired. Both she and Vicki shared a look of alarm—though it was brief. They bolted up from their chairs.

A dozen different scenarios ran through Eve’s mind. Had the drunken fighters returned? Had the other men at the table taken issue with how their companions had been treated? Had the fight inadvertently caused another? Eve didn’t much care which scenario was taking place, only that Cassie was alone in the pub. Eve took some comfort from the knowledge that she’d left her trusted shotgun with Cassie, but she still wanted to get out there. She delayed only slightly to grab a bandage from the first aid kit, which she then tossed to Vicki.

“Wrap that wound.”

Vicki unwound the white fabric and wrapped it around her hand as she hurried along beside her mother.

Eve threw the hall cupboard door open, reaching directly for the .357 Magnum. She withdrew it, since Cassie had her shotgun, and from the corner of her eye she noticed Vicki unholstering the Colt .45 revolver on her hip.

They both dashed down the hallway, anxiously wondering what awaited them at its end.

EVE ENTERED THE pub, her worry diminishing and a smile coming to her face at what she saw. Cassie was by the front door, and nearly every shadowstalker in the room was behind her, either readying their weapons or taking up position. The regulars were a loyal bunch, and if ever needed, Eve knew they would have their own personal army at their disposal.

Eve pushed her way through the crowd, though most moved aside to let her through. Vicki followed in her slipstream, one step behind. They took up positions on either side of Cassie.

Cassie leaned out the front door, aiming the shotgun. She fired again, spraying a vehicle's boot with buckshot.

With one look outside, Eve was able to sum up what had happened. Obviously annoyed at being barred, Scarface and the skinhead had foolishly made a move for the boot of a large Toyota Land Cruiser, which no doubt contained an arsenal of weapons. Clearly they felt they needed more guns than the ones they had on them if they were to face the Valentines. Eve felt a smirk emerge—it seemed the alcohol hadn't completely inhibited their reasoning.

“Don't even think about it, fellas,” Cassie yelled. “Just get in your car and drive.” Oddly, the men seemed to have traveled together, and the dispute in the pub had been brushed aside in dealing with a common foe.

“Problem?” Eve asked, gun by her side but ready nonetheless. She much preferred her shotgun, and missed its familiar weight.

“Nah.” Cassie looked calm, cool.

The rest of Eve's worry dissolved at her collected attitude, not only did Cassie have everything under control, Eve could see for herself that Cassie hadn't been hurt. She didn't doubt Cassie's abilities, but Vicki's unfortunate injury had unsettled Eve, so she was more on edge than usual. She'd had more than enough of her daughters being hurt for one evening.

“They're going now,” Cassie said. “Made a move to get weapons from their trunk.”

Vicki scoffed. “That was stupid of them.”

Cassie shrugged, apparently not taking the men's actions at all personally. “They're drunk.”

Outside, an engine started. The red Toyota Land Cruiser roared away, tires spinning until they found purchase on the dry, crumbly earth. Both men shouted crude obscenities out the windows.

When the car was out of sight, Cassie kicked the front door shut. She raised her hand to a shadowstalker by the window. “Thanks for the heads up, Anthony. You too, Jack.”

Anthony nodded, and Jack tipped his Stetson hat respectfully.

At Eve’s questioning gaze, Cassie explained, “They kept watch at the window. Warned me what they were up to.”

Eve gave them an appreciative look, and then addressed the rest of the patrons, “Drinks are on the house.” Though it’d barely been a skirmish, Eve wanted to show her appreciation for their support.

Loud cheers greeted her announcement.

“ALL RIGHT, PEOPLE,” Cassie raised her voice to address the room full of shadowstalkers. Eve had just taken Vicki away to finish treating her hand, so Cassie was on her own again. She knew that after Vicki had been dosed up with painkillers, she would likely be sent upstairs to rest. That meant it would just be herself and Eve for the rest of the night. Fortunately, there wasn’t much of the night left—little more than an hour in fact—though she still had to serve everyone, since no one was likely to turn down the offer of free drinks.

“I’d appreciate it if you could be patient for your drinks. I only have one pair of hands. Anyone has a problem with that, come back tomorrow when we’re better staffed.”

No one seemed to have a problem with it—no one left.

Cassie nodded decisively. “All right, then. Who’s first?”

A mass of shadowstalkers gathered around the counter, all waiting for Cassie to serve them. When the numbers finally dwindled and there were only a couple of men remaining, Anthony left his table and came to the counter, taking up one of the stools. Cassie came to Anthony last, guessing that since his pint glass was almost full, he wanted a private word with her.

She had a great deal of respect for Anthony. His story was often told to newcomers in the pub. Anthony hadn’t always been a shadowstalker. Unlike the Valentine sisters, he hadn’t been raised as one. At thirty two, Anthony’s wife, Marta, had been killed by a werewolf—it tore her to pieces. Anthony swore vengeance, and killed the beast that had taken his beloved wife from his side before her time. That was over a decade ago. Since Anthony hadn’t been initiated into the

stalking world until middle age, it was surprising just how good he was, and he soon gained the respect of his fellow stalkers. The only reason he'd survived at all was down to the fact that before he'd become a shadowstalker, Anthony had been a martial arts instructor. He'd already known how to fight, and to fight well.

Cassie gave him her full attention. She leaned forward onto her folded arms, and rested her weight on the counter.

Anthony clasped his dark hands together. He wasn't one for pleasantries, and got straight to it. "I stopped by Juniper Creek today."

Cassie remained silent, knowing he'd continue without encouragement.

"I overheard Walter Barnes talking. Walter's a farmer. He was real upset. Seems a number of his cattle have suddenly died. He's blaming disease, but apparently the vet declared the whole herd healthy only five days ago."

Anthony took a swig of his beer. "The main thing that piqued my interest was Walter's description of the wounds. He said every one of the bodies had hemorrhaged blood, from all orifices. And each was marked with four pock holes, all in a perfectly straight line."

Cassie felt her interest rise. "About half a foot long?"

Anthony raised his glass to her. "The very same."

There was only one creature that left such a mark: a tri-quad. The end of its name reflected its mark of four, while the beginning represented its three unusual cavities. The tri-quad was about four foot tall, stood upright. It had two stumpy legs, covered in coarse fur. Instead of arms, it had two long tentacle shaped appendages, which at their tip held four suckers. Those suckers latched onto any flesh, pierced it, and injected a lethal toxin into the blood stream. The victim died almost instantly, allowing the tri-quad to get what it needed without further struggle. It fed off white blood cells, and its suckers siphoned them out of the blood and into its own body. It had no eyes or ears, and went solely off smell. It had three extraordinarily powerful nasal cavities to compensate for not having other senses, and they were all located on its head. One where a human's nose would be, in the center of its faceless face. The other two cavities were on either side of its head, like a pair of deformed ears. The nasal cavity itself wasn't covered by a nose like humans, it was simply a crater, surrounded and filled with thousands of hairs. It needed no mouth, for its nourishment came through the suckers.

Cassie asked the obvious question, "Didn't they attack Walter too?"

"His mother-in-law was sick. He and his wife have been away overnight."

"They got lucky." That was an understatement. Had they been there when the creatures attacked, Walter and his wife would be as dead as their livestock.

Anthony grunted in agreement.

“How many cattle were killed?” Cassie wanted to get an idea of how many creatures there were, and the best way was to get the death toll.

“More than twenty,” Anthony said without delay. He’d clearly asked Walter the same questions himself.

Her brow furrowed. “That’s too many for one tri-quad.” Cassie thought it through. A tri-quad, though small, could drain up to five victims apiece in the timeframe given—overnight. “There’s gotta be at least four.”

“That’s my thinking.”

“And if there are cattle left they’ll return. They’ll feed till the source runs dry.” Tri-quads were notoriously greedy, only moving on when they’d drained everything that was of use to them.

Anthony cleared his throat self-consciously. “I’ve got a job up north that can’t wait. Or I’d do it myself.”

Cassie realized he was asking for the Valentines’ involvement. A hard thing for a shadowstalker to ask. Shadowstalkers relied on only themselves, asking for help was seen as weakness. Cassie didn’t make it any harder on him. “We’ll take care of it,” she said. “First thing tomorrow.” Because the tri-quad hunted by smell and had no eyesight, it didn’t matter if the shadowhunt was night or day.

Anthony nodded, which Cassie knew was the nearest she would get to a thank you from the man. The fact that he’d chosen them for the task above all other stalkers spoke volumes, and Cassie was content with that.

Anthony slipped from his stool, moving to rejoin the other patrons. “Let me know how it goes.”

Chapter Six

EVE WAS BUSY cleaning her double-barreled, 12-gauge shotgun. The saying ‘if you take care of the gun, the gun will take care of you’ she had found to be quite true, and she always took

good care of their weapons. Strangely, she found the cleaning process quite relaxing, and she enjoyed doing it, despite the repetition.

Close by, Cassie slid a pair of daggers home into their respective sheaths, which were attached to either side of her belt. The daggers were a favorite of hers, but they weren't anything fancy—the silver blades were plain, unembellished, and the black hilt was equally simple. Despite that, they were smart and sleek. Their incredibly sharp blades made them lethal weapons.

Vicki entered the kitchen. She gestured to the weapons. “What’s going on?”

Eve glanced to the wall clock—it was just after nine a.m.; still early in the Valentine household, since the pub didn't close until midnight. “What are you doing up?” Her youngest usually liked to lie in. Eve stopped what she was doing and focused on her. “How’s your hand, honey?”

“Sore,” Vicki said. Her gaze landed on the two backpacks on the kitchen table, filled with supplies and ammunition. “Has something happened?”

Eve smiled to reassure, seeing her anxious expression. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

Eve retrieved several cans of Coca-Cola from the large fridge in the corner of the room, checking out the window while she was there to see what the weather was like. It was raining. She realized a moment later that it was redundant, since the weather would no doubt have changed by the time they'd reached their destination— Juniper Creek was hours away. At least, Eve hoped that the weather would change; it would be a miserable outing if they had to search acres of farmland in the pouring rain. She returned to the table and began to stack the Coke cans into the side pockets of the backpacks.

“Anthony informed me of a tri-quad attack.” Cassie briefly filled Vicki in on last night’s events. “A farm over in Juniper Creek.”

Vicki’s tone was one of disbelief. “And you weren’t going to wake me?”

“Well, no, we weren’t.” Eve picked up her shell belt, which was made of brown saddle leather. The belt, when full, held an entire box of shotgun shells. Having her ammunition within easy reach was vital, and the shell belt effectively provided that. Eve was surprised to find that no shell loops were empty, and she glanced knowingly to Cassie, whose smile confirmed that she had indeed re-filled it.

As Eve fastened the shell belt around her waist, she turned her attention back to Vicki. “Your hand hinders you, and you should be resting it.”

“It’s nothing,” Vicki said. “And I’m right-handed anyway, so it doesn’t hinder me much at all.”

Eve raised an eyebrow. “You just said your hand was sore.”

“Sore, not debilitating! I’m coming with you.”

“There’s no need…”

“I’m *coming*.” Vicki glanced down at herself—she was still in her silk pajamas. “I just need to get dressed.” She went to leave, but then stopped and pointed at them both. “Don’t you dare go without me.”

“All right, you can come.” Eve shook her head in confusion. “I just thought you’d rather stay. I know shadowstalking isn’t your favorite activity.”

Cassie snickered. She rummaged through her backpack, as if checking to make sure everything was accounted for. “Hardly. She’s always moaning about it.”

Vicki moved into the hall and removed the Land Rover’s keys from the peg to make sure they couldn’t leave.

“Vicki, really, there’s no need for that.” Eve frowned at her odd behavior. “I said you could come.”

Vicki obstinately kept hold of the keys.

Cassie’s head snapped up. “You know, Vic, you’re always complaining about stalking, but I’ve never once known you to sit out on a shadowhunt. And now not even when injured.” The insinuation was clear, but Cassie continued, “You can’t hate it that much.”

Vicki whirled on her, suddenly seething. “You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Eve blinked, startled at her outburst. Cassie seemed to be rendered mute in shock.

Vicki stormed off, up the stairs before either woman could respond.

VICKI WAVED HER arm back then forth, drawing the others’ attention. She realized a moment later that since a tri-quad had no ears, she could’ve just shouted. Still, it was now second nature for her to remain quiet on a shadowhunt, Eve had drummed it into her from a young age. Since most creatures did use sound to seek out their prey, it had been in her own best interest that she learn it.

The Valentines had separated to cover more terrain, though they kept one another in line of sight.

Vicki felt her stomach rumble in hunger. Though they'd set off early, Juniper Creek was a good three hours' drive. Because of the distance, the terrain here was a complete contrast to the flat, barren land surrounding The Smoking Gun. It was full of life. The rolling hills were plush and green. A gurgling creek flowed slowly along, which indicated a lack of rain in the past few days. And, like its name suggested, clumps of juniper trees were dotted here and there.

Though Vicki could see none of those things at present.

When they'd had to cross fields and the car could go no farther, they had taken off on foot. Several miles later, Vicki had spotted a rocky outcrop near the top of one hill and headed for it.

She glanced at her watch—it was lunch time. No wonder she was hungry. She of course had food supplies in her pack, but up until now the pain from her hand had dulled her appetite. Vicki had only been able to take mild painkillers, for she needed to be alert on a shadowhunt. It wouldn't do to become drowsy mid-hunt. It was typical that she was hungry now, when she no longer had the option to eat.

The tri-quads were close. She had to be on her guard, if one managed to lay even a single sucker on her she would be dead. She despised tri-quads. The creature had a disgusting habit of spitting at you from its nasal cavity. Fortunately, it didn't spit toxin, only blood, though it was enough to blind you momentarily, allowing it to get the upper hand.

Both Eve and Cassie were making their way to her, jogging in from separate directions.

Vicki examined the mouth of the cave she was standing in front of. Shining her torch inside, into the darkness, she couldn't see any movement. That of course meant nothing; there were plenty of crevices and holes for the creatures to hide in.

The creatures no doubt knew of her presence and were eagerly lying in wait, hoping she would come inside. Well, Vicki would grant them their wish, just as soon as backup arrived. That was the problem with hunting tri-quads and one of the things that made the creature so dangerous. Its powerful sense of smell detected you long before you knew it was even there. That gave it a huge advantage—it was either ready and waiting, or it caught you by surprise with an attack.

Her Colt was out, cocked and ready, just in case a tri-quad grew impatient and decided to come out to her.

With the torch still in her grip, Vicki cautiously flexed the fingers of her bandaged hand, loosening it a little. She winced as the stitches pulled. It was hurting her a lot more than she'd let on, but if her mother knew that she never would've allowed her to come along, so Vicki had played the injury down—a first for her. But Vicki hadn't been about to stay behind. She couldn't take that chance. Not again.

Eve, who had been closest, reached her first, following Vicki's torch as she lit up some blood drops on the ground. Vicki shone the beam farther into the cave, showing Eve the scarlet trail.

A nod from Eve signaled her agreement—the tri-quads were inside.

Eve's lips curled upward as she drew the shotgun out of its holster on her back, as if pleased to get its reassuring weight in her arms. Out of her backpack, she withdrew a torch and a roll of duct tape. She quickly taped the torch on top of the gun's side-by-side barrels.

Vicki understood her reasoning for this—Eve needed both hands for the shotgun. Though she could've simply held the torch underneath the gun as she and Cassie would do, unlike them, Eve only had two rounds. And when reloading the torch would get in her way. Fixing it to the gun in this fashion gave Eve more freedom of movement.

Cassie joined them, panting slightly. She'd been the farthest away, and had to run uphill.

Vicki had been watching the cave entrance closely while her mother prepared her shotgun. Now, Eve joined in, four sharp eyes peering into the torch-lit darkness.

A skittering noise drew their beams sharply together, but all that was illuminated was a light shower of dust and grit, falling away from one of the cave walls. They weren't naïve enough to think it was only a natural occurrence. A tri-quad was on the move, getting ready to attack.

The two torch beams separated quickly, each covering as much of the cave as possible. Cassie added a third beam to the mix, her breathing still not level, though better than it had been. The chance to rest had vanished when the creature made an advance.

Cassie attached a silencer to her pistol, clearly not relishing the idea of echoing gunshots around the cave. Vicki rolled her eyes; Cassie always had been sensitive to loud noises. Eve's shotgun would likely deafen her. Vicki had once suggested earplugs, but limiting her ability to hear could have dire consequences.

Torches lighting their way, the Valentines proceeded into the cave, the darkness swallowing more of them the deeper they went in.

The natural light from outside dwindled, then diminished completely the farther they walked, and Vicki was surprised by the cave's depth. Unexpectedly, the walls opened up even more, forming a good-sized cavern.

The Valentines drew to a sharp, unified halt when stones fell to Cassie's right. At the same time, there was movement on Eve's left. Vicki, in between them, felt something drip onto her head.

Despite their primeval looks, the tri-quads were smart—they were intending to attack in unison.

Though keen to wipe the liquid substance away, Vicki restrained herself, keeping both hands firmly attached to her torch and Colt. Shining the torch upward, she spotted a tri-quad hanging face down, suspended by its suckers, feet on the cave's ceiling. It was directly above her, twenty

feet up. It was inhaling her scent. More mucous fell, and Vicki was reminded of a dog salivating over a bone. She scrunched up her nose, wishing she hadn't made the comparison.

"Clean shot," she whispered.

"Hold while you can," Eve whispered back. "Let's draw them out."

Vicki knew that the longer they waited, the more confident the creatures would become, and more of them would reveal themselves. They needed to kill as many as they could in the first assault. Once a gunshot connected, the scent of their own blood drove the tri-quads into a wild and frenzied attack.

"I've got eyes on two more," Eve whispered. That was three.

"Mine won't come out to play," Cassie said, her voice hushed. "It's shy."

Vicki sniggered. "It'll be a whole lot shyer in a minute."

As if in defiance of the label it'd been given, the tri-quad suddenly darted out, aggressively running straight at Cassie. It jumped nearly two feet in the air, spraying in an attempt to blind her. Her tall height alone saved her from getting an eyeful. The liquid still collided with her upper chest and neck, splattering her clothes and skin.

Cassie fired the pistol twice, both bullets hitting the creature squarely in its face, one going through and exploding out the back of its nasal cavity. It was dead before it hit the ground.

Eve let rip with her shotgun, taking out the two she could see with a shot from each barrel. At the same time, Vicki fired her Colt, darting backward as the tri-quad came off the ceiling and fell down toward her. She emptied five rounds into it, not willing to risk it landing alive at the unguarded backs of her mother and sister.

The tri-quad impacted solidly with the stone floor. It looked dead.

Vicki closed the distance to it and used her last remaining bullet to make doubly sure—she capped it in the face.

Eve and Vicki both needed to reload, so they went back to back, watching all sides. The leather shell belt around Eve's waist gave easy access to her ammunition, but she still wasn't given the time to reload.

A further tri-quad appeared, going for Eve.

Cassie ran forward, evidently trying to get a clear shot, but both Vicki and Eve were in the way. The creature moved like lightning, its tentacle arms whipping up, ready to lash out at its target. Cassie took a shot, winging it on the shoulder. It was far from perfect, but the impact had the desired effect—the tri-quad was knocked off its feet and onto its back.

Eve used the butt of her shotgun, and rammed the stock forcefully down into the crater that was the creature's nasal cavity. Since her torch was now pointing upward, the wrong way, she was relying solely on her daughters to keep the creature lit up. The triquad twitched and writhed as if having a seizure. Its tentacles snapped up defensively—Eve ducked under one, barely dodged the other. It snapped back for her.

Cassie leapt for the tentacle, grabbing the top part to avoid its tip full of suckers. She had to use both hands to find hold on the slimy surface, and her gun, along with the torch, clattered to the ground. She dropped onto the tentacle, her knee pinning it to the hard ground. She withdrew her dagger and slashed strongly at it, cutting it clean off. It coiled and spasmed in the light of her fallen torch. She kicked it away, across the cave.

Following her sister's lead, Vicki trapped its remaining tentacle beneath her knee. It started to curl back on itself, its suckered tip heading straight for her. Unlike Cassie, she didn't have daggers to cut it off, and her penknife would take too long to extract. She couldn't release it, for Eve had just stepped in to kill the creature.

Cassie hurled her dagger, and the blade embedded into the tentacle's soft flesh and through to the ground below. Unfortunately, because the ground was mostly stone, the dagger hadn't gotten a very good hold in the rock.

Vicki made the most of the tentacle's delay, grabbing the dagger and twisting, putting her weight behind it and pressing down, tearing through the slippery flesh.

Eve smashed the gun's stock into the tri-quad's facial cavity. Repeatedly. Until it went limp. Eve pulled Vicki to her feet, while Cassie hastily retrieved her torch and gun. She covered them as they reloaded their weapons—the chambers filled successfully this time, and without interruption.

They thoroughly searched the remainder of the cave, highly alert despite being pretty positive that there were no more tri-quads here. Any remaining creature would've attacked by now. They still checked every nook and cranny before stepping back out into the daylight.

Vicki immediately started to laugh. "Cassie, you look so gross!"

Cassie looked down at her crimson spattered form, lifting her gray checked shirt and wiping at the globs of blood on her neck.

"Now those are words I never thought I'd say." Vicki leaned against Eve, laughing hysterically.

"I feel gross." Cassie's eyes scanned the surrounding countryside. "We'll have to go back via that creek we passed. I need to wash up before the car journey home."

"We will," Eve said. She showed Cassie the stock of the shotgun, which was caked in bloody pulp. "You're not the only thing that needs washing."

Vicki was still chuckling. “I wish I’d brought my camera.”

A dark smile appeared, and Cassie advanced on Vicki, arms out wide as if to embrace her.

Vicki’s taunting attitude vanished instantly. “No. Don’t you dare! Cassie, I mean it!” She hid behind Eve, trying to use her as a shield. Cassie chased her around their mother.

Vicki barely managed to stay ahead. “Mom! Tell her!”

Cassie laughed. “That’s so you. You get yourself into a situation, then expect someone else to bail you out.” She made another grab for Vicki. “Tattletale.”

Eve shook her head, as if not quite believing that only a short while ago these two had been fighting deadly monsters. She smiled at their playful banter.

“Leave me out of this.” And with that, Eve stepped out from between them.

Chapter Seven

EVE ALWAYS GLANCED up when someone entered The Smoking Gun. Even if she was busy, she always turned to see who it was. Every single time. It was second nature to her. She liked to know *exactly* who was in her bar, even down to the number of people. Eve knew of certain shadowstalkers that had feuds with one another, and knowing they were in the pub alerted her to any potential trouble before it broke out.

She had to be fully alert and on top of the situation at all times, for many shadowstalkers would take advantage if she wasn’t. Not so much the regulars, though Eve wouldn’t trust them either. Nor they her. Trust was something that came hard to shadowstalkers, often not even in their vocabulary. Due to this, most went their separate ways and hunted alone. The only time they came close to socializing was in this very bar.

However, there was one exception, and interestingly, that exception was the same for all shadowstalkers. At least all the ones Eve knew.

That exception was a woman—Raven.

Everyone told her their secrets, their life stories. Raven knew everybody. She was a font of information. Though an untapped font; Raven kept it all in confidence. She could be trusted

completely, and the shadowstalkers somehow picked up on that. This trust, of course, helped her business—Raven was the main trader, supplying anything and everything a shadowstalker might need. Anything you wanted, Raven could get it for you. She dealt with her customers in person only, so she traveled all across the country, meeting them face-to-face. She stopped at bars like Eve's, or any other gathering place for shadowstalkers. She didn't do house calls, and if a client wanted an individual meeting, they had to come to her. And come they did—Raven was always in high demand.

All shadowstalkers knew of Raven. Even if they'd never met her, her reputation preceded her. She was the best at what she did. She was accepted completely into the community, despite not being a shadowstalker herself. Though Raven could handle herself in a tight spot, she was no fighter.

Eve genuinely liked and trusted Raven, which was a rarity in itself. But even if she didn't know her as well as she did, the fact that so many shadowstalkers connected with Raven, in spite of their loner dispositions, would've been enough to show Eve how special a person she was. Unique.

The front door suddenly opened, and Eve didn't need to look to know who'd entered. The room erupted in greeting, numerous shadowstalkers offering invites to join their table. There was only one person who received such a reaction. Out of habit, Eve looked up anyway. As if she'd conjured the woman by her thoughts, Raven stood there. Raven took the time to nod or return the greetings, touching several affectionately on their arms or shoulders as she passed. She was a natural flirt, though Eve knew it never went beyond that—Raven strictly kept business separate from pleasure.

Eve prepared her usual drink, a coke and lemon. Raven never drank liquor when doing business; she said she liked to keep a clear head.

Eve watched amusedly as shadowstalkers all clamored for Raven's attention, and the trader patiently listened, responding to each in turn. Raven passed close to Vicki, and the two bumped knuckles with one another.

Vicki grinned at her. "Glad you're back."

Raven returned the smile. "I'm glad to be home."

Eve was touched by the words. Technically, Raven's home, or rather estate, was down south, a good distance away. She'd been born there, but hadn't lived there since she ran away at fifteen. Raven often said she considered the much smaller house in Long Meadows to be her real home, as she spent so much of her time at The Smoking Gun. If she had a headquarters for her business, Eve didn't doubt that her pub would be it. Raven spent nearly all of her free time there as well, and was sorely missed when she left. She was family in spirit, if not by blood—Raven's parents had died when she was fourteen years old, and the last of her kin died a few years later. The Valentines had always been a close-knit family, but somehow, Eve still didn't know when it'd happened, Raven had worked her way into their impenetrable circle.

Raven made her way to the bar, though it was slow going as she kept getting stopped by people. Finally, she made it, smiling as Eve placed her usual drink in front of her.

“You were missed around here.”

Raven’s smile grew. “Likewise.”

As Raven took a long drink from her glass, Eve appraised her. One would expect with a name like Raven, for her to have jet black hair, or at the very least dark, and to have sharp, birdlike features, but she was quite the opposite. Raven had long, pale, naturally blonde hair, lovely green eyes, which were unusually vivid and clear, and soft delicate features. She was very striking to look at, enchanting. She was slim, shapely, and of average height; around five foot six, but she appeared small next to the Valentine women. Raven had an elegant bearing about her, made all the more so because of the company she kept—shadowstalkers tended to be rough and ready, which was the complete opposite to Raven.

Eve was one of the few who knew Raven’s real name: it was Lily Rochester. Eve thought that suited her perfectly, though she understood why Raven had felt the need to change it. Eve never referred to her as Lily, not even when there was no one else present.

“You look well,” Eve said as Raven removed her knee-length coat, revealing the tattoo of a raven on her slim, upper left bicep. The artwork was incredibly detailed, holding an uncanny likeness to a real live bird. Its beady eyes looked out challengingly, and seemed to follow a person around the room. Raven lifted herself up and draped her coat across the stool, sitting down on top of it. Though it wasn’t a particularly warm night, she always had her tattoo on show while amongst shadowstalkers—it let them know instantly who she was. Everyone knew Raven by reputation, and if they’d never met her, her tattoo made her easily identifiable.

“I am. How’ve things been here?” Raven glanced worriedly to the corner, where a group was playing poker. “Is Cassie all right?”

“She’s fine.” Eve saw her concern and frowned. “What makes you think she wouldn’t be?”

“I got back late this afternoon. Townsfolk told me Cassie had been mugged over at Allensville. They’re all talking about it. Said she looked terrible. I, of course, knew that story wasn’t true—I’ve seen her fight, and I can’t imagine a common mugger would pose much of a threat to her. But I’d heard previously that Cass had a fight with Harley, and she’d saved Earl’s life.”

Eve wasn’t at all surprised that Raven knew so much about what had gone on while she’d been away. Gossip traveled fast, and everyone talked to Raven.

Eve nodded. “That part’s true.”

“I thought so. So I put both stories together, and I figure Harley must’ve knocked her around some.” Raven again looked to the poker group. Cassie had her back to them, so she couldn’t see her face.

“No. He just bruised her jaw. It’s nothing.”

“That’s it?” Raven’s voice lifted in disbelief. “Not that I’m not pleased, but the townsfolk made out like she was at death’s door.”

Eve scoffed. “Hardly.”

“I should’ve known they’d exaggerate. They’re as bad as you stalkers.” Raven let out a relieved laugh. “Remind me to never listen to them again. I’ve been worried sick.”

Eve gave her a sympathetic look, and patted Raven’s forearm. “There was no need.” She wasn’t at all offended by Raven’s dig at shadowstalkers. It was true, they did have a tendency to overexaggerate. “See for yourself.” Eve tipped her head toward Cassie, who was now making her way toward them—the bruise on her jaw was already fading.

Now able to see for herself that Cassie was safe and sound, Raven seemed to relax. She chuckled as she gestured to the wad full of cash in Cassie’s hand—she’d clearly won the poker game. “I see she’s still taking their money.”

Eve nodded. “She’s a real hustler, that one.”

When Cassie reached them, she laid a hand on Raven’s back. “Hello, stranger.” She took up the stool beside her. “How was your trip?”

“Buying. Selling. Trading.” Raven shrugged. “The usual. Nothing exciting. Though I had stories of your heroic escapades to keep me entertained.”

Cassie blushed, and then scowled because of it. “You know how stalkers exaggerate.”

Eve smirked. “We were just discussing that.”

“There you go then.”

“You’re clearly one of the rare exceptions,” Raven said, not looking at all fooled. She obviously knew of Cassie’s tendency to play things down. “And I think what you did for Earl was very noble.”

Cassie shook her head. “Nosy more like. It was none of my business.”

“That’s never stopped me,” Eve said, straight-faced. “Nor should it. You were right. Harley was wrong. End of.”

“Well said.” Raven tipped her glass to Eve before taking a drink.

Cassie chuckled. “You’re just saying that because you like to boss people around.”

Eve gave her a wry smile. “That too.”

Vicki appeared beside Raven, holding out her bandaged hand for Raven to clearly see. Eve bit back a smirk—unlike her sister, Vicki enjoyed the attention.

“Oh, honey!” Raven said. “What’s happened to you?”

“These idiots,” Vicki gestured behind to the room full of shadowstalkers, making no attempt to lower her voice, “were fighting. I got caught up in it, fell on some glass.” Her tone still held a note of anger, as if upset that again she’d been involved in stalker business.

“Oh no. I bet that hurt?”

“I thought I was going to lose my hand! Mom removed like half a pint glass from my palm.”

“Not quite,” Eve said, sharing an amused look with Raven. She really was the complete opposite to Cassie.

Vicki ignored her and continued, “I had to have loads of stitches. It’s going to scar horribly.”

Raven gently took hold of Vicki’s injured hand and turned it over. The bandage around her hand and wrist covered the injury, but Vicki liked a fuss, and Raven appeared more than happy to give it to her.

Eve knew that Raven was an only child, and had always wanted a younger sister. Vicki was considerably younger, seven years in fact, but it seemed she still fulfilled that wish.

“At least it’s in your palm,” Raven said. “It won’t be so noticeable.”

Vicki’s pout lessened somewhat. “I suppose.”

Cassie nodded, backing Raven up. “You won’t see it.”

Vicki looked grave. “Well if you can, I’ll have to wear gloves.”

“ACTUALLY, EVE, THERE was one thing of interest on my trip. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

Eve was pleased to have a respite from washing that evening's extensive amount of glasses. Drying her hands off on a towel, she crossed to the round kitchen table. Taking the seat directly opposite Raven, she gave her her complete attention.

"About a month ago, two shadowstalkers decided to investigate a series of missing persons in the area of Oaksmount. Because no bodies had been found, they didn't have a clue what they were up against. Shortly after, stories started circulating about a large unidentified beast that they'd come up against."

"Who were these stalkers?"

Raven grimaced slightly. She looked reluctant to say. "Alf James and Scott Gatesby."

Eve raised a single eyebrow, highly dubious. "The cousins?"

Raven nodded, holding up a hand as if to forestall any further comment. "I know what you're thinking—they're a couple of pranksters, but just hear me out."

Eve leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. She was skeptical to say the least. Since it was Raven, and she trusted her judgment, she would at least listen to the whole story before making up her mind. Eve nodded for her to continue.

"Like you, I was doubtful of the rumors, so I went straight to the source." Raven took a breath. "The cousins were badly shaken. Scott told me they'd barely escaped with their lives. And they'd only managed that because they hadn't stayed to fight it."

Eve frowned at that. If the story was fabricated, the cousins were much more likely to paint themselves in a heroic light, not one of cowardice. Still, she wouldn't put anything past those two.

"I asked them to describe it. Massive. About eight feet tall. Built like a tank. Spines down its back."

Eve leaned forward, interested now. Though she didn't like what she was hearing.

"Alf said he shot it in the head, and it kept on coming. That's when they ran." Raven shrugged. "They had no idea what it was."

"No, they wouldn't have. Nor would many other shadowstalkers for that matter."

Raven watched her expectantly. "But you do." It wasn't a question.

"What they describe, if it's true, is a galdago."

Raven repeated the name, breaking it up into syllables and saying it phonetically, as if to be sure she got the pronunciation right. "Gal-day-go."

“But I have difficulty seeing it.” Eve shook her head. “The last time I heard of an attack by one was nearly two decades ago.”

“What happened?”

“Four stalkers went after it. Three died. The other had his arm ripped off.” Eve squinted in thought. “He’s retired now, but I think you met him once. When you were just starting out.”

At Raven’s hesitation, Eve realized that as the main trader, she would have hundreds of acquaintances to sift through. “Nelson? I remember him mentioning you.”

The name seemed to jog Raven’s memory, for she nodded. “That’s right. Of course.”

Eve got back on topic. “Alf and James are too young to remember, but galdagos were feared greatly by shadowstalkers. Because they were so rare, even then, they were almost legendary, and their prowess seemed to grow with each new story. Some shadowstalkers wanted to make their name by killing such a beast, and a lot of them died in the trying. The few that succeeded dwindled the beasts’ number further, and since the galdago hardly bred, eventually they were regarded as extinct.”

“Why didn’t it breed?” Raven said.

“Because their young were even more vicious than they, and tended to kill their parents.”

Raven winced. “Charming.”

“That’s why I find it highly unlikely that the story you heard is true. As I said, nearly twenty years have passed since the last sighting.”

Raven asked the obvious question, “But how would the cousins know what it looked like to describe it to me?”

“The same way you now do,” Eve said. “They spoke to someone who had the knowledge.” She produced a self-deprecating grin. “I bet some old-timer like myself loved reliving the glory days. The cousins could’ve simply pretended to not know what it was.”

“You’re hardly an old-timer, Eve.” Raven jumped on the opening, clearly wanting to know more. “But since you brought it up, did you ever come up against a galdago?”

“Once. I’d have been around Cassie’s age. A year or two younger. Mathew was with me.” She smiled at the memory of her husband. “I’d dismissed a lot of the stories I’d heard as hearsay, or drunken exaggerations.”

“And were they?” Raven said.

Eve shook her head of brown hair. “Not a one. Everything I’d heard was true.”

Raven looked genuinely surprised, her pale eyebrows crawling up. “Everything?”

“Every word.” Eve nodded. “I could easily see why the galdago had such a fierce reputation. Why it was feared so. It fed off internal organs, though it made full use of its victim’s carcass...”

Eve stopped, suddenly remembering that she wasn’t talking to a fellow shadowstalker. Raven didn’t have the same constitution that she herself did. Though Raven had spent nearly half of her life around shadowstalkers, and no doubt had heard all sorts of gross recountings, Eve tended to try and spare her the gorier details, so she wasn’t about to elaborate or finish that sentence. She continued on another tack, “Its hide is tough, difficult to penetrate. One bullet isn’t enough to pierce its thick skull.” A smirk appeared. “Barring a shotgun of course.”

Raven smiled, as if knowing how fond Eve was of that gun. “I take it that’s how you brought it down?”

Eve chuckled. “Clever girl. Though it took some time, they’re really smart. Out of all the creatures I’ve fought, the galdago would be the last one I’d choose to fight.”

“That speaks volumes in itself.” Raven shifted in her chair. “Well I don’t think you’ll have to. From the information you’ve told me, the cousins have to be lying.”

“Why the change of heart?”

“Because, as they were fleeing the scene, they both said they saw two more.”

Eve’s eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. “A nest of galdagos?”

“That’s what they said.”

“You think they’d at least try and keep it plausible.” With a shake of her head, Eve laughed. “Sorry boys, that’s one lie too many.”

“MRS. FRYE TOLD me about it. Or rather, she was the first to tell me about your supposed mugging.”

“Why am I not surprised?” That woman was such a gossip. Cassie sighed. “Don’t those people have anything better to do?” A small chuckle emerged when she recalled that day, and she tucked a long leg beneath her as she twisted to face Raven, who was sitting beside her on the bed. “I bet she didn’t tell you she tried to rub my bruise off with a handkerchief?”

Raven barked a laugh. “What?” She turned as Cassie had, adopting a similar pose and leaving a foot dangling over the bed’s edge.

“She thought it was dirt,” Cassie said.

Raven shook her head. “Her eyesight’s getting worse. I keep telling her I’ll take her to the optician, but she won’t have it.”

As with the shadowstalkers, the townsfolk of Long Meadows adored Raven. She was the only person Cassie knew of, who could fit in effortlessly with both the stalking world and the normal one.

“Nor is she likely to now.” Cassie gave her a rueful look. “The nearest optician’s in Allensville.”

“Mrs. Frye hated that place long before you mentioned the mugging, Cassie,” Raven said. “I’d have had to take her farther afield anyway. But it’s redundant, because she doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with her eyesight, so she’ll never go.” Her eyes shifted to Cassie’s fading bruise. Reaching up, Raven lightly traced its outline. “Just wait until I see Harley.”

Cassie glanced amusedly to her. “And what exactly are you planning to do?” She removed Raven’s hand from her cheek, giving it a squeeze before letting go. “Stop trading with him?” Her tone wasn’t unkind, but they both knew Raven was no match for Harley in a fight.

“Yes, actually.” Raven’s face was serious. “He’ll have to get his supplies elsewhere.”

“There’s no need for that. Really. I appreciate the sentiment, but don’t lose yourself business on my account.”

Raven waved a dismissive hand. “It won’t affect me in the slightest. But it will cause him considerable difficulty.”

“First, I beat him up. He’s barred from the pub. Vicki wanted to keep his prized bike. And now you’re going to stop trading with him? I’m starting to feel sorry for Harley.”

“Well you shouldn’t,” Raven said. “He’s only got himself to blame.”

“All this over a bruise?”

“This has nothing to do with your bruise.” She paused briefly. “At least not on my part anyway.”

Cassie was surprised. “Then what does it have to do with?”

“What he said to you. About your father.”

Cassie froze. Her gaze snapped back to Raven’s.

Raven’s tone was soft. “Earl told me.”

Cassie frowned, displeased. “Of course he did.”

It was almost impossible to keep something from reaching Raven’s ears. She didn’t like to think they were discussing what had happened behind her back. She passed a hand tiredly across her face, rubbing at her eyes. “And what else did Earl say?”

“That you lost it. Went ballistic on his ass—his words, not mine.” Raven shuffled closer on the bed. “That you were out of control.”

“I had control,” Cassie said. Then after a moment, she quietly added, “Mostly.”

Raven laid a comforting hand on her back at the admission. “Harley had no right to say those things to you.”

“At least he had the balls to say it.” At Raven’s frown, she said, “I know everyone must think it.” Cassie swallowed. “That I left my father to die.”

“They certainly do not!” Raven sounded startled by her way of thinking. “And if anyone would know about it, it’d be me.”

Cassie was hopeful for a second, painfully so. Then she shrugged. “As if you’d tell me anyway.” She knew Raven would try and protect her from such knowledge.

“Have I ever lied to you, Cassie?” Raven caught her eye and held it. “Have I?”

Cassie shook her head. “No.”

“And I never will.” Raven paused, as if to let her words sink in. “I’m not lying now. No one thinks that.”

“Harley does,” Cassie said.

“Harley’s an ignorant son of a bitch. And he was goading you.”

It was extremely rare for Raven to pass judgment on a person, especially in the negative sense. Cassie knew that Harley’s actions had to have really angered Raven to warrant such a response.

Raven cupped Cassie’s cheek, as if in an attempt to hold her in place. “No one thinks that. No one except you.” Cassie tried to move, but Raven held firm. “Just listen, all right. Listen.” When Cassie stopped resisting, Raven said, “What happened wasn’t your fault. None of it. You have to believe me on this.”

Cassie wrenched free, standing up and crossing the room. She whirled around to face Raven, arms folded defensively across her chest. “You weren’t even there!”

Raven didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed by Cassie's anger. She clearly knew it wasn't for her. "No. But I've heard the story from Eve, and she was."

"I don't want to talk about this." It wasn't a strong statement, more of a plea to drop the subject.

"I know." Raven's voice was compassion itself. "But you need to, Cassie. I can see that it weighs heavily on you."

"It's my burden. I'll carry it."

"Let me help," Raven said. "Please?"

"You know I can't." Cassie felt even worse when she saw Raven's disappointment. She stood there awkwardly for a moment, and then returned to the bed, sitting beside her once more. "I'm sorry." She was sincere.

Raven placed a tender finger on her lips. "Don't. There's no need. The last thing I want is to add to that guilt."

Cassie drew her in for a hug. She was pleased beyond measure that Raven had returned home, for she'd missed her terribly while she'd been away. "I'm so lucky to have you in my life."

Raven laughed quietly. She rubbed Cassie's back. "Remember that."

Cassie laid a soft kiss in her blonde hair. "I never forget."

GARRETT ROARED WITH laughter. He clapped Raven heartily on the back in delight, nearly causing her to fall off the stool. She hastily grabbed the bar to steady herself.

"You've made my day, Raven." Garrett put a hand to his side, as if he'd laughed so hard he'd given himself a stitch. "They've gone for drama instead of realism. No one will believe them. A nest of galdagos?" He chuckled again. "There's just no way."

"That's pretty much what I said." Eve placed a bowl of salted peanuts down in front of them.

"From what Eve's told me about the galdago, it's probably a good thing," Raven said, resettling herself on the stool. "The last thing we'd want is a nest of them."

"True," Garrett said. "They're nasty creatures. Remember the smell, Eve?"

Eve unconsciously wrinkled her nose. “How could I forget?”

Scooping up a handful of peanuts, Garrett turned to Raven. “They stink of rotting flesh. Though that’s to be expected since they...”

“Garrett.” Eve shook her head at him, trying to get him to halt his sentence.

Garrett continued, frowning confusedly at her. “Cover themselves in the flesh of their victims. They cut parts off, usually skin or the like, though on occasion something more identifiable will show up, like a finger or an ear.”

“Garrett.” Eve tried again, seeing Raven cringe at his description.

Garrett went on eagerly—it was obvious he enjoyed talking about his work. “I saw one once that’d made a display of a human’s bellybutton, stitching it onto its arm.”

He popped a few peanuts into his mouth, munching contentedly.

Raven looked appalled. “Stitched?”

“Oh, yes,” Garrett said. “They stitch the parts onto their own body. Kind of like a trophy. I kind of think of it like a cross between a skin graft and a tattoo.”

Raven winced as she glanced down at the tattoo on her arm. She clearly didn’t appreciate the comparison.

“Of course the trophies rot. So that explains the smell. The one I saw was covered in places by maggots...”

“Garrett!” Eve’s stern tone stopped him now.

He looked to her, startled. “What?”

Eve tipped her head to Raven, who had paled slightly. “Raven doesn’t want to hear about that.”

Garrett appeared genuinely confused. “Why not?” It suddenly seemed to dawn on him that Raven’s lack of color was due to him, and he patted her arm in apology. “Right. Sorry. I forgot that you’re not a shadowstalker.”

A small smile. “It’s all right.”

“I honestly wouldn’t give it another thought,” Garrett said. “I’m pretty certain they’re extinct.” He nodded confidently. “I’d bet my life on it.”

EVE GLANCED UP from behind the bar as she heard Garrett raise his voice in evident frustration.

“If you want to waste your time, then go right ahead.” Garrett pushed his chair back and left the group gathered around the table behind. He headed toward the bar.

“I never thought of stalkers as a gullible bunch,” he said to Eve. “I’ve just spent the past two hours repeating myself to a number of them—none of which wanted to listen, and ignored what I had to say anyway.”

Eve looked at him. Tonight, Garrett’s T-shirt was navy, though his black jeans remained, as always, the same.

“There’s not more about that galdago rubbish?” Eve stopped wiping down the bar. “I’ve had it for two nights now.”

“Afraid so. They’re drawing straws to see who goes.”

Eve smiled, amused. “Too scared to go, are they?”

“Quite the opposite. They all want to go. Trying to prove their manhood or some tripe.” Garrett ushered her closer, lowering his voice. “It’s a good thing it is rubbish, for not many here would stand a chance against a real galdago. Never mind a nest.”

Eve looked around, examining the entire room. “I only count six. And that’s against a single galdago.”

Garrett glanced around also. He stroked his scar almost absentmindedly, thumb running across his cheek in thought. “I only count four.”

Eve smirked as she realized his oversight. “Did you count you and me?”

Garrett clicked his fingers, leaving his index finger out to point at Eve. “Six it is. And that’s including your daughters.”

Eve nodded. “Of course. I figure Jack Wilks could manage.” She used his full name as there were quite a few Jacks in the pub at the moment. It was a common name. Jack Wilks had tried to help Vicki when she’d gotten the glass in her hand, and Eve hadn’t forgotten his noble intentions. She looked to Garrett to see if he had picked the same.

He had. “Yeah,” Garrett said. “Anthony, too.”

Eve grunted in acknowledgment. “Not many considering, suppose we should think ourselves lucky the galdago rarely bred.”

Garrett nodded. “They’d have had no problem overrunning us otherwise.” He lowered his voice further, clearly not wanting his admission to be overheard. “I can’t say I’d like to face a whole nest of them.”

“Me neither.” Eve glanced up as a young shadowstalker named Graham jumped to his feet, exuberantly clutching the short straw.

“I won!” Graham shouted to the now scowling group. “I’m going to kill me a galdago.” Graham was around twenty years old, blond, tall, and muscular. He was also over-confident, cocky, and naïve—a bad combination for anyone, but for a shadowstalker it would be his undoing. It was just a matter of time. Eve was surprised Graham had lasted this long, but she put that down to his older brother, Percy, who had more about him in general, and a much better skill set. Percy looked after Graham. Or he had, Percy had died two months ago. Graham would be following his older brother shortly, of that Eve had no doubt.

She shared a look with Garrett.

“Chopped liver,” Garrett said, as if knowing that Graham wouldn’t stand a chance in hell against a creature of such high repute.

“Metaphorical chopped liver,” Eve said.

After all, the nest had been made up by a couple of prankster cousins. Graham would return with nothing to show for his trip except a bruised ego at being misled.

“They’re not even taking it seriously themselves,” she said. “They’ve no doubt heard the stories by now, so they should know they’d have to team up to kill the galdagos. One stalker alone is suicide. They don’t even believe it. They’re just showing off.”

Garrett held a hand out, pointing to the gathered group. His finger told her to wait. A moment later, another man called out in success.

Eve rolled her eyes, shaking her head in disappointment. She’d thought they would have more sense. She was at least pleased to note that the two men who actually could face a galdago—Anthony and Jack Wilks—weren’t taking part in this nonsense. They had more sense.

Eve assessed the winner. After deciding he wouldn’t fare much better than the first, she looked back to Garrett. “How many are going?”

“Three.”

Just then, the third man announced himself by letting out a hoot of delight. Eve recognized him. Christian was a regular, often in The Smoking Gun. She'd seen him chatting to Vicki a few times.

Christian had a good sense of humor, but beyond that she knew little about him. Only that he'd been a shadowstalker for many years, and was in his mid-thirties. Christian was a lot more seasoned than Graham, and so could handle himself better in a fight, but Eve didn't believe he had what it took to best a galdago. None of the chosen men did.

The three winners shook hands with one another, clapping each other on the back in triumph.

"Those fools," Garrett said.

"The sad thing is, they think it's real. If this were real, they'd be about to face the biggest threat they'd ever had to deal with. The galdago would tear all three to shreds without a break in its stride." Eve frowned at the trio. "They'd actually be celebrating their own deaths right now."

Chapter Eight

THE PUB'S ATMOSPHERE was still charged with excitement about the upcoming galdago hunt, and many shadowstalkers were high-spirited in anticipation, their merry state heightened further by the liquor they were swilling.

Garrett smiled at Vicki as she came to clear away the empty glasses. "Are you on your break shortly? You could join us if you like?" He tried not to appear too eager, though inside he was. He'd really enjoyed the time he and Vicki had recently shared together, and wanted to spend some more time with her. Vicki had shut him out for the past five years, and he was keen to keep any more time from elapsing.

"No, thank you." Vicki smiled politely at him, then turned and walked away.

Raven spoke up from her seat beside him, "I see nothing's changed between you and her."

Garrett was crestfallen. It was like nothing had changed. Like the other day hadn't even happened. The friendliness she'd shown then had vanished, and in its place, was only forced politeness. Vicki had reverted backward.

As if seeing his dejected expression, Raven gave his forearm a squeeze. “At least Vicki didn’t avoid you. She came to clear the table. That’s something.”

“You don’t understand. I thought we’d had a breakthrough. The other day I spent hours with her.”

“With Cassie and Eve?” Raven said.

“They were there at times. But mostly it was just me and Vicki.”

Pale eyebrows rose in surprise. “That’s great, Garrett. Really.”

“That’s what I thought.” He looked at Vicki’s retreating form, though all he could see of her was her back. She was moving farther and farther away from him, and not only in the physical sense. “But the way she was with me just now…” Garrett broke off with a heavy sigh. He drank some of his beer, reflecting. “Perhaps I expected too much?” An awful thought hit him. “I just hope the other day wasn’t a one time thing.”

He felt a sinking sensation in his gut, hoping against hope that his words were not true.

“GARRETT LEFT EARLY,” Eve said as Raven came to sit at the bar. She’d had to lift her voice above the raucous background noise. Though she’d had her fill of galdago talk, she was appeased by the profit she knew she would make tonight—most patrons, in their jubilant state, were drinking to excess.

Raven merely nodded, pulling out a stool and planting herself on it.

When nothing further was forth-coming, Eve said, “He looked upset.”

“He was.”

Eve tapped her fingers impatiently on the counter. She knew that Raven didn’t like to betray confidences, so she’d have to make her best guess. She cocked her head slightly to one side in thought. “Did you and he…” Eve didn’t even bother to finish the sentence—it was extremely rare for Raven to fall out with someone. And Garrett was a good friend of hers.

She glanced suspiciously at Vicki, who was still collecting empty glasses. She’d noticed Vicki clearing their table earlier, and had been pleased by it, glad to see that she was no longer avoiding Garrett. However, those feelings abruptly vanished, Eve easily connecting the two incidents to one another.

“What did Vicki do?” Eve said.

“Nothing.”

A disbelieving eyebrow rose. “Raven, this is me you’re talking to.” Eve leaned forward onto the bar. “You know I’ll get the information out of Garrett if not from you.”

“It’s true.” Raven gave her direct eye contact. “Vicki merely acted as usual. It was what she didn’t do that hurt Garrett.”

“Which was?”

“He wanted her to join us for her break. She declined.” Raven shrugged. “Apparently they got on great the other day, so Garrett couldn’t understand why her attitude toward him hadn’t changed. He thought it would have.”

Eve felt a frown form. “So did I.” She gave her youngest a long, speculative look. Vicki had already lost one father; Eve simply couldn’t understand why she was denying herself the second.

“CAN YOU BELIEVE those imbeciles?” Vicki flopped down into the kitchen chair, propping her feet up on the chair next to her without bothering to remove her shoes. “Drawing straws like that? You’d think it was a flamin’ raffle. Those boys need to get a life.” She flicked some hair over her shoulder. “Shame it’s not true though— it’d mean three less idiots for me to serve.”

Raven frowned, clearly taking affront to her words. “Vicki, that’s not nice.”

Vicki rolled her eyes. Though she remained silent.

“I thought you liked Christian?” Cassie said. “I’ve often seen you laughing together.”

“I like his jokes.” Vicki over-emphasized the last word. “Doesn’t mean I like him.”

Cassie held up her hands in a surrendering motion. She didn’t want to argue. “My mistake.”

Before Vicki could respond, Raven stepped neatly in, changing the topic completely. “Are you busy for the next few days, Cassie?”

Cassie looked to her, intrigued. “I’ve got nothing important planned. Why?”

“I need to visit my parents’ estate. Pick up a few items.” Raven always referred to her family home in that manner, though it was now actually her estate, since her parents had died long ago. She shrugged casually, but Cassie knew how difficult it was for Raven to visit her old home,

which held both good and bad memories for her—Raven only ever returned when it was absolutely necessary, and if it couldn't be avoided.

“I'd appreciate it if you'd come along. I could do with the company.”

Even if she'd had something important planned, Cassie would've canceled it for this request. Her eyes locked onto Raven's and held there. “Of course. You know you needn't ask.”

Raven smiled warmly at Cassie, dipping her head in a slight nod.

“Can't I come?” Vicki sounded hurt by the exclusion.

“I'd love to have you along.” Raven reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “But it wouldn't be fair to Eve, leaving her alone to run the bar. Especially for a few days.”

Vicki seemed to concede the point, for she fell silent. A moment later her expression lit up in hope. She sat up straight in her chair, lowering her feet in readiness. “What if I can convince Mom to close up and come along?”

“The more the merrier,” Raven said.

Vicki stood, then rushed off to search for Eve.

“Good luck.” Cassie chuckled, knowing their mother only ever closed the bar for two reasons: an emergency, or if they were going on a shadowhunt. A vacation didn't factor in on the list. “You'll need it.”

“IT'S ONLY FOR a few days!” Vicki said. “You'd think I was asking you to do more work, not less.”

“You're confusing me with yourself, Vicki. I don't shy away from extra work.”

Eve was sitting in front of an antique oak dressing table, getting ready for bed. Vicki was standing behind her, though they could see one another's faces by using the vanity mirror in the center of the dressing table. The table had been an anniversary gift from Mathew. He had told Eve that it was the most beautiful and ornate set he could find, and only a mirror such as this deserved to hold her beautiful and, in his eyes, unrivalled image.

Eve's bedroom had two windows; one to the front and one to the side of the house, giving her dual viewpoints of the surrounding area. Both windows were currently covered by curtains, shutting out the night sky. The room was long, rectangular. The double bed sat at the far end, bedside cabinets to either side. The dressing table was opposite the doorway and, next to the

door, a wardrobe stretched along the wall. Lilac was the prominent color; the bedspread identical to the matching curtains, which were embroidered with a delicate leaf design.

Vicki huffed in annoyance. “Please? We haven’t had a break in years.”

Eve took down her long brown hair, freeing it from the ponytail it’d been in. She picked up a brush and ran it through her wavy locks, untangling any snarls of hair that she came across. “That’s one of the downfalls of running your own business. Besides, I don’t need a break, I enjoy what I do.”

“Well I don’t,” Vicki said.

Eve leveled an impatient look at her, using the mirror. She only ever used her youngest’s full name when annoyed with her, and she used it now. “Yes, Victoria, I am well aware of that. You make it perfectly clear.” She held up a hand, forestalling Vicki’s next comment. “I’m not stopping you from going. Feel free.” Eve saw her pause, so turned to face her. “Weren’t you invited? I’m sure Raven wouldn’t mind...”

“That’s not it,” Vicki cut her off mid-sentence. “Raven said it wouldn’t be fair to leave you by yourself to run the bar. So basically, I can only go if you go.”

Eve felt a touched smile form on her face. “She’s a thoughtful girl that Raven.”

Vicki scowled. “Meaning that I’m not?”

“Did I say that?”

Vicki’s voice lifted. “You implied it!”

“No. You interpreted it that way.” Eve fought to keep her own voice level—she was tired, and wanted nothing more than to crawl into her warm bed. “And you are wrong.” She knew that in spite of Vicki’s displeasure at not being able to go on this trip, her youngest would never actually leave her alone to run the pub. Vicki had her outbursts, but she was all talk.

Vicki let out a heavy breath. “I think Cassie should stay. She likes hanging out with the punters.”

“So do you.” At Vicki’s incredulous look, Eve said, “Some anyway.”

“The odd one. The few who can talk about something besides shadowstalking.”

“You shouldn’t be so averse to it. It’s a part of your life too.”

“A part I’d like to cut out,” Vicki all but shouted. “And I’m averse to it because stalking took my father away from me. From all of us.” Her expression was suddenly open, distraught, and Eve was reminded of the young teenage girl at the hospital, wailing helplessly in her mother’s

arms as her world crashed down around her upon finding out that her father was dead. Then just as quickly as she'd appeared, the girl was gone. Vicki's face hardened, replacing the vulnerability there. Her tone dripped with sarcasm. "Excuse me for allowing such a trivial thing to affect how I feel."

"It affects me too, honey." Eve reached out and took hold of Vicki's hand.

"I know, Mom. But I'm not as strong as you. You want to take revenge on every single creature. Cassie's the same. Despite the fact that Dad took the creature that killed him along with him to the grave, you still want more."

"It's not about vengeance. Not anymore. To start with, of course, but not now. It's simply who we are."

Vicki looked skeptical. "Says who?"

"You know my parents were shadowstalkers, as were your father's. The knowledge and skills are passed down from generation to generation. It is a stalker's way." Eve stood, bringing a hand to rest over Vicki's heart. "It's in our blood." She patted Vicki's chest twice. "It's in your blood."

Vicki rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I'm going to get a transfusion."

Eve laughed, lightly brushing Vicki's cheek with the back of her knuckles. The gesture was a trademark of hers, one of the ways she often showed affection to her daughters.

"I take it that's a no for the trip then?" Vicki's voice didn't hold any annoyance now, only disappointment.

"No for me. You can make your own decision. I honestly don't mind if you go. Garrett would probably help me out if I asked."

Vicki shook her head adamantly, as if the last thing she wanted was for Garrett to do her a favor. "Don't do that." She paused a moment. Then she pointed a finger at Eve. "If I'm doing twice the work I want twice the money."

It was Eve's turn to roll her eyes. "Sort that out with Cassie. She's likely to just give you her pay for those days."

Vicki nodded, finally looking pleased about something.

THE JOURNEY WAS long and they were taking turns driving. It was Cassie's shift. She liked driving Raven's car—the black Range Rover was brand new and it ate up the road with ease, gliding smoothly along. Unlike their own 4x4, which, to put it kindly, had seen better days. It was old, rusty, and rattled loudly when going off-road. Though Cassie realized she should probably be grateful that it still even went off-road.

“Have you been back to the estate since we visited...?” Cassie couldn't recall exactly when it was. “How long ago was it?”

“Two years,” Raven said. “And no I haven't been back since.”

“Two years is a long time.”

“Not long enough.” Raven seemed somewhat subdued, as if she hated the fact they were travelling toward her old home. She nervously fidgeted in her seat.

Seeing her discomfort, Cassie pulled the car over to the side of the road. She turned sideways in her seat to give Raven her full attention. “I can still turn the car around, if you'd rather not go,” she said. “I can see that it's bothering you.”

Raven bit her lower lip. “I'd rather not.”

“Right then.” Without the slightest bit of irritation or annoyance at having traveled the entire day for nothing, Cassie checked in her rear-view mirror to swing the car around. A hand gripped hers on the steering wheel, stopping her.

Raven didn't speak until Cassie looked at her. “I don't want to go. But I have to. I have to collect an item for a customer.”

“Can't you get one elsewhere?” Cassie was curious as to what the item was, but didn't like to pry. She knew that Raven, the business part of her anyway, kept a lot of things confidential, and would offer the information if she were free to do so. Some of her clients demanded complete privacy regarding their transactions. Cassie assumed this was one of those times.

“Afraid not. It's a very rare piece. It would take months, maybe even years to track down another, and my client needs it now.”

“If it's that rare, shouldn't you just loan it to him?” Cassie used the male pronoun simply because the majority of shadowstalkers were men. “Then you've still got it in your collection in case it's needed again.”

Raven smiled at her. “You'd make a good trader.” Her smile widened as Cassie returned it. “I do that for quite a few pieces actually. Put them on loan,” she said. “But I want rid of this item.”

Cassie couldn't help herself. “Why?”

“It was one of my uncle’s acquisitions.” Her jaw tightened on the familial term.

“Ah.” Cassie now understood. She frowned as she remembered differently. “I thought you’d gotten rid of all his stuff?”

“I have. This is the last. Though he was a complete bastard he did have an eye for trading.” Raven let out an uneven breath, and Cassie laid a comforting hand on her thigh. “I couldn’t bring myself to throw this final item out, simply due to its worth.”

“Expensive I take it?”

“A few hundred thousand,” Raven said, waving dismissively at the amount.

Cassie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. For one item? That was more than she and her family would make in five years.

Raven looked amused by her expression, though she soon sobered. “I didn’t mean its monetary worth. I wouldn’t touch any money that’s been tainted by...” She hesitated, as if she couldn’t bring herself to say his name again. “Him.”

No name was needed—Cassie knew that Raven was referring to her uncle.

“I’ll give it to charity, like all the rest.” Raven was silent for a long moment before continuing, “I meant its worth as an item. It will be of great use to my client, and many others who need protection from the...” Raven caught herself, and clearly amended what she’d been about to reveal. “These creatures.” She narrowed her eyes at Cassie. “You’re too easy to talk to. You almost had me there.”

Cassie merely smiled. They both knew she wasn’t trying to pry anything from her.

Raven directed an honest look at her. “I’m sorry I can’t tell you more. I would if I could.”

“I know that,” Cassie said. “Don’t worry about it. I’m getting the gist of it.” Her blue eyes twinkled at Raven. “Though it no doubt caused you considerable distress to hang on to that item, you did it anyway, so that one day it could be of help to others.” Cassie studied her. “You’re quite selfless.”

Raven’s mouth curved into a grin. “You’re painting me in a rather flattering light.”

Cassie shrugged, answering truthfully. “I paint it like I see it.” She let that sink in. “You’re a better person than I am.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

“It’s true,” Cassie said. “I’d have burnt it. Your uncle too, for that matter.”

Her grip tightened on the steering wheel. She'd inherited her mother's protective streak, and it came through now in defense of Raven. "He's lucky he's dead, that's all I can say."

Raven's grin widened, looking oddly flattered by Cassie's threat. She removed Cassie's clenched hand from the wheel, taking it between her own and holding on to it.

They sat in companionable silence for a while.

"Your parents would be extremely proud of you, Raven," Cassie whispered, not wanting to disturb the moment. Though she had never met them, she didn't at all doubt her words. From what Raven had told her, they seemed like good, kind people.

A silent tear rolled down Raven's cheek.

Cassie wanted nothing more than to brush the tear away, but she restrained herself. "And for what it's worth, I am too."

Raven looked overcome with emotion. In response, she affectionately squeezed Cassie's hand, which was still between her own.

IT WAS DARK out. At this early hour the roads were deserted, allowing the car to drive unimpeded.

Cassie and Raven were taking turns behind the wheel, as they were driving non-stop. Raven's estate lay south of The Smoking Gun. A good way south. It'd been decided early on they would travel through the night, only stopping for toilet breaks and to restock their packs of food and water supplies. For two reasons: the first, Raven wanted to get this whole ordeal behind her as fast as possible, she didn't want to drag it out. Second, Cassie didn't want to leave her mother and sister to cover her shifts for too long. Though she knew they could manage, it would be harder without her there to help out. If she and Raven were to only travel by day, and stop or stay in a motel overnight, the entire journey would take twice as long, and they wouldn't return for more than a week, likely eight days.

"Is it my shift yet?" Cassie had been staring at her watch for the past couple of minutes, trying to make out the time. To no avail though, it was too dark in the car. And since she was laid across the backseat, she couldn't see the clock in the front. She really needed to get herself a watch that lit up in the dark.

Raven jumped in the driver's seat. "God, Cass! You nearly made me crash the car."

"Don't do that." Cassie reached out and patted Raven's shoulder in silent apology.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was.” Cassie yawned and stretched her tall frame as much as she could in the confined space. Her back ached, somewhat uncomfortable from having been kept in the same position for so long.

As if reading her thoughts, Raven said, “You should’ve taken the chair.”

Cassie knew she was referring to the front passenger seat. It tilted all the way back, allowing the person in it to practically lay flat.

Cassie chuckled. “Habit. I’m used to the back.” When she and her family went on a shadowhunt, if it required an overnight journey or longer, because there were three of them, they had no choice but to take turns and sleep in the backseat. Their passenger seat went back but not a long way, which meant oncoming headlights easily disturbed one’s slumber.

“Next time, I’ll listen to you.” Cassie sat up, rubbing her eyes to clear them of sleep. Putting her feet to the floor, she realized her bad leg felt odd, numb. She must’ve been lying awkwardly on it.

“Come up front. You’ll be more comfortable.” Raven began to slow the car. “You’ve still got an hour before you take over. You should try to get some more rest.”

The Range Rover pulled off the main road and parked on the hard shoulder.

Cassie stepped down onto the tarmac, pleased she’d kept hold of the assisting door when her numb leg gave out underneath her. She managed to stifle her surprised cry, trying her best to regain her footing before Raven noticed the mishap. Despite her efforts to hide it, she still heard a car door open, then slam, as Raven rushed around the rear of the car to help.

Cassie was amused by the irony—she’d lied to Vicki about lying awkwardly on her bad leg, feigning discomfort so her sister would spend some time with Garrett. And now, she really had lain awkwardly on her bad leg—she supposed it served her right.

“I’m all right,” Cassie said as Raven’s worried face appeared. “My leg’s just numb, that’s all.”

Raven hooked a supportive arm behind Cassie’s back, stabilizing her slightly unsteady form. “Get back in.”

Cassie looked at her questioningly. “I thought you wanted me in the front?”

“Now I want you in the back.” When Cassie didn’t budge, Raven added, “You just said that next time you would listen to me. Well, it’s next time.” She indicated the rear seat with a tip of her head. “In the back.”

A dark, delicate eyebrow rose at the instruction. Still, Cassie didn't protest, clambering back in with as much dignity as she could, which wasn't a lot, since her leg wouldn't cooperate with her.

"Sit with your back to the other door." Raven climbed in also, shutting the door behind her to keep the cold night air from seeping in. Once Cassie had done as she'd asked, Raven tapped her own lap. "Give me your leg."

Cassie hesitated. "What are you going to do?"

"You'll see." Green eyes sparkled across at her. "Do you trust me or not?"

Cassie responded by putting her leg across Raven's lap, leaving the other on the floor.

"Thank you." Raven examined her leg for a brief moment, then set to work, kneading and massaging the calf muscles.

If Raven had told her she was going to massage her leg, Cassie would've turned her down flat—she wouldn't have thought it would do any good. However, experiencing it was an entirely different thing, and Cassie could already feel the tingling sensation as blood flowed back into her leg. The feeling returning to her limb wasn't unpleasant as she'd thought, like pins and needles would be. Raven's firm, kneading hands removed any discomfort, leaving behind only warmth.

Raven's hands halted. "This would be a lot easier if you rolled up your trouser leg."

Cassie didn't hesitate this time. She leaned forward, easily pulling back the loose combat trousers she was wearing. She'd specifically chosen them for this long trip as they were extremely comfortable. Her hands faltered slightly at her knee. Though she knew of the incident, Raven had never actually seen her scar. Cassie thought scars added character, but she knew many people—who weren't shadowstalkers—disagreed. A single glance at Raven, who wore a soft smile on her face, was all the reassurance Cassie needed to roll back her trouser leg fully, three-quarters of the way up her thigh. Raven only showed compassion, and Cassie was relieved to see not an ounce of distaste.

Raven lightly traced the longest of the three jagged scars, following it across the knee and up Cassie's thigh. She abruptly withdrew her touch. "That doesn't hurt you, does it?"

Cassie shook her dark hair. She swept a hand across the pale, raised lines to make her point.

"So I can massage it?"

"Feel free." Cassie closed her eyes when Raven continued the massage, working her way up. "I can't believe how much better my leg feels." She peeked at Raven through one eye. "You've done it now. I'll never be away."

Raven laughed. "Maybe I should set up a shop?"

Blue eyes opened fully. “With those hands, you’d be a million...” Cassie reminded herself that Raven already was a millionaire. “Billionaire.”

Raven’s laughter increased. “That good, huh?”

“Mm-hmm.” Cassie shook her head at herself. “And to think I’ve been denying myself this for years now.”

Raven suddenly became serious. “Among other things,” she said quietly.

Cassie knew what she was referring to. On several occasions, Raven had tried to deepen their relationship, to take it from friendship and into romance. It was Cassie who wouldn’t allow it, who pushed Raven away when she was getting too close. Cassie had her reasons, though she wouldn’t share them with anyone—Raven, Eve, and even Vicki had all tried at one time or another to extract those reasons from her, wanting to understand her reluctance at becoming romantically involved. It wasn’t as if Cassie didn’t feel the same way about Raven, for she did—Cassie was completely in love with her, and had been for some time. That fact didn’t change anything for Cassie, she still couldn’t allow their relationship to develop further.

She could see Raven was upset, and it hurt her to know that she was the cause. “I must be a masochist,” Cassie said it half-jokingly, half seriously.

Raven smiled, though it was sad. “I’m beginning to wonder.”

Chapter Nine

EVE HAD A basketful of supplies. She really could’ve done with a trolley, but in such a small town, with so few customers, the grocery store had only opted for half a dozen trolleys, and it was just her luck that they all seemed to be in use at the moment. Her basket was beginning to overflow, and she still had many items to get. She glanced to the door, hoping Vicki was on her way back from the post office—she could carry another basket.

Vicki had gone to check if her parcel had arrived—the one containing the dreaded lace bodice that revealed far too much for Eve’s liking. She secretly hoped it had got lost in the mail, never to be opened, let alone worn. She hadn’t said anything further on the subject, knowing Vicki would have to learn this lesson herself.

The door opened, but it wasn't Vicki who entered. The woman, upon spotting Eve, raised her hand in greeting, heading straight for her. Eve recognized the woman, but for the life of her couldn't recall her name. She could remember every shadowstalker's name that she met, but the names of her neighbors and townsfolk just wouldn't stay in her head. Not one for waving, Eve smiled politely, pretending as if she knew exactly who the approaching woman was.

Getting right to it and not exchanging pleasantries—which Eve was grateful for as she hated inane talk—the frizzy-haired brunette dove straight in. “How awful about your daughter being assaulted.”

Eve nearly dropped her basket. She set it quickly down on the floor. She'd wondered what was taking Vicki so long. “Where? At the post office?”

The woman, a similar age to Eve herself, frowned confusedly.

“Where did this happen?” Eve said. “Where is Vicki now?” She would get to her faster if she knew precisely where her youngest was.

“Now I heard it was your other daughter, Cassie.” A smile appeared, infuriating Eve further. “That just goes to show how people get it wrong.”

Eve had no idea what she was waffling on about. Nor did she care. She only wanted to make sure Vicki was all right. And after, kill the person who had dared to lay a hand on her. Eve's very limited patience ran out. She had even less than usual where her daughters were concerned. She grabbed the startled woman by her shoulders, shaking her a little.

“Look. Where exactly did this happen?”

The woman looked as if she wished she'd never come up to her in the first place. “I'm not sure precisely,” she said in a rush. “I just know it was in Allensville.”

A memory suddenly hit Eve. Raven mentioned something about that—the trader had been worried herself when she'd returned home, because of some story about Cassie in Allensville. It was connected to the incident with Harley. Eve thought quickly, putting the pieces together. Her girls had likely spun a story to explain Cassie's bruised face. She silently cursed Vicki, wishing she'd at least given her a heads up.

Eve removed her hands from the woman's shoulders and stepped back. She was so relieved that nothing had happened to Vicki she let out a small chuckle.

The woman gave her an odd look, as if to say this was no laughing matter. Especially for the assaulted girl's mother. Eve ignored the look of disapproval, not caring in the slightest what this woman thought of her.

“I misunderstood. I thought you meant here and now.” Eve patted her chest dramatically, easily turning the events to add to the story. She was used to such pretenses. “I'm so shaken up

about what happened at Allensville. I'm a bit paranoid about their safety at the moment. You understand?"

"Of course." The woman patted Eve's arm sympathetically, all seemingly forgiven.

Eve tried her best not to tense; she didn't like to be touched by anyone who wasn't family.

"I have children myself, so I know how you worry about them, no matter what their age. I have two sons, and I imagine it must be worse having daughters. Women are so vulnerable in times like these. Don't you agree?"

Eve did not agree in the slightest. She had raised her daughters to be able to defend themselves. They were more than capable. Much more capable than the woman's two sons, that was for sure. She kept it a simple lie. "I do."

The woman nodded, clearly expecting her agreement. "How is Cassie doing anyway? It was Cassie, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Eve said. "She's fine now. It's been a couple of weeks, so the bruise has completely gone."

"That's good." The woman seemed sincere. "Though no doubt the mental scars will take longer to heal."

Eve had to catch herself before she rolled her eyes. She lived in such a different world to these civilians, it was such a contrast. Eve had been fighting creatures of the night since she was fifteen years old, Cassie since she was fourteen, and Vicki the same. The incident at Allensville, had it indeed happened, would've been so completely trivial to the Valentine family it would've been dismissed practically outright. They wouldn't still be going on about it two weeks later. And Cassie certainly wouldn't have been traumatized by the incident.

"Quite," was all Eve could say. She made a show of selecting a packet of chocolate biscuits, trying to convey that she had shopping to do, and wanted to get on with it.

The woman merely followed her down the aisle, jabbering away.

Thankfully, Vicki entered the store, though Eve's relief diminished somewhat when she saw the cardboard box she cradled under one arm. Eve hefted her own basket, indicating its full load, pointing to the stack of others by the entranceway.

Vicki nodded and retrieved another basket, sauntering over with an excited grin plastered on her face. "It's arrived." She gave the parcel a shake.

The woman nosily leaned closer. "Have you been buying something nice?"

Vicki appeared all too happy to share with her. "A new top for myself."

Eve hoped Vicki wouldn't offer to show her the top. The woman would likely think Vicki worked at, or at least acquainted, a brothel. A humorous smirk formed. That would give the gossipers something to talk about.

"A girl can never have too many clothes, that's what I always say," the woman said.

"*She* can." Eve's tone was droll. "Way too many."

Vicki waved the parcel at her defiantly.

"Oh dear." The woman gestured to the bandage around Vicki's hand and wrist. "What happened to you?"

Eve answered quickly, before Vicki could make something up. "She fell over. Sprained her wrist." Eve couldn't help herself. "It was the clothes she fell over actually." She fought off a smile at Vicki's enraged look.

"Oh dear," the woman repeated. "Perhaps you do have too many."

Eve gave Vicki a self-satisfied smile, then exchanged baskets with her, taking the empty one and wandering off to finish the shopping. Vicki left the full, heavy basket on the shop's tiled floor, obviously quite content to stand and chat with a likeminded clothes enthusiast. Eve had no qualms about it, hoping Vicki would keep the woman busy until she'd completed her shopping. She had better things to do than stand around talking. Vicki, it seemed, did not.

She glanced back to the two of them as she rounded the aisle, groaning inwardly as Vicki began to open the box. Eve lingered for a moment, wanting to see the woman's face when she saw what awaited inside. She wasn't disappointed—the woman's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

Eve chuckled darkly. That expression alone would be worth the fallout of gossip.

"SHE'S SUCH A nice lady."

"She certainly had a lot to say." Eve loaded a bag of shopping into the car boot.

Vicki chuckled, hefting another carrier bag and placing it beside the other. "Elsie's always like that. She talks to everyone."

Eve's memory sparked. "That's her name."

Vicki shook her head critically. "You've known her longer than me."

“I wouldn’t say ‘known’ is the right word. I know of her, sure. But that’s all. I couldn’t tell you a thing about her. Nor anyone else at Long Meadows—bar Raven.” Eve shrugged. “Besides, you’re more sociable than I am.”

“Very true,” Vicki said. She put the parcel containing her bodice in, tucking it carefully down the side of the carrier bags. She took her time, and didn’t seem to notice Eve’s disbelieving glance—Vicki was taking more care with the unbreakable bodice than she did with the very breakable eggs.

“You could’ve given me some warning about the story you’d spun. She hit me straight with it.”

Vicki had the grace to look embarrassed. “Sorry. I forgot.”

“Tell me now.” Eve loaded in the last bag of groceries, then turned and sat on the vehicle’s bumper, waiting expectantly.

“Just that Cassie got mugged over at Allensville. We had to make up something fast to explain what happened to her face.”

“That’s all?”

Vicki nodded. “That’s it.”

Eve crossed her arms across her chest. She knew how her youngest liked to exaggerate. “No embellishments?”

Vicki scowled at her. “No. It was a boring story, like you taught us to do. *Mine*,” she gave Eve a look, “if given free reign, would be much more interesting.”

A smile crept onto Eve’s face. “Oh, I have no doubt of that. But would it be believable?”

She sounded indignant. “Of course!”

With a chuckle, Eve shook her head. “I think you did a fine job as it is. They’re still harping on about it even now. Any better, they’d likely have a stroke.”

Vicki broke into laughter. “You’re probably right. My story would be too much for them.”

Eve pushed herself up off the bumper, standing once more. “To say the least,” she said, deadpan.

Vicki let out an insulted cry, and playfully shoved Eve.

Eve laughed with her, more so when Vicki ran around the car to escape her retaliative reach.

CASSIE ENJOYED WATCHING the ever-changing scenery. Around her home, little changed, there weren't even trees to mark the seasons. Gazing out the window sated her eyes, like water would sate her throat when thirsty. The forest off to her left was saturated with a multitude of colors, from greens and browns, to rusts and oranges. Autumn was in full swing. It was Cassie's favorite time of year, though she'd never been able to figure out why. She always appreciated the warmth of the summer, so it didn't really make sense that she would celebrate its passing.

She knew Vicki favored March, though not because it was the start of spring and brought new life into the world, it was simply because her birthday was in March. Thinking of her sister reminded her of something she wanted to raise with Raven. She wasn't quite sure how to go about it, but realized that now was as good a time as any.

Reluctantly tearing her eyes from the window, she glanced to Raven, wondering where to start. Money was an uncomfortable topic for Cassie, but she wanted to know Raven's opinion. To see if she shared the same view as Vicki did.

"Do you often give money to charity?"

If Raven was surprised by the question, she didn't let it show. "Quite a bit, yes," she said. "I don't need it all myself." She seemed to reflect for a second. "I like giving to people. My mother was the same." She looked across to Cassie in the passenger seat. "Why'd you ask?"

"It was just something that Vicki said. I was wondering if you felt the same way."

"Try me," Raven said.

Cassie wrung her hands together, a nervous gesture that only occasionally showed itself. "Vicki thinks I'm too proud to accept your help. Financially, I mean." She kept her voice level, trying to sound nonchalant. "Do you think the same?"

"I'll admit I thought that to start with."

Cassie grimaced. Raven's opinion mattered to her, more than she'd care to admit.

"But now I know that's just your way." Raven looked at Cassie with a heartfelt smile on her face. "I wouldn't change a thing about you." She laid a hand on Cassie's thigh, rubbing her thumb over the scars beneath, as if to let Cassie know that she meant those also.

Cassie smiled, truly moved by Raven's words. She took hold of Raven's hand, and their fingers entwined together.

“No matter how awkward it may be,” Raven said, her smile widening as Cassie broke into laughter.

VICKI DIDN'T KNOW precisely when things had changed, but change they had. The first few hours she wore the lace bodice, the compliments rolled in, from practically every man in the bar. She drank in all the attention, loving being in the limelight. She'd never experienced this level of focus before—all eyes were on her. People moved aside chairs for her if they were in her way, offered to assist with her tray full of empty glasses—they couldn't do enough for her. She was practically worshipped. It made her feel special. She lost count of how many invites she received, though at first they were invites to join people at their table. Later, the invites became more lewd, even offensive. The suggestions did not make her feel special. The complete reverse.

Vicki was fast becoming uncomfortable wearing such a revealing item, the men ogling her were not at all discreet about it. She'd often seen Cassie receive such looks, but now, on the receiving end herself, saw that they were nothing to be envious of. She stopped at a table, clearing away the empty glasses.

“Thanks, darlin’.” Thomas, a man she'd known for half her life, and was old enough to be her father, leered at her, though his gaze was way too low to make eye contact.

“My face is up here,” Vicki said.

There were three other men sat at the same table, and two of them laughed loudly.

Thomas shrugged, seemingly indifferent. “You can't blame me, you're a good-looking girl.”

“And dressed like that...” One of the laughing men, Ryan, whistled.

“Cut it out, Ry.” Marx, who'd remained silent until now, elbowed Ryan in the ribs, cutting off his piercing whistle.

Ryan yelped, holding his side. “What's with you?”

Vicki gave Marx an appreciative glance. She added him to the short list of shadowstalkers that she actually liked. She had to admit she didn't know much about Marx. He never added much to the conversation, coming across as reserved, bordering on shy. From the look of him, Vicki thought he was a year or two older than she was. Marx was ruggedly handsome, well-built, and had captivating dark blue eyes. He was clean-shaven, and had wavy brown hair that flopped around his eyes in a boyish cut.

Ryan glared across to Marx. “Don't pretend like you weren't looking.” He snickered.

“It’s hard not to,” Marx said, though his smile wasn’t lurid like all the others. He looked only at her face when he spoke. “Mind, I always think that, no matter what you’re wearing.”

Vicki returned his smile, though it faded when Ryan clapped Marx approvingly on the back, guffawing loudly.

“That ‘a boy.”

“It don’t matter what they wear,” Thomas said, joining in, “as long as they take it off at the end of the night.”

The men hooted wildly, hysterical with laughter. Marx held a hand across his face, shaking his head in what appeared to be embarrassment.

Vicki had had enough. Being objectified like this wasn’t her idea of fun. She’d already made up her mind to change clothes, but she wouldn’t walk away like this, not with them having one up on her. She hated to do it, but she needed to pull out the big guns. Metaphorically speaking of course. Vicki slammed her hands down onto the table top, causing the glasses to rattle and shake. The men jumped in shock. She leaned over the table threateningly, too angry to care that she was now giving them a better view of her cleavage.

“I’m sure my mom wouldn’t think this was funny.”

Three sets of eyes darted up to her face, sobering instantly.

Ryan paled. “W...we meant no disrespect.”

Thomas, who’d been the instigator, swallowed convulsively. He seemed to struggle to find any words. “Sorry,” he eventually said.

Vicki fixed the remaining man with a hard stare until he apologized also. She ignored Marx, for he hadn’t done anything wrong. Except choose the wrong table to sit at. Vicki left them in awkward silence, heading back toward the bar. She was going to change immediately. Into something with a high neck, long sleeves, and preferably loose fitting. She felt strangely violated; the feeling only made worse because she knew it was partly of her own doing. She had wanted to receive the kind of attention that her sister did. Vicki didn’t know how Cassie coped with it; she herself had barely lasted a few hours. It must be awful to have to deal with that all of the time. She decided then and there to stop teasing Cassie about her many admirers.

Wading around the numerous tables seemed to take much longer than usual, but soon she was nearing the last—then she would be free to leave the room and switch her clothes.

A balding man stood, blocking her path. She cursed internally. He had his back to her, so Vicki didn’t think he’d done it on purpose. She could tell from his sluggish, unsteady movements that he was heavily impeded by drink. She tapped his shoulder, getting his attention so he would

move out of the way to let her pass. He was slow to turn, and his eyes bulged upon seeing her, as if not quite believing his luck.

“WHAT WERE YOU thinking, letting her wear that?” Garrett gestured to Vicki’s barely clad form. His eyebrows were raised so high, Eve wondered if his scar might split open.

“She’s nineteen, Garrett,” Eve said. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, she’s pretty strong-willed. And believe me, I did try to talk her out of it.”

Eve was on edge, not at all liking the events playing out in front of her. She had promised herself earlier that she wouldn’t interfere unless it was absolutely necessary. Vicki needed to learn this lesson. However, all of that flew out the window when the very first man leered at her youngest. And unbeknownst to Vicki, Eve had been keeping many of the shadowstalkers in line with her cold glare all evening. Just like she did for Cassie. She kept track of every unfolding situation, and as expected, she saw the negative effect it was having on Vicki as the night wore on. Eve hoped she would understand Cassie’s point of view now, and would be kinder to her sister.

A proud smile formed when she saw how Vicki handled a raucous group at the back of the room. Though Eve couldn’t hear what was said, Vicki left them all in stunned silence.

A few moments later, Garrett jumped to his feet when a shadowstalker blocked Vicki’s path.

“Leave it, Garrett,” Eve said. She had already assessed the scene, and knew the drunkard was of no threat to Vicki. “She won’t thank you for interfering.”

Garrett ignored her, marching purposely toward them.

Eve followed, though she was a way behind since she had to first walk around the bar counter. It was a good thing she did follow, for Garrett let his emotions get the better of him, and slugged the man straight off.

“Garrett!” Vicki cried. “What are you doing?”

The drunk crashed against the table, overturning it, a chair, and himself. They all collided with the floor, the wooden furniture clattering and scraping distinctly.

Eve understood Garrett’s anger, she felt it herself. It was a difficult thing for a parent to witness—their child being objectified in this manner.

Vicki hurried from the room. She passed Eve on route. “I’m going to change.” She held up a warning hand. “Not a word.”

Eve told her straight. “You owe your sister an apology.”

Vicki nodded, not slowing her pace. “She’ll get one.”

Eve managed to reach Garrett before he did any further damage to the felled drunk. She pushed him away, putting herself between them. “Back off.”

Garrett heaved in several furious breaths, and then as if realizing Vicki had left, went after her.

Eve helped the drunk to stand, getting him into a chair that a nearby patron had righted. Several more were righting the table. Fortunately, the men had grabbed their drinks beforehand, so nothing had been spilt or broken. With the exception of the drunk’s nose. Though at the moment, he looked more concerned about Eve leaning over him than he did about his bleeding nose.

“I’m drunk,” he said in a meek voice.

Eve roughly patted his cheek. Though it was more of a slap. “Drunk or not, you’d better keep your senses in my pub.” Her eyes narrowed darkly. “Or you’ll get them knocked back into you.”

Eve returned to the bar, briefly wondering whether she should close up early for the night. Not because of what had just happened, but because of what was likely happening now, upstairs. Both Vicki and Garrett were angry, looking for a fight. Eve just hoped that neither would do or say anything that they would come to regret.

GARRETT STORMED UP the stairs. Without knocking, he charged into Vicki’s bedroom.

“Do you mind!” Vicki shouted. She was unfastening the lace bodice, but now simply left it alone, grabbing the closest jumper and slipping it on over her head.

Garrett wasn’t in the mood to apologize, not that he was given the chance to.

“What was all that about?” Vicki said. “Have you gone crazy?”

Despite his anger, Garrett still took in his surroundings— observation was key to being a successful shadowstalker. He was amazed by the amount of clothes Vicki possessed—they were stacked in piles all around the room. It wasn’t so bad that he had to watch where he put his feet, but he didn’t know how Vicki managed to find anything amongst so much clutter. The furniture was partly buried by all of the clothes, and only the bed lay untouched. Pale yellow walls gave the room a cheery tone, though it did little to lift Garrett’s mood.

“Right. We’re going to sort this out once and for all. Starting with your antics tonight.”

“My antics are none of your business, Garrett. They never have been.”

“Mathew would’ve turned in his grave, knowing you’d dressed like that.”

“Get out of my room!” Vicki screamed at him.

“I will not. Not until we get to the bottom of this. What have I done that makes you treat me this way?” He checked his tone, softening it. “I genuinely want to know. I want to fix things between us, Vicki. Get things back to how they used to be.”

She didn’t acknowledge his words. “You had no right to interfere tonight. I don’t need your help.”

“What you think you need is irrelevant, Vicki,” Garrett said between clenched teeth. “If I believe you need help, I will give it. And I always will, whether you want it or not.”

“Well I don’t want it!”

“Tough,” he said. “I promised your father if anything happened to him, I would take care of you, Cassie, and your mother.”

“Don’t give me that.” Vicki shook her head. “You aren’t even here half the time.”

“And whose fault is that? You’ve made it perfectly clear that you don’t want me around.”

Vicki’s tone was droll. “Not clear enough apparently. You’re still here.”

“Despite your constant attempts to drive me away. But I will keep my promise—watch out for you as a father should.”

Vicki’s eyes narrowed. She hissed her next words in evident fury. “You are not my father! I would never choose or want you to be. My father was one hundred times the man you are, and I wish it was you who had died instead of him.”

Garrett actually took a step back at the vehemence in Vicki’s voice. He looked sadly at the girl he considered to be his daughter. Not only had she broken his heart by saying those awful things, she’d trodden all over it. Then spat on all of his future dreams for good measure. He had no idea that Vicki hated him so. With a heavy heart, Garrett realized he had lost her, though it had happened long ago, the night when he had also lost his best friend.

Head low, he followed her wishes and left the room, closing the door on the most important relationship in his life.

Chapter Ten

CASSIE WAS PLEASED to arrive at Raven's estate before dusk fell. Ringed on its surrounding edge by a high wall, Cassie had to stop the car in front of a large set of gates before they could gain access to the grounds. Raven leaned across her and punched in the access code, used her key, and then placed her finger on a pad, so the scanner could verify her fingerprint. Once accepted, the gates swung open electronically.

"It's like Fort Knox." Cassie drove through the steel gates. In her rear-view mirror she saw the gates swing silently closed behind them.

"That's nothing," Raven said. "Don't you remember the security surrounding the vaults?"

Cassie did. The vaults were beneath the house, where all the trading items were kept.

The drive through the grounds was long; the estate was surrounded by a lot of land. Raven had fallen ominously silent, so Cassie spoke up, wanting to distract her from her no doubt painful thoughts.

"Has the place changed much?" Cassie had been here before, but she knew she couldn't possibly know the place like Raven did.

Raven glanced around. "No gardener," she said. "Though that's of my own doing. It's pointless to pay someone to keep the place in order when I hardly ever visit."

Cassie examined the lushly planted grounds. She imagined the plants were once kept trim and tidy, but they didn't look so orderly now. They were unkempt and overgrown. "I like it. Gives the place a rugged, untamed feel. It's more natural this way."

The house finally came into view. Though she'd visited in the past, Cassie was always awed by both the estate's grounds, and the grandeur of the mansion itself, which was massive in size. Cassie couldn't even imagine what it would be like to live in a place like this, let alone to grow up in it. She and Vicki would've had a great time playing hide and seek in all those rooms. As an only child, Raven wouldn't have had a sibling to play such games with, and the thought saddened Cassie.

"Just pull up over there." Raven indicated the end of the driveway, which held a large, lion-topped fountain. The fountain itself was a magnificent piece, fitting for such a grand house.

However, its purpose was a practical one, positioned in the center of the drive so cars could use it as a turning point—a mini roundabout.

Cassie parked the black Range Rover alongside the fountain and switched off its engine.

Raven swiftly got out, clearly not wanting to delay. It was as if she knew that if she hesitated, even for only a moment, she wouldn't be able to bring herself to leave the car.

The stone fountain was silent, unmoving. The lion no longer spouted water from his roaring mouth. The bottom of the fountain, where the water would normally rest then recirculate, was only covered with leaves and moss, mold forming around the edges.

The mansion loomed above them, its marble pillars seeming to grow in size as they approached. They ascended the many steps, finally reaching the top level. Raven strode to the large, double white doors. She withdrew a bunch of keys, and they jangled nervously in her grip. Cassie quietly laid a supportive hand on her back. After disengaging numerous locks, Raven repeated the finger scan and entered her private code. To gain entry to the house, she also had to undergo a retinal scan.

Inside, they found themselves in a cavernous hall, probably big enough to house the entirety of The Smoking Gun. Everywhere was white, shiny, though the layer of dust that covered the furniture betrayed the fact that no one lived here.

Cassie moved to study an impressive painting on one wall. The furniture was also huge, but she supposed it had to be to avoid being swallowed up in this enormous room.

“I'm going to the vaults. Get what we came for.” Raven was already striding away. “Feel free to look around.” She turned as she walked. “Library's that way.” She pointed off to Cassie's left, clearly knowing of her fondness for books.

Cassie smiled. “You'll be all right? If you want me there you could always blindfold me or something.”

Raven unexpectedly laughed. “As interesting as that sounds, I'll be quicker myself.” She directed an affectionate smile at Cassie. “You're the best, you know that?”

Cassie shrugged. “I try.”

Raven winked at her. “And don't think I'll forget the offer.” She turned and sauntered off.

Cassie's laughter echoed around the hall. Once Raven had disappeared from sight, she headed straight for the library. She wasn't at all offended that Raven had chosen to go alone into the vaults. It wasn't as if Raven didn't trust her enough, for Cassie had been in them before. But since this current client of hers was clearly insisting on complete and total privacy, Cassie knew Raven had little choice in the matter—if Raven gave her word, she always kept it.

Cassie was actually slightly relieved, the vaults made her uncomfortable, the air down there was always stale—the vaults were kept airtight so as to better protect their possessions. Though air was circulated upon entry, it was never as fresh as Cassie would've liked.

Despite there being a trove of wonders inside, the vaults themselves were lifeless, almost clinical in their design. Sheet after sheet of reinforced glass, broken up only by the use of steel girders. It was very impersonal, cold. She'd much rather visit the library, where it was warm and homely. How it managed to feel so when the room was gigantic, Cassie had no idea.

The oak door opened inward, and she stepped inside. Thousands of books stared back at her, spread across two levels, each a story high. Both levels were connected by an intricate spiral staircase, which sat neatly in one corner of the room.

Cassie closed the door, more out of politeness than anything. There wasn't any heat in the room to contain, and she was pleased she'd worn a thick woolen jumper.

As she looked around, she noted all of the books were not only alphabetized, they were also broken up into different genres. She searched for the classical section, knowing that's where the oldest books would be. She finally found it at the far end of the room. Gazing up at shelf after shelf, she didn't know which book to pick. She settled on *Moby Dick*, carefully removing the antique-looking book. She sat in a plush, leather reading chair, delicately turning the age-tainted pages. Wondering when it was printed, she flicked to the front, nearly dropping it when realizing it was a first edition. She quickly put it back on the shelf.

Cassie moved away from the classical section, passing an ornate, marble fireplace. The hearth was unlit, but she could imagine how nice it would be to sit and read by a roaring, open fire. On the mantelpiece, a photograph caught her eye. On it, stood a young Raven, and behind her, a hand on each of her shoulders, were her parents. Cassie lifted the silver frame, drawing it closer for a better look.

Raven had the pale hair of her mother, and the green eyes of her father. They looked friendly, kind-hearted, everything that Raven herself was. From the wide smile on young Raven's face, she was happy. Loved and protected by her family. Cassie wondered when the photo had been taken. Was it long before her parents had died? From the look of her, Raven appeared to be thirteen or fourteen years old. This was probably the last photo Raven had of her parents, the last time she was truly happy.

Raven's parents had been brutally murdered by vampires. It was one of the downsides of being such prominent traders. It made them a target for creatures, much in the same way that shadowstalkers were targeted. Raven was fourteen at the time. Though back then she was known as Lily Rochester. Because of Lily's young age, her only other living family; her father's brother, Lily's uncle, took over the estate, managing it until she was of age to take over, which her father had documented in his will, to be on her eighteenth birthday.

Dominic, her uncle, was practically a stranger to Lily, since he traveled around as a trader and had little to do with family matters. Though Lily's father, William, didn't see Dominic often,

he trusted him because he was his brother, and so willingly left Lily in his care. Unfortunately for Lily, her uncle didn't deserve the trust that was graciously bestowed upon him. Dominic treated Lily terribly, abusing her in every way possible. He beat her for the slightest infraction, and after a year of physical and mental abuse, on the anniversary of her parent's death, to celebrate his temporary inheritance of the estate, he raped the young Lily. The very next day, she ran away, taking a few items to trade so she could get by, vowing to herself that she wouldn't return until she was eighteen.

Her parents had taught her well, and Lily managed to make the trading work, though it was difficult with her being only fifteen years old. At first, not many shadowstalkers would take her seriously. Only through perseverance and determination, did she eventually convince them to deal with her. Lily never used her family name, though that would've made things a whole lot simpler—the Rochester's were well-trusted amongst the stalking community. She couldn't chance it, since her uncle would no doubt be looking for her. She kept on the move, never staying in one place for too long.

On her eighteenth birthday, Lily returned home. Dominic had been expecting her return, planning to do away with her completely so he could keep the estate. He hadn't expected that Lily would beat him to it, immobilizing him with a drug she injected into his neck. He'd wrongly assumed that she was still the same girl—weak and defenseless. But Lily was no longer at his mercy. He was at hers. And she had not an ounce of mercy for him. She wanted him dead. But despite all he had done to her, Lily still couldn't bring herself to kill him with her own two hands; she just didn't have it in her. Nor did she have the stomach for it. Unfortunately for her uncle.

Lily had carried out her research beforehand, and through some shadowstalkers, knew where a group of foragers were living. Foragers, as the name implied, were mainly scavengers, they ate anything and everything. She drove her uncle there, leaving him in the open field near the entrance to the foragers' habitat. He was conscious the whole time, though the pain at being eaten alive loosened the drug's paralytic hold on his voice box. His horrific screams were heard only by his watching niece, and she wasn't about to help him. Lily watched it all from a safe distance, and when the foragers eventually left, she went down to check nothing had been missed. Not a scrap of her uncle remained. No flesh or bone anyway. There was plenty of blood staining the ground, but the first rainfall would take care of that.

Birds had cried out overhead, drawing her attention. There were dozens of them, circling the scene of death. They were as black as coal—ravens.

That was the day Lily Rochester ceased to be, and Raven was born. A new name for a fresh start. A new life.

Only the Valentines knew the whole story. To everyone else, Dominic Rochester had mysteriously vanished without a trace.

Lost in her thoughts, Cassie started when a hand touched her arm.

Raven glanced between her and the picture she was holding, her gaze following it as Cassie returned the photo to the mantelpiece. She raised an aluminum suitcase. “Got it.”

“Ready to go?”

Raven nodded. She clearly didn’t need to be asked twice.

Cassie indicated the picture. “You look like them.”

Raven smiled, a little sadly.

“Don’t you want to take it with you?” Cassie was surprised she had left such a personal item here.

“That’s only a copy,” Raven said. “I’ve got all the originals in a photo album, which I keep at home.” She clarified her meaning, “At Long Meadows.”

Cassie nodded, that made more sense. She knew how close Raven had been to her parents, so couldn’t easily see her leaving all trace of them behind. She completely understood Raven’s reluctance to stay in this house though, given what her uncle had put her through. The mansion contained both good and bad memories for her, but the bad were more recent, so held more sway.

Leaving the library, Cassie said, “Since you left your old life behind, how come you kept on trading? Why was that the exception?”

Raven seemed to think about it, their footsteps echoing around them as they walked. “To begin with, it was simply to get by—it was the only thing I knew. But as things got easier, and I got more clients, I began to enjoy it.” She looked confidently to Cassie. “It probably sounds stupid, but it helps me feel closer to my parents.”

“That’s not stupid,” Cassie said. “I feel the same way about my dad when I go on a shadowhunt.”

Raven smiled at Cassie. The smile changed to one of relief as they stepped out of the house. She closed and locked the door behind them, leaving the building in silence once more.

Chapter Eleven

EVE WAS RELIEVED when her old friend entered the pub. She had tried talking to Vicki after Garrett had stormed out after their argument the other night, but her youngest wouldn't speak of it, clamming up even more than usual. Eve knew something significant had to have been said, for she'd only seen Garrett that upset once before—when informing him of Mathew's death.

Eve greeted Garrett by placing his usual drink, a Guinness, on the bar counter. "I'm glad you're here." She caught his gaze. "I was worried when you didn't show up last night. Thought you'd up and left."

"I would never go without saying good-bye, Eve."

"No one's heard from the group that went to Oaksmount. It's only a day's drive. They should've been back by now."

Garrett shrugged dismissively. "I'm not surprised. They'll probably lay low for a while, or move on to a different area. They won't want to face the men they've been boasting to. Now that they've turned up nothing, least of all a nest of galdagos, they're gonna look pretty stupid."

"I hope you're right." Eve was starting to feel uneasy about the entire situation. Not for the first time, she wished both Cassie and Raven were back from their trip. Raven could easily confirm if Garrett's assumptions were true. She spoke her thoughts aloud, "Raven would know where they are. She's got contacts everywhere. She'd easily ferret them out."

"They'll likely be at another stalkers retreat. Drowning their sorrows." As if reminding him, he took a sip of his own drink. "They've got no one to blame but themselves."

A frown tightened Eve's brow. From his dour expression, it was apparent that Garrett wasn't only referring to the men.

"Actually," he looked up from his glass, "I'm headed out that way. I've got some business to attend to first, but then I'll call in at Oaksmount and see what's going on. Debunk this story by the comedic cousins once and for all."

Eve's face fell. "You're leaving?"

"First thing tomorrow," Garrett said. "It's about time I moved on."

"What happened to sticking around? I thought you were going to try harder with Vicki?"

He met her unwavering eyes. "I did try, Eve. She's made it crystal clear how she feels about me." With his knuckles, he scrubbed his short hair frustratedly.

"Listen, Garrett." Eve softened her tone. "She was upset last night. You can't base your decision on that one conversation."

“I’m not basing it solely off that. The past five years is proof enough. I’ve just been dense to the fact. But no more.” He adamantly shook his head. “Last night was a wake-up call. I can’t ignore what she said, nor will I brush aside her wishes for me to leave.” He heaved a heavy sigh. “I only want her to be happy.” His voice held nothing but defeat. “That’s why I’m going.”

“What did she say to you, Garrett?” Eve said quietly. It was as she’d feared, a line had been crossed.

A weak shrug. “It doesn’t matter.”

Eve scrambled to fix things, trying to see a way to reconcile the irreconcilable damage that had been inflicted on her oldest friend, by her own daughter’s hand. Garrett had been exceptionally patient with Vicki, five years he’d given her to change her ways, and all that time she’d treat him like dirt. The other night, whatever had happened, had clearly been the final straw.

“You know how things get said in the heat of the moment.” Eve indicated the corridor behind her. “Vicki’s in the kitchen. Go and talk to her. Don’t leave it like this.”

“It’s not my decision,” Garrett said. “Vicki’s already decided.”

Eve’s voice lifted. “It’s your decision as to whether you go in that kitchen.” She paused, deciding on another tack. “What’s one more try? You’ll always wonder if you don’t.”

Garrett let out another heavy breath. He downed his drink as if needing the courage, and then headed for the kitchen.

Eve had done all she could. It was up to Vicki now. If she blew this, Eve wasn’t sure Garrett would give her another chance. Cold realization suddenly trickled down Eve’s spine. If Vicki drove him away, they were all going to lose Garrett. They would all have to pay the price.

GARRETT FOUND HER in the kitchen, collecting a mop and bucket to clean up a spillage with. “Vicki,” he said, seeing the surprise on her face as she turned. He quickly held up a hand, stopping her from speaking. “I want to ask you one thing, then I’m leaving.”

Vicki remained silent, clearly willing to hear him out.

“This is the last time I try with you, Vicki.” He let that sink in. “If the answer is no, you won’t see me again. I’ll stay away. If you want to salvage any kind of relationship with me, this is the last chance to do it. We’ll start afresh. Clean slate.” He took a breath, giving it his best shot. “I’m going to run a few errands, and I’d like it very much if you were to accompany me.” Garrett smiled at her, and he knew it showed all of his hopes for reconciliation. “Will you

accompany me?" He waited a moment. Garrett had never begged in his life, nor did he ever imagine he would, but he did so now. For her. "Please?"

Vicki shook her head, though it was a sad shake. There didn't seem to be any hostility in it. "I'm sorry, Garrett."

Garrett left the kitchen without adding anything further. He didn't glance to Eve as he passed her. "I'll phone in a month or so, check that you're all okay. If you need anything, you know how to reach me." He was a man of his word, and would keep his promise to Mathew as best he could under the unforeseen circumstances. Garrett opened the front door, stepping outside. "Take care of yourself, Eve. The girls too."

EVE HOVERED OVER the phone in the hallway. She lingered unsurely, which was a rare and unusual state for her to be in. She didn't at all like it. Eve was a decisive woman, doing what needed to be done. The problem was, she didn't know if anything actually needed doing about the galdago situation. She still wasn't convinced they were real. In fact, her head told her quite clearly that they couldn't be, someone would've seen them during the past twenty years, or at the very least heard about mysterious disappearances or something to that effect.

Of course, Eve knew galdagos were vicious creatures, and smart too. Anyone who had seen them, if they did, could've just as easily been killed by them. There wouldn't be any stories if no one was left alive to tell them. Wherever they nested, the number of locals and livestock in that area would shrink considerably. However, once the galdagos moved on, roaming from place to place, hunting new prey, the mysterious disappearances would also disappear, moving with the galdagos to their next nesting grounds. Due to that, the gossip about the disappearances would eventually fade. Eve couldn't rule it out. Galdagos were deceptively clever, and were also fast learners. If they'd learnt that too much death and destruction brought them trouble, in the form of shadowstalkers, they may have limited themselves, changing scenery when the death toll was nearing that limit. It was possible. Eve shook her head, though highly unlikely.

Her head told her one thing—that the story was just that, a story, which had been fabricated by two well-known jokers. And the trio who went after the galdagos, who had now vanished, was just a coincidence, she tended to believe Garrett's version of events. Unfortunately for Eve, her gut didn't seem to agree. It was wound tight, clenched almost, and had been since hearing of the trio's disappearing act. Eve had learned long ago to listen to her gut instinct. It had saved her life too many times to count.

Decision made, she picked up the phone. Though Raven and Cassie were due back later that day, her gut was niggling at her, so she dialed Raven's mobile number. Cassie didn't have a mobile, none of the Valentines did—there was little point as the area around the pub had no signal whatsoever. They were too far away from society. This way, at least Raven could start

making some calls to her contacts. And by the time they arrived, hopefully Raven would have some news, and be able to dispel Eve's fears.

Eve sighed as the phone rang a fifth time, no one answered. She wondered if they were travelling through an area with no signal. She decided to hold on, to wait until she could record a message. It was only ten a.m., and this was already the second time today that she hadn't been able to get through to someone. Though Eve knew the first had been by choice of the receiver. She'd phoned Garrett earlier, intending to ask him to delay his leaving until they could at least ascertain from Raven if the trio had indeed vanished or were merely holed up somewhere. Garrett hadn't accepted her calls, likely thinking that she was ringing to try and convince him to stay for different reasons, the main of which being Vicki. He wasn't completely mistaken. Garrett kept cutting off her call, so she wasn't even able to leave a message. If Garrett hadn't mentioned that he was going to drop in at Oaksmount, Eve would've simply waited for Raven to return. But it was Garrett, her oldest friend, and she wasn't willing to wait, to risk the delay if something more sinister was actually going on in Oaksmount.

The phone finally stopped ringing, clicking over to the answer phone. Eve impatiently waited for the beep, and then left her message.

“DO YOU WANT salt and vinegar, or...” Cassie rummaged in her backpack, pulling out another bag of crisps and holding it up alongside the bag she already held. They were her last two packets. A wry smile formed as she noticed the packaging. “Salt and vinegar?”

Raven chuckled. “Surprise me.”

Cassie joined in laughing. “Not much chance of that.” She tossed her a bag of salt and vinegar, which Raven easily caught. Lying down on her front, Cassie sprawled out on the picnic blanket that Raven always kept in the boot of her car. They'd stopped for lunch, choosing a nice grassy area to spread the blanket on, and taking the opportunity to get out of the car. They weren't in such a hurry to return—Raven was no longer stressed since her visit to her old home was behind her, and Cassie knew they would make it back in plenty of time for that night's shift, so she didn't see the need to rush.

Cassie stretched her tall frame, relieved for a bit of respite from sitting in the same position. Raven followed suit, lying down and resting on her elbows.

Biting into a crunchy apple, Cassie wiped her chin as some of the juice trickled down from her mouth. Raven bit into a cheese salad sandwich. A short while ago, they'd called into a grocery store. Still somewhat on the outskirts of civilization, they were surprised to find one, especially positioned alone, just at the side of the road. They'd decided to take full advantage of their good luck—it was lunch time, and though they still had supplies left and would be home

before their evening meal, they chose instead to buy fresh food, food still at the correct temperature.

Cassie popped open a can of coke, letting out a moan of delight as the cool liquid slipped down her throat. After finishing the apple, she started on a ham sandwich, filling it full with crisps.

The day wasn't particularly warm, but it wasn't cold either, so they didn't need their jackets, both women quite comfortable in their jumpers. When they were done with their meal, they laid back on the blanket, staring up at the cloud-filled blue sky. The clouds were white, puffy, floating lazily above them as if they too were taking a break.

Raven's mobile phone suddenly beeped, disturbing the tranquility of the setting. She pulled in a deep breath, and exhaled a heavy sigh. She apologized to Cassie for the interruption. Raven withdrew the phone and looked at its screen. She sat up sharply.

"What is it?" Cassie asked, startled by her reaction.

"It's from your house."

Cassie bolted up beside her. She knew her mother wouldn't ring unless it was something important. Though Vicki would. Had something happened? "When's the message from?"

Raven quickly checked. "Today." She glanced to her watch. "About two and a half hours ago." As if seeing Cassie's panicked look, she said, "I'm sure they're fine." Raven pressed a few buttons. "I'll put it on speaker."

Cassie gave a grateful nod. She didn't want to be kept waiting longer than was needed. Her stomach was overrun with nervous butterflies, making her somewhat queasy since she'd just eaten. Thankfully, the message started to play, distracting Cassie from her anxious and worried thoughts.

"Raven, it's me." Eve's recorded voice came through. "Everything's fine here. Tell Cass to stop panicking."

Cassie smiled a little, her mother knew her all too well. Her nervous butterflies disappeared, though she was still curious as to why Eve was ringing. Especially when they would be home later that very day.

"It's probably nothing, but the shadowstalkers who left for Oaksmount haven't returned yet. They could've just moved on, but I'd like to know for sure, as Garrett's on his way over there to check things out."

Cassie frowned at that. She thought Garrett would be staying awhile since the last she'd seen he and Vicki were finally making headway. Something must've occurred while she'd been away.

“Could you ring around, see if they’ve turned up somewhere?” Eve’s recorded voice asked. “I’d appreciate it. Let me know what you find.” The phone disconnected.

Raven and Cassie shared a long look, then they both began to pack up their things—their break was well and truly over.

Though Cassie had been driving many hours, and had been planning to switch with Raven, she now kept hold of the car keys, since Raven would need to make numerous phone calls.

Before they were even in the 4x4, Raven was dialing one of her contacts. Cassie knew that Raven genuinely cared for Garrett—like her, he was a part of the Valentine family.

EVE WAITED IMPATIENTLY in the doorway. She was eager for news. It was already mid-afternoon. She stepped out of the house and walked to the car as it pulled up. The passenger door opened. “Anything?”

Raven shook her head as she jumped out of the 4x4. “No one’s heard from them. But I still have a few people to try.”

“Many?”

“Afraid so. I know a lot of people.”

Eve nodded. She was pleased that Raven still had plenty of contacts to try. The less she had left, the more likely it was that the galdagos were indeed real, and that meant Garrett would soon be walking into imminent danger. Though she didn’t doubt that Garrett could manage a single galdago, a nest was an entirely different matter. Had they taken the threat seriously, Eve would’ve insisted that all four of them go. She silently cursed herself—she shouldn’t have let him go. She should’ve found a way to stop him.

Cassie strode around the car. “Why has Garrett left?”

“He and Vicki fell out,” Eve said.

Cassie frowned. “Bad?”

Eve nodded. “The worst yet.” And that was saying something, for during the past five years, Vicki had shown Garrett nothing but hostility.

Cassie grimaced, clearly knowing her mother didn’t exaggerate.

Eve’s voice was subdued as she said, “I fear Garrett’s left for good.”

Raven shook her head disbelievingly. "Surely not?"

Cassie stepped forward and embraced Eve, as if seeing the answer reflected in her eyes.

"What was said?"

Wavy brown hair fell around her shoulders as Eve shook her head. "Neither would tell me."

"We'll sort it out," Cassie said, though doubt could be heard in her voice. She linked an arm through Eve's and started to lead her inside. She stopped when Raven didn't follow.

"DO YOU WANT me to stay?" Raven looked apologetically between them. "It's just that I can't do any more ringing around from here." She tapped her phone. "I've rang everyone in my contact list. The phone's memory isn't big enough to hold it all, and my contacts book is at home. At Long Meadows," she added the location quickly, to avoid confusion.

"It's fine, Raven." Eve spared her a smile. "You'll ring me?"

Raven tipped her head. "As soon as I know anything, you'll know it too." She glanced to Cassie. "I'll stop by tomorrow morning." At Cassie's confirming nod, Raven held out her hand. "Keys?"

Cassie smiled sheepishly at the oversight. She dug the car keys out of her trouser pocket and tossed them over.

They went their separate ways: Eve and Cassie into the house, Raven into her car.

Pulling away from The Smoking Gun, Raven locked on to the rear-view mirror, watching the two women as they walked into the house. She silently committed the image to memory, suddenly frightened that she may never see them again. She tried to shake the irrational fear off, but it stayed with her. And it stayed that way for the entire journey home.

EVE HAD KINDLY given Cassie the night off. After a quiet conversation about Garrett, in which Cassie had tried to reassure her mother that everything would work itself out and come right in the end, Eve had sent her up to bed to get some decent sleep. Cassie realized that her mother wanted her to be fully rested and alert for tomorrow, in case Raven drew blanks and came up with nothing. They would then have to travel to Oaksmount and try to search out Garrett themselves.

Cassie didn't much relish the idea of another long day in the car, but she didn't protest—it was Garrett after all.

Plodding up the stairs, Cassie made a note to herself that she must remember to give Vicki her pay for another night. She smiled inwardly, as if Vicki would let her forget such a thing. She knocked on her sister's bedroom door, and when invited in proceeded inside.

Vicki looked up from the clothes magazine she was perusing through. "You're back." She sat up and patted the bed beside her, inviting Cassie over.

"Sounds like a lot's happened while I've been away," Cassie said, as she sat down beside Vicki.

Vicki sighed heavily. "I take it Mom's told you then?"

Cassie shook her dark hair. "Not much. I just know you had an argument, and Mom's worried he's left for good." She caught Vicki's brown eyes. "Has Garrett left for good?"

Her response was quiet, flat. "Yes, I think so."

Though Cassie was annoyed at Vicki for driving Garrett away, she could see that Vicki herself was upset by his departure, and she wouldn't be the one to point out that it was of her own doing. That it was her fault alone. Cassie just wasn't like that. She was careful to keep the annoyance out of her voice. "What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Cassie had to bite off her scathing retort. She was tired, and her nerves were on edge from seeing her mother upset. She took a calming breath, but it had little effect, her words still coming out harsher than she would've liked. "I think under the circumstances, Vicki, the least you can do is tell Mom why her oldest friend is gone. Don't you?"

Vicki blinked, looking shocked by Cassie's tone. She nodded mutely. As Cassie stood to leave, she picked up the magazine she'd been searching through and held it out to her. "Can you see a returns address in there? I can't find it."

"Vic, I'm tired, I really don't..." she trailed off at Vicki's beseeching look. Cassie took a deep breath, her cheeks expanding as she huffed air out of her lips. She reluctantly sat back down, snatching the magazine out of Vicki's hands. Cassie impatiently leafed through the magazine. On the back cover, she found what she was looking for.

"There." She tapped the page. "What do you want it for anyway? I've never known you to return something before." Her lips quirked. "Buy, yes, but never return."

Vicki playfully slapped her knee, for once appearing pleased by Cassie's teasing banter.

Cassie noticed that Vicki had removed the bandage from her injured hand. That surprised her, for Vicki usually played the sympathy card for all it was worth. "I see you're not wearing gloves."

"Yeah." Vicki turned her hand over. "It's not so bad."

Cassie examined the small compress in Vicki's palm. It was firmly stuck on with medical tape. Given the short timeframe, she knew the stitches would still be in, so the compress was needed to keep the wound clean and free from infection.

"The compress is more discreet than the bandage," Vicki said. "I've had my fill of attention lately." She met Cassie's gaze, and answered her earlier question, "I'm returning the bodice."

Cassie felt her eyebrow hike up. "Oh?"

"I wore it the other night."

"And how'd that work out for you?"

"It was awful." Vicki grimaced. "It wasn't at all like I'd imagined. I don't know how you cope with that level of constant attention."

"And you only had it for one night," Cassie said.

"Actually," Vicki looked sheepish, "I didn't even last that long. After a few hours I changed clothes."

To Cassie's credit, she didn't laugh, or say I told you so. Though she badly wanted to.

"I'm sorry I teased you about having so many admirers. I know now what it's like, and I won't do it again." Vicki paused. "I'm sorry."

Cassie gave her knee a pat. "Accepted."

Vicki's voice rose in hope. "That's it?"

A confirming nod. "That's it."

Vicki grinned. "Now that I've told you everything that went on here...mostly everything," she said at Cassie's pointed look, "tell me how your trip went?"

EVE QUICKLY ANSWERED the hallway phone, not wanting the repetitive ring to disturb Cassie's sleep. "Hello?"

"Eve, it's Raven. I'm sorry it's so late." It was half an hour past midnight.

"It's all right. I'm still up, washing the damn glasses," Eve said. She hated that job. She was washing them alone, since she and Vicki had had another argument about Garrett. The girl just wouldn't tell her what had been said. It was infuriating.

"That's what I thought." Raven cleared her throat. "I've rang everyone I can think of. Everyone I know. No one's seen the three men who went to Oaksmount. Either separately or together. They've disappeared."

"Only off the stalkers map," Eve said.

"No, that's just it. I mean completely disappeared." Raven paused briefly. "I have shared acquaintances with two of the men. They're civilians, nothing to do with the shadowstalking community. Even they don't know where the men have gone. Their families are worried sick."

Eve frowned strongly—the men, out of embarrassment, may have tried to lay low from their fellow shadowstalkers, but they wouldn't hide from their own families.

"That's why I'm ringing so late, I've just now finished. I didn't realize how many contacts I had," Raven said. "There's only one person I'm waiting on." A rustling of paper was heard, as if Raven was checking down her list of contacts. "A Garth Andrews. Garth's a good friend of Graham's. If anyone knows where he is, it's Garth. Unfortunately, his wife said he won't be back until morning."

"We can't do anything now till morning anyway," Eve said. If the circumstances were different, they would've set off this instant. But Eve knew you needed to have your wits about you when fighting any creature, let alone one as clever as a galdago. Tired as she was, Cassie simply wasn't in a fit state to fight, and Eve wouldn't go without her, for they would need all hands against a galdago. More so, if there was a nest. Rushing headlong into a situation was a good way to get yourself killed. They would wait until morning. She didn't at all blame Raven or Cassie for the delay, it was merely an unfortunate set of events. They couldn't possibly have known this was going to happen.

"You should get some rest. I know you must be exhausted. Thanks for sticking with it."

"No problem," Raven said around a loud yawn.

After a short delay, Eve shared her anxious thoughts aloud, "It's not looking good."

"I know." Raven sounded solemn. "Have you tried ringing Garrett again?"

“Numerous times.” Eve sighed. “I don’t know who I’m more angry at. Him for leaving, or Vicki for pushing him away.” Her voice hardened. “But if the galdagos do turn out to be only pretense, the next time I see Garrett I’m going to beat the tar out of him for worrying me so.”

Raven didn’t laugh, as if knowing how concerned Eve was about her friend, and this was just the way she dealt with it. “He’ll be all right, Eve,” she said. “Garrett’s one of the best, you know that.”

Eve was silent for a moment. “You’re right.” She’d meant to ask Raven earlier how the visit to her old home had gone, but in all the haste she’d forgotten. She took the opportunity now. “Are you okay, Raven?” Eve said. “I know how hard it is for you to return to that house.”

“I won’t pretend it wasn’t difficult, but I got through it.” The smile was heard in Raven’s voice when she said, “Cassie helped tremendously.”

Eve had expected no less. “She’s a good kid.”

“That she is. Speaking of, can I have a word with her?”

“She’s asleep, like you should be.”

Raven chuckled. “All right, I get the hint. See you tomorrow.”

Eve smiled down the phone. “Night, Raven.”

Chapter Twelve

EVE WAS AWAKENED by a piercing ringing sound. She glanced to the clock on the bedside table—seven a.m. She’d barely gotten six hours sleep. She was annoyed by the early call. Seven a.m. might not seem considerably early to most people, but it was at the Valentine house. Since the pub didn’t close until midnight, by the time they’d put everything in order and washed up, it was usually one-ish. The people who had this phone number knew not to call until after nine a.m., at the earliest.

Her brain suddenly came alert, remembering last night’s conversation with Raven. She picked up the receiver on its third ring, expecting it was Raven with some news.

“I take it you have something?” she said groggily into the phone’s mouthpiece, leaving out the thought that she better have, for disturbing her sleep.

“Eve? Listen to me, I don’t have long.”

Eve bolted upright in bed, almost pulling the phone off the nightstand. “Garrett? Where are you?”

“Listen!” he whispered urgently. “They’re real! The galdagos.” Garrett was panting heavily, it was clear he’d been running. “There’s a nest.”

Eve focused on the important details. “How many?”

“I’ve seen five so far, but there could be more.”

Five! Eve nearly exclaimed in dread. She made herself keep quiet.

Garrett continued, his words causing a chill to run up her spine, “And that’s not the worst of it...” Before he could go any further, an explosion of some sort echoed down the phone, followed by Garrett yelling and firing his gun.

Eve wanted to yell his name in panic, but forced herself to listen carefully, trying to make out what was going on. Garrett yelled again, longer this time, more of a scream, then his gun fell silent.

“Garrett!” Eve shouted into the receiver. “Garrett, you answer me!”

Reverberating thuds echoed down the phone line, growing louder each time. The phone cut off with an unpleasant cracking sound. How she knew, Eve didn’t know, but she wasn’t in any doubt about what had just happened—a galdago had stepped on the telephone, purposely silencing it.

Eve’s hands were clenched painfully on the receiver. Then, in a sudden rage, she threw the entire phone across the room. It clattered solidly against the wall, but the noise was overridden by her urgent shouts.

“Girls!” She made sure her voice was loud enough to wake them both. “Get yourselves ready. We’re going on a hunt in ten.”

Hearing them both jump out of bed, Eve reflected on what had been said. At least five galdagos? With that many, she would’ve liked extra backup. But her backup was already there—her backup was Garrett. If he was still alive. Eve crossly shook the negative thought out of her head. Anyone else would likely be dead, but not Garrett. He might stand a chance. No matter how small that chance might be, Eve clung to it like she was suspended over a cliff edge.

VICKI RUSHED BACK into her bedroom. She'd run straight into her mother's room after Eve had yelled they were leaving in ten minutes, wondering what was going on. Eve had quickly filled her in on Garrett's phone call and how it had abruptly cut off. Cassie had remained in her room, simply following Eve's instructions.

Vicki now wished she had done the same, for she couldn't think straight. She was panicking. What if Garrett was dead? One of the last things she'd said to him came back to haunt her—she had wished him dead. She hadn't meant it, but she also knew that Garrett didn't know that. He had believed her. What if he had died believing that? That she hated him? It just simply wasn't true. She loved Garrett. But her choice on that awful day meant she always felt guilty being around him.

Vicki leaned back against the closed door, resting against it as she tipped her head back to stare hopelessly at the ceiling. She took several deep breaths, trying to gain control of her stampeding emotions. Trying desperately not to burst into tears. Trying to focus on what needed to be done.

With effort, Vicki made herself move from the door, grabbing her hair in both hands and giving the locks a harsh tug. She was so angry with herself she would've torn her hair right out of her head if she'd had the time. The feel of the hair in her hands kick started her brain, reminding her she had to get ready. She darted to a chest of drawers, grabbing a hair-bobble and pulling her hair back into a hasty and rather untidy ponytail. Vicki didn't care.

She swiftly put on clean underwear, grabbing a pair of black trousers from a nearby pile of clothes at the side of the room and slipping them on. A t-shirt came next, then a jumper, also black. Vicki knew that Oaksmount was a day's journey, and they wouldn't get there much before dark, so they would be going in under the cover of darkness. She'd chosen to wear black for a reason—blending into the background helped her to go unnoticed. She knew Eve and Cassie would wear similar clothing. You could be an expert at stealth, but if you chose to wear an orange jumpsuit you would likely be spotted.

She'd chosen a warm jumper, knowing she could only wear a light coat. A heavier coat would be cumbersome, and slow her movements in a fight. She found her waist-length black leather jacket draped over a wardrobe door, and slid her arms into it with ease.

Vicki hefted her backpack from behind the bedroom door, shrugging the familiar weight onto her shoulders. She'd been taught to always have her pack ready and waiting, for moments exactly like this one. Her mother always said you could never be too prepared.

Vicki's mind was still reeling, the situation so similar to that awful day she almost threw up. How could this be happening? It was her father's death replaying again. With that terrifying

thought, Vicki tore out of the room, hastily following her family down the stairs and out into the car.

In her distress, Vicki forgot completely that she'd removed a particular item from her backpack. A most important, if not lifesaving item.

None of the Valentines had any reason to go into the kitchen. But they should have. For sitting on the far counter, waiting to be cleaned, was Vicki's gun. Her Colt .45.

CASSIE CURSED LOUDLY, drawing Eve's gaze from the road. "I forgot to tell Raven not to come over this morning."

Eve returned her attention to driving. "She'll put two and two together. She'll know where we've gone."

"Five galdagos," Cassie said, with a shake of her head.

Vicki stirred in the backseat. She'd been silent and unmoving since they'd left, but she shifted in her seat now. She sat forward, drawing Cassie's attention with a light touch to her arm. "I guess today's the day we see if we live up to the Valentine name."

"You've already done that," Eve said, looking in the rear-view mirror at Vicki, then across to Cassie in the passenger seat. "Both of you." She smiled at each daughter, taking longer with Vicki to assure her that the argument they'd had last night was behind them. She didn't want to go into a life-threatening situation and not have made peace with her.

Eve glanced to Cassie again after she'd navigated the Land Rover around a sharp bend. "And don't count on there only being five. Garrett said he'd seen five, but there could be more."

"Great," Cassie said.

"I know. It's a large nest. For galdagos anyway." Eve grew yet more serious. "But even as Valentines, you'll need to be on your game today. Top form. Any less, and you'll be in serious trouble. If you give it an opportunity, by making a simple mistake, or by giving it an opening, the galdago will take advantage, it won't miss the chance.

"They're the smartest creatures I've come up against, using similar tactics to what we do. They split their prey to divide and conquer, they'll try to corner you so you can't escape, and lie in wait to ambush and trap you. They have excellent eyesight, and can see clearly in the dark. Even if it's pitch black. If you use a tactic once, don't use it again. They learn fast, and it will have adapted. Don't repeat anything. The same if you're in a hand-to-hand fight with one—mix up your moves, or it will read your intentions.

“Along with their intellect, the galdagos’ main advantage is its strength. It has a substantial body mass. A galdago will tower over Cassie by a couple of feet.” Eve had used Cassie for the example as she was the tallest among them. “Its body is solid muscle, and its hide is thick, difficult to penetrate. One direct hit from a galdago will break bone.” She heard Vicki take in a sharp breath. Eve wasn’t trying to scare them, merely filling them in on the facts. She needed them to be fully prepared. Any less would endanger their lives. “If it gets its arms around you, it’ll crush your bones into powder. Your guns will be the best weapon you have, though bullets seem to have little effect.”

“What?” Cassie sounded anxious now. “You just said they’re our best shot.”

“Let me finish,” Eve said, though not unkindly. “A galdago, if sprayed with bullets, barely slows its pace. You can shoot it directly in the head, and it’ll still keep on coming.” Only worried silence answered her pause. “Its brain is protected by a thick plate of skull. Don’t panic when it doesn’t seem to be working and alternate your shots to other body parts. Stick to the same place. Individually, the bullets have little to no effect, but if you shoot repeatedly at its head, eventually the skull will cave in and you can kill it.”

Vicki’s nerves came through in her voice. “Even with a shotgun?”

“One headshot usually suffices.”

Vicki nodded, as if that made her feel a bit better. “You’re deadly with your shotgun. You never miss.”

Cassie nodded also, in agreement. She straightened her back and arched it, though it was clear she was trying to be discreet about it.

Eve, though driving, looked across and gave her a small, sympathetic smile. “I bet you’re sick of being in the car.” It wasn’t a question. Only yesterday had Cassie returned from a four day journey, so no doubt she was quite fed up with travelling.

Cassie smiled humorously. “I was trying to be subtle. I should’ve known you’d notice.” Discretion aside, she began to stretch out her long limbs.

“Muscle cramp?”

“A little.” Cassie waved it off. “Does a galdago have any weaknesses?”

“Not many,” Eve said, allowing Cassie the subject change. She knew her eldest wasn’t one to complain. “Though its main advantage is also its greatest weakness. Its strength comes from its huge size, but its size also hinders its movements. Slows it down. It’s a slow runner, so if you do find yourself in trouble you can easily outrun it. Though that’s only for fully grown galdagos, a young one doesn’t share those weaknesses.”

Vicki’s head appeared between the two front seats. “I thought you said they rarely bred?”

“They don’t. But occasionally it does happen. I’ve been thinking about what Garrett could’ve meant by ‘that’s not the worst of it.’ I’m beginning to wonder if that’s what he was referring to.”

“Surely they’re not as strong as the adults?” Vicki asked. “If they haven’t yet matured, they shouldn’t be such a threat.”

“It’s just the opposite,” Eve said. “If you’re faced with a situation where you have to choose which to kill first, always kill the infant galdago. Though Vicki’s right in that they’re not as strong, they’re still much stronger than us, and can still do serious damage with one strike.” She took a breath. “They’re a lot faster than their parents because they lack that bulk, and they’re ten times as savage. If there’s an infant at the farm, try and leave it to me.” Eve didn’t doubt they could handle themselves, but she had nearly two decades of experience more than Cassie. And even more over Vicki. She knew that in the upcoming fight, they would all need to count on that experience. Their very lives would depend on it.

“Both adult and infant will fight to the death, they never back down. Only if you leave their territory and they lose your scent will the adults give up, knowing they can’t catch you. They’ll try and corner you to keep that from happening, or lure you somewhere they have the advantage.”

“What about the infant?” Vicki had obviously picked up on the fact that Eve had only mentioned the adult galdago.

“The infant never gives up. Because of its speed, it never loses its prey’s scent. It keeps on tracking till you drop. Exhausted from the run, its prey then can’t put up much of a defense.”

“Jesus,” Vicki whispered.

Eve had a sudden image of Garrett staggering onward, being hunted down by such a monstrous creature. She felt her throat constrict at the thought. Garrett will make it, she told herself, though less confidently than before. Her own words had driven home how much danger Garrett was actually in, how much danger they themselves were about to be in. Garrett’s chances were slim at best. But he was one of the best shadowstalkers Eve had ever known. She tried to fix solely on that—she couldn’t bear the alternative.

“So it’s not actually faster than us?” Cassie said.

“No. We’d all be able to stay ahead of it, though you more than us.” Eve knew that Cassie was exceptionally fast, both on her feet and as a fighter. “At least until we tired anyway.”

Cassie’s tone was dry. “Well, that’s something.”

Looking somewhat defeated, Vicki slumped back into her seat, falling silent once more.

Chapter Thirteen

IT WAS AFTER nightfall when they finally arrived. The journey being longer than they'd expected. It was dark out, and in the countryside there was little relief from that darkness, no streetlights or houses to better illuminate their way. Fortunately, the moon was full, floating high in the night sky. There were some gray clouds dotted around, but at the moment none hindered the moon's helpful light, so at least they would be able to see where they were walking. None of the Valentines were prepared to wait until morning, when they could see better. Every second counted. Every second of delay could cost Garrett his life.

Eve shone her torch onto the map that she'd spread across the car bonnet. Her daughters, one to each side of her, leaned over when she tapped the map.

"We'll leave the car here and go the rest of the way on foot. Surprise is our only advantage, so we should use it as best as we're able." Her finger trailed a path across the map's terrain. "To the west of the farm lies a forest, and that's the way we'll be entering. It'll allow us to scout the farm without being seen ourselves. The other directions, as you can see, are open and flat, likely the farmer's fields."

"Is it just blind luck that we're already to the farm's west?" Cassie asked, giving Eve a knowing look. Their current position would allow them to head straight for the farm, going through the forest instead of having to waste time circling around the property first, to get to that forest.

Eve shrugged. "I may have glanced at the map when you were giving directions." It was vital that she was on the ball, no matter what was going on. Despite her worry about Garrett, her clarity of mind wasn't impeded in the slightest.

Cassie shook her head, smiling with one side of her mouth as if she was thinking the exact same thing. "It's a good thing you did."

Eve shouldered her backpack, keeping the shotgun in her hands, out and ready. Vicki, already wearing hers, was staring off into a line of trees that could just be made out in the distance. She looked eager to get going, but at the same time seemed anxious—no doubt worried about what horrors awaited them, just beyond those trees.

Cassie removed her pistol from a large side pocket of her pack and slid it into the holster at her hip. She folded up the map and tucked it into her pack, then slipped it on to her shoulders.

The three Valentine women took off in a jog, slow at first, gradually increasing as their muscles warmed. They held steady at a run, though not sprinting. They would be no good to Garrett or themselves if they arrived exhausted. They hadn't gone very far when the field they were crossing suddenly turned from grass into dry mud, and as Eve looked down she realized it was an old track road. Since the farm was the only homestead in the area, she reasoned that it would lead directly to the farmhouse itself. At least they could get their car in if needed. The track road allowed them easier passage, so they kept on it, running for fifteen minutes before they reached the forest. They dared not go any farther on the open track road, so slipped into the trees, slowing their pace considerably to avoid the densely packed trunks. Three torches clicked on as the pale light from the moon was all but filtered off amongst the tightly woven, overhead branches.

In complete silence they advanced, treading carefully so as to not step on anything that might draw attention to their position. It was slow going amongst the trees, but they couldn't rush and risk alerting any nearby galdagos. The light from their torches alone would alert them, but they couldn't do without it. The torches clicked off at the first sign of natural moonlight ahead, and the women used that to guide them. When they finally reached the forest edge, they could clearly see the farm's layout. Behind the tree trunks, crouched low, they all assessed the scene.

The first thing Eve noticed was how brightly lit it was, the lights from the farmhouse spilling out of the windows and flooding a good part of the surrounding fields. The family who had lived here must've been attacked at night, for the lights seemed to be on in every room.

The farmhouse was a good hundred meters away. In front of the house, but much nearer to the trees, was a large, ramshackle barn. Though the farmhouse and barn were not positioned opposite one another, the house was cleverly angled so that the front door faced the barn, lighting up the barn and the field in-between. An old, rusty tractor sat between the buildings, though off to one side. Bar the tractor, there was nothing at all in the fields—except for one, which contained crops. The rest were laid to grass, presumably for grazing.

There was no sign of anything living: no animals, no people, no galdagos. The place was deathly silent.

The cold wind whipped Eve's hair back, and carried an unpleasant odor to her nostrils. It was the stench of death. Though the smell wasn't at all encouraging, she was pleased that the wind hadn't changed its direction since they'd left the car. They were downwind of the galdagos, so the creatures had no prior warning of their approach. Surprise was still on their side.

The farmhouse door stood wide open. Eve wanted to go there first as Garrett had called from the farmhouse phone. When she'd checked the number, the call hadn't come from Garrett's mobile.

Why he hadn't used his mobile, Eve didn't know, but she surmised he could've easily dropped it or it could've gotten broken, or maybe the device simply had no signal. Eve didn't much care about the reason. She only knew that that was the last place Garrett had been before

the phone was cut off. She would find answers about what happened to him in that house, she was sure of it.

VICKI FELT AS if she was somewhat in a daze. She watched as Cassie withdrew some ammunition clips from her backpack and slipped them into her jacket pocket. Cassie then fastened the silencer onto her pistol—she was sensitive to loud noise. Realization dawned on Vicki that wasn't the only reason for her sister's actions. Stealth was their main advantage here. Firing the pistol, if unsilenced, would only draw more galdagos to Cassie. Eve's shotgun, deafening as it was, was the most effective weapon, so Vicki knew her mother wouldn't have considered changing it for a lesser, quieter gun. If they'd had more time to prepare, Vicki would've gotten a silenced pistol of her own for such a job.

The thought of her own gun snapped Vicki out of her daze. She scrambled to get her weapon out of her pack. She'd nearly forgotten to arm herself. She mentally kicked herself, sternly chiding to focus on the matter at hand. She couldn't help Garrett if she was dead. Fumbling around in her backpack, Vicki found her ammo belt, boxes of ammunition, but no gun. She experienced a horrid sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach as she remembered taking the Colt out to clean it. She never returned it to her pack. With cold dread seeping through her bones, she considered her options. If she were to tell Eve, she knew one of either two things would happen: Eve would send her back to the car, to wait until the fight was finished—she would never let Vicki go in without a gun. Vicki wasn't willing to do that, she'd rather take her chances unarmed. There'd been only two occasions where Vicki had chosen to sit out on a shadowhunt. Her first, and the one Garrett had just asked her on. The first had been catastrophic, and since that day she'd never missed another hunt. Until Garrett. She desperately hoped that wasn't going to end the same way, though she feared it already had. The other thing Eve could do, would be to make them all leave and come back once they'd bought another gun. Though it would likely take the best part of another day to do so. Vicki couldn't have that, her mistake might end up costing Garrett his life, if her shunning of him hadn't already done so.

Every second counted. Vicki made her decision. Fastening her leather jacket so neither Eve nor Cassie could see the empty gun holster at her hip, she kept quiet as they crept forward, toward the farmhouse. Vicki followed behind, trying to calm herself by assuring that she would be fine, as long as she stayed with her mother or sister at all times. That shouldn't be too difficult. Sometimes they split up, sometimes not—she would just have to make sure that it was the latter.

Eve would go ballistic if she found out she'd forgotten her gun. It had been drilled into Vicki since she was a child to be prepared. She would never hear the end of it. Though to be honest, Vicki would understand such a lecture. How could she have been so stupid?

A BLOODY HANDPRINT greeted them. The crimson smear stood out clearly against the blue paint of the farmhouse door, as if in warning not to go any farther. The handprint's smear told its own story—someone had clearly been trying to escape from the house and had been taken down at the last moment, then dragged unwillingly back inside.

The Valentines ignored the bloody warning. Eve stepped into the house first, shotgun raised ahead of her. Vicki entered behind Eve, and Cassie brought up the rear, lightly ascending the wooden porch steps without so much as a creak from the timber.

Cassie's eyes scanned the hall—the bloody hand trail stopped midway down the corridor. The body of a man lay there, and from his shredded clothes she guessed he was the farmer. Or had been at any rate.

Cassie really wanted to close the front door behind her. She'd feel a lot better with something solid at her back. They'd also hear if it opened behind them. Though if galdagos were as smart as Eve had described, and she didn't at all doubt her mother's words, then the closed door may actually alert them of the Valentines intrusion, especially if a galdago was to remember that the door had been open.

Three doorways led off the hallway, plus the stairs in front of them. One doorway lay straight ahead, the other two were on either side of Eve and Cassie.

As Eve checked out the room on her left, which appeared to be a sitting room, Cassie took the room on her right—a dining room. Several of the dining chairs had been tipped on their sides, and the table itself was upended against the side wall. It was built from solid oak, so it would weigh a substantial amount, yet it had clearly been tossed with some force, for three of its legs had snapped clean off, and the last leg was broken, but still clung tenaciously to the table top. On the far wall was another door, which sat open. Through it was what looked to be a kitchen.

Cassie nodded to Eve when she returned to the hall, letting her know that the room was clear. Cassie glanced into the sitting room as she passed by, curious to see if that room also held an extra door. It did. The layout of the farmhouse was odd, at least what she'd seen of it so far. No downstairs room was separate; they all linked together from end to end. In the current situation, Cassie could see the advantage of such a layout. At least you couldn't be cornered in one room. Her gaze landed on the body in the hallway, such a layout hadn't done him much good.

She passed by the man's lifeless corpse. The man's chest and ribcage were torn open. Every organ ripped out of his body, leaving a dark, bloody void where they should've been. The blood had coagulated, but it did little to relieve the stench. From its state of decomposition, the body had been here for weeks, though maggots still picked at the dead flesh, causing parts of his

clothes to move and twitch unsettlingly. His left hand was missing, his wrist having been chewed right through. Also, an ear and a large flap of skin from his leg. The galdagos had taken trophies.

Eve led the way into the kitchen. Two doors were at either end, connecting through to the rooms that they'd just been in. Eve swept the room, careful to keep away from the windows so her form wasn't seen from outside. The back door to the house was no longer there. It had been torn from its hinges.

To be on the safe side, Cassie checked the doors at each end of the kitchen, peering through to the living and dining room in quick succession as Vicki watched the hallway and front door. They didn't want to chance that a galdago had been in the kitchen when they'd first entered the house, and as they'd come up through the hall it may have slipped behind them.

The farmer's wife lay in the center of the kitchen. A rolling pin was held in a death grip of one hand. The weapon, though imaginative, had obviously proved ineffectual. It must have angered the galdago too, for all her limbs had been torn off. Her head full of auburn curls was still attached, though barely. Like her husband, her organs were also gone. The savagery of the attack was apparent everywhere, not just from her mutilated corpse. Kitchen implements were overturned and strewn about the place, most covering the floor. Cupboards had been opened, and everything in them scattered around, from crockery to cereal packets. The fridge door hung wide and askew, all of its contents lying in a rotting heap at its feet, growing moldier as each day passed. The inner light of the fridge flickered repetitively, and the smell of rotting eggs only added further to the already overpowering stench. Even the plants on the windowsill had been knocked into the sink, though it was apparent they'd been knocked in by a thrown, dismembered leg. The severed stump now sat pride of place on the windowsill.

Cassie breathed through her mouth, as shallow as she could manage. The smell made her want to gag. Her eyes watered, and she wondered if the atrocity before her had been carried out by an infant galdago. It seemed different from the first, much more frenzied. She looked away, the grisly image already seared into her mind. She hoped to God that Garrett was all right.

Eve lightly nudged Vicki aside, and then moved back into the hallway, taking up point once more. Vicki followed closely behind, and Cassie fell in step after her. From the hallway, they took the stairs, heading up to the first floor.

Upstairs, the smell only got worse. The landing was wide, spacious, and compared to the mayhem of the kitchen, it seemed relatively unscathed. Oddly, no rooms went off the landing, only a hallway, and down that corridor was where the rooms were situated. The room farthest away from them, at the very end of the corridor, looked to be where most of the trouble had occurred. The door, its frame, and part of the surrounding wall had been knocked through. Bits of rubble and timber lay scattered across the hall's pale carpet— it looked like an explosion had hit it.

Cassie recalled the description of Garrett's phone call, and wondered whether the explosion Eve heard had been a galdago breaking through whatever barricade Garrett had put in place.

Eve gestured to the badly damaged doorway immediately, as if instantly knowing that was the room where Garrett had called from.

Vicki clearly came to the same conclusion, for she stepped eagerly forward. Eve gripped her arm and pushed her backward. She held up a hand, telling her to wait. To Cassie, she indicated the nearer rooms with her shotgun.

Though it was apparent to Cassie that Eve herself was keen to find out what had happened to Garrett, she knew her mother's instincts were right—they needed to check the other rooms first. They would be no good to him if their own safety was compromised.

Cassie checked the closest room. The bathroom was empty. It looked completely undisturbed. Eve was checking the bedroom opposite. Her nod conveyed that was clear too.

Cassie hesitated at the next, seeing a child's nameplate stuck onto the door. The name 'Ralph' was surrounded by frolicking, smiling dinosaurs. She wondered sadly if the boy had mistakenly confused a galdago for a dinosaur, for Eve had told her of the sharp, single row of spines running down its back. Taking a breath to try and prepare herself for the carnage she knew laid inside, Cassie moved forward. A hand drew her back, and Eve was suddenly in front of her, going into the boy's room for her.

Despite the situation, a small smile appeared on Cassie's face. She couldn't have asked for a better mother. Protecting her to the last. Moments later, Eve returned, her face paler than before. Cassie grimaced to see it—the sight must've been bad. She gave Eve a grateful, but sympathetic look.

Eve patted her cheek, though Cassie was unsure as to whether the touch was to comfort her, or Eve herself.

Cassie moved ahead and searched the next room, which was a small study. It was deserted.

Only one room now remained—the room at the end of the hallway. The room that looked like an explosion had hit it. They headed toward the wreckage that had once been a solid wall, the ghastly smell only intensifying as they neared. Eve wasted no time, crossing the last threshold swiftly so that they could enter behind her.

All three Valentines stopped and stared at the horrific scene before them. Eve stood rigid, stoic. Cassie covered her mouth and nose, trying to block out the nauseating stench. Vicki sank to her knees, burying her head in her hands as tears flowed freely down her face.

Chapter Fourteen

THEY'D FOUND THE missing stalkers. Maybe Garrett too, it was hard to tell.

There was so much blood covering the walls it looked as if the room had purposely been painted red. Arterial spray even spattered part of the ceiling. A torso was propped up against a bedpost, like a mannequin waiting to be assembled. The torso had nothing attached, no limbs or head, and its shoulders had been torn open—the galdago getting the internal organs out that way instead of going straight through the chest and ribcage. Like the kitchen, limbs were strewn about, though there was a lot more than before.

Vicki was trying to muffle her sobs in her hands, and she kept whispering how sorry she was. She obviously thought Garrett was amongst the dead men.

Eve moved closer to Cassie and whispered in her ear, “Count the legs.”

Cassie's eyebrow rose at the strange request, but she nodded and paced around the room, trying her best not to stand on entrails or torn off skin. She tried to focus on counting, and not on the slaughter before her. There was enough red in the room to make her hate the color for life. She found six legs, though she had to examine one closely as it'd been torn apart at the knee, and again at its ankle. She holstered her gun and put the three parts back together until it resembled a leg. Cassie had come to realize why her mother had asked such a thing, and she wanted to be certain of the numbers. She noticed Eve counting other body parts, and tracked back to her side.

“Six legs.”

“Three torsos,” Eve whispered back.

“You did say they took trophies,” Cassie said quietly. Six legs meant three men had died here, but who was to say Garrett's body hadn't simply been dragged away?

“Trophies, yes. Pieces. Not whole bodies.” Eve indicated the blood-soaked room. “Look around. This is where they fed.” She pointed to a small, obliterated mess of plastic on the floor. It had once been a telephone. “Garrett rang from this room. If he'd been killed here, his body would still be here.” She took a shallow breath. “I think he got out,” Eve said the last slightly louder so Vicki could hear.

Vicki's head snapped up, a look of hopeful desperation on her face.

Nearby the broken phone, something metallic caught Cassie's eye. She walked to the item. It was a silver hip flask. The initials G.H. were engraved on the side—Garrett Harding. Garrett always carried the flask full of whisky, to celebrate after a job well done. Cassie held it up to

show her mother and sister, then tossed it to Vicki, hoping that the trinket would give her some small amount of comfort.

Vicki lightly traced the lettering, and after a few moments she pocketed the flask for safekeeping.

Eve caught Vicki's attention, then tipped her head to where the door had once been, clearly reminding Vicki to watch the hallway. Vicki turned to keep a lookout.

"There are seven hands," Cassie said, trying to keep the distress out of her voice. It didn't help; Vicki's shoulders still shook as more tears fell.

Eve's sharp eyes darted about, obviously counting the hands for herself. She paused on each hand for a brief time before moving on to the next. A few moments passed. Eve crossed to the extra hand and picked it up. This hand wasn't attached to an arm, it was severed at the wrist. She gestured to the bite marks along the clotted stump. "It belongs to the farmer. His hand was missing. See, this skin has decomposed more than the rest."

Cassie took a closer look. She saw that Eve was right, and nodded in relief.

Eve knelt by the nearest torso. Cassie joined her. Before his bowel had been removed, the man had soiled himself—it could've been through sheer fear or simply the after-effect of death. The rank smell of feces and urine clogged the air, vying for dominance over the putrid scent of rotting flesh.

"There are only three bodies here," Eve said. "Let's verify none are Garrett."

Cassie moved to the torso by the bed post. She leaned the body forward, her hand inadvertently slipping into the gaping shoulder wound. Her jaw clenched tight. She couldn't stop now, she had to continue. A large tattoo spread across the man's back, so Cassie knew it wasn't Garrett—he wasn't one for body art. She rested the torso back against the bed post, straightened, then pulled back the blood-saturated duvet cover on the bed. Using the sheets below, she cleaned the blood off her hand. Once the duvet was back in place, she moved on to the next torso, where Eve was also crouched.

"That wasn't Garrett. Tattoo on his back confirmed it." Cassie glanced around again. "I wonder what they've done with the heads."

"You probably don't want to know. I certainly don't."

Her mother had a point. But it would've made identifying the men a lot easier. "What about yours?"

"The first torso I checked wasn't him. Garrett didn't have a beer gut. But this one," Eve gestured to the third and final torso in front of her. "It's the right size and build..." She looked to Cassie. "Any suggestions?"

Cassie examined it. “Did Garrett have any scars that would help?”

Eve’s eyes brightened. “On his lower back. A claw slice.”

The torso was flat on its back. Eve lifted it up so Cassie could see underneath. The skin looked as if it’d been put through a cheese grater. What little of it remained hung in strips.

“No good,” Cassie said. “Can’t make anything out.”

Eve lowered the torso onto the floor. “Didn’t Garrett mention that he’d had his appendix out?”

Both sets of eyes flew to the torso’s stomach. Fortunately, for them at least, the damage had mostly been done to the chest area, which allowed them to make out the area beneath the bellybutton. There was no scar. It wasn’t Garrett.

“Garrett’s not here,” Eve said. “He got out.”

Moving to the smashed window, Cassie had little choice but to lean out and look directly below. Garrett could be lying dead at the bottom. He wasn’t. A large manure pile sat straight beneath the window, and the top of it looked somewhat squashed.

Eve appeared to follow both her gaze, and her train of thought. “The manure cushioned his fall. If he wasn’t too badly hurt, he could’ve made it to his...” her hands tightened on the shotgun, and she finished in a broken whisper, “car.” Eve tipped her head toward a brown Volvo parked off to one side—Cassie recognized it as Garrett’s. The car was parked next to another vehicle, which presumably belonged to the farmer’s family.

Cassie laid a supportive hand on her mother’s shoulder. The fact that Garrett’s car was still here was a very bad sign. Though she knew they wouldn’t give up. Not until they found his body. She didn’t see the trio’s car—the shadowstalkers must’ve snuck in like they themselves had. Garrett, not believing the galdago story, had boldly pulled up to the farmhouse. The galdagos had likely waited until he was inside the house before attacking, cornering him in a trap. Like a spider, waiting for its prey to get caught in its web.

Eve picked up a spent bullet casing. “We’ll search the entire farm if we have to.”

VICKI HAD PULLED herself together, now that she knew Garrett wasn’t among the dead. She was frantically searching through the bodies, patting down shredded clothes and checking a gun holster that was still affixed to one shadowstalker’s hip. It was empty, but she soon found the gun—across the room, still clutched in his severed hand. She prayed that it held some bullets,

but her prayers went unanswered. Every round had been spent. Vicki moved on to the next, surely one gun would have some ammunition left?

The trio of shadowstalkers had clearly made their final stand here, and they'd used everything they had to defend themselves— not a single bullet remained. And still it hadn't been enough.

Vicki angrily threw the last gun down, though it was onto the bed so it didn't make much noise. She cursed internally—if only one of the guns had been a Colt .45, she had all the ammunition she needed in her pack.

Eve and Cassie had taken up position by what was left of the doorway, alternating between watching the hall and giving Vicki questioning glances.

Vicki quickly made up a reason as to why she'd been going through the guns. "We need as many weapons as we can get from the looks of this lot."

With a small smile, Eve nodded, as if pleased Vicki was taking the threat seriously.

Vicki rested her hand on the hip flask in her pocket. She told herself she'd taken it so she could return it to Garrett when they found him alive, and not because it was some sentimental reminder of a man no longer living. Garrett was still alive. He had to be.

Vicki followed Eve as she led the way back along the hall, and onto the landing. Eve started down the stairs, but drew to a sudden halt about halfway down. Vicki stopped on the top step nearly instantaneously. Cassie was still on the landing, but she paused also.

A massive beast walked past the open front door. The Galdago was close to the house, just at the bottom of the porch steps. It was staring straight ahead, and its large stride took it past quickly.

As its loud footsteps faded, Eve spun around on the stair, keeping her voice to a low whisper. "I'm going after it. You two stick together. Go and search the barn, see if Garrett's inside."

Eve didn't wait for a response. She crept down the stairs, shotgun at the ready. She cautiously stepped outside, and took off after the lone galdago.

IN THE DOORWAY, Cassie watched Eve's shrinking form as she jogged away from them. Glancing back into the house, Cassie noticed that Vicki still hadn't drawn her weapon. She tapped her pistol in indication.

Vicki shook her head, looking decidedly embarrassed.

Cassie's nose creased, the smell still assaulting her nostrils. She wanted to get out into the fresh air, but she was waiting on Vicki drawing her gun. She frowned as Vicki tried to move past her, still without freeing her weapon. Cassie blocked the door.

"I can't," Vicki whispered in her ear. "I forgot it."

Cassie blinked dumbly for a moment. "Very funny."

"I'm not kidding." Vicki unzipped her leather jacket, revealing the empty holster. She patted the Bowie hunting knife on her opposite hip. "This will have to do."

"Vic, I can't believe..." Cassie shook her head, now wasn't the time. She thrust her silenced pistol into Vicki's hand. Cassie didn't relish the idea of facing a galdago practically unarmed, but she liked the idea of her younger sister doing it even less. She also knew she was better at hand-to-hand combat than Vicki, so she'd stand a better chance in a fight.

Vicki looked insulted at the way Cassie had screwed up her face. "I know it was stupid, but there's no need to look at me like that!"

"No, it's not..." Cassie smelled the air, not comprehending why the smell was getting worse in the doorway. The air from outside should be lessening the stench, if anything. "Don't you think the smell is stronger?"

"It's horrendous, I know." Vicki waved a dismissive hand. "You're not going to tell Mom, are you?"

Cassie ignored her. Taking a step to the side, toward the entrance to the living room, the smell intensified to the degree that she wanted to retch. Fear alone kept her from doing so. When Cassie had glanced in earlier, after Eve had searched it, she hadn't seen any corpses inside. Something else was causing the reeking stench.

A Herculean arm swept down between them. Both women jumped back, narrowly escaping the blow. Vicki fell back into the hallway, tripping over the farmer's body and landing with a thud. The pistol skittered out of her grasp. Cassie, upon jumping out the door, lost her footing on the multi-leveled porch steps and tumbled down them, hearing something crack as she collided solidly with the ground. Her momentum carried her farther, rolling a few times before she was able to stop herself. Cassie hurried to her feet, relieved when no part of her body protested the movement. The crack she'd heard had alarmed her, and she'd worried that a bone had broken. She was fine, but didn't have a chance to ponder what had actually caused the cracking sound.

Another galdago strode out from the shadows beside the house. Cassie's eyes darted toward the porch steps, wondering if she could make it back inside. Vicki had her gun. The galdago must've read her intentions, for it moved closer to the steps, stopping her attempt. Its long arms could easily grab her now.

From her jacket pocket, Cassie removed an extra magazine for her pistol. She tossed it through the front door, into the hallway. From the lack of noise it made, Cassie assumed it had landed on the welcoming mat. She prayed that Vicki would notice it.

The galdago came at her. Cassie turned and ran for the barn, hoping she would find something inside that she could use as a weapon. She had her daggers, of course, but first she wanted to see if she could find something with a longer reach.

THE GALDAGO HAD increased its pace. It was running.

Though due to its massive bulk it wasn't particularly fast. The creature was headed east, into the open field.

Eve kept it in view, letting it gain ground on her. She knew she could easily regain it, but for now she wanted it far ahead of her. She didn't want to stop it just yet, for it would be in her best interests to allow it to reach the center of the field. When she opened fire, the noise would draw more galdagos to her, and Eve wanted to have a clear, uninterrupted view all around.

The farther she walked into the field, the darker her surroundings became, for the light from the farmhouse only reached so far. The moon was full and bright overhead so Eve didn't have to bother with her torch—she could still make out the galdago and it was a good distance ahead of her.

Annoyingly, the galdago wasn't being cooperative, and it angled quite sharply to the left, now heading north east. It was making its way toward a crop field, which was ripe and ready for cutting. Though the crop was only around three foot tall, Eve would prefer to stay out of it, as it wouldn't be as easy to traverse.

Eve broke into a jog, hoping to catch the galdago before it entered the crop field. The lead she'd given it now worked against her, but the galdago's abrupt change of direction had been unexpected.

Eve looked back over her shoulder. She could no longer see the front of the farmhouse, and the side of the house blocked her view of the barn.

The galdago entered the crop field, still running. Eve increased her speed further, sprinting now—she didn't want the galdago to get too far in. She soon crossed from the grass, into the crops, lifting her feet higher to avoid getting snared by the taller foliage.

The galdago suddenly stopped dead in its tracks. It turned purposefully around, as if knowing she'd been there all along. It didn't react to her presence, confirming Eve's suspicions. The galdago had known she was following. It had intentionally been leading her away. To divide and

conquer. Drawing to a halt herself, Eve glanced back to the farmhouse—the whole thing had been a setup, it had chosen to walk in front of the doorway. It had known they were inside the house.

A frown marred Eve's features. To split the prey, to lead one away, it had to be pretty confident that the rest weren't going to escape in its absence. This was a group effort, a coordinated attack. The galdago had even lured her into a position where she couldn't see the full picture—she was blind-sighted to the rest of the farm. She had no way of knowing if her daughters were under attack. Eve hadn't heard any gunfire though, she knew Cassie's pistol was silenced, but Vicki's Colt wasn't, she'd hear it.

The galdago in front of her just stood there. Somewhat calculating. Eve moved toward it, wondering what it was waiting for.

The creature was exactly as she remembered: sharp spines ran from its neck down the entire length of its back. Its flesh was a mottled dark purple, as if diseased, and its thick skin was rough, like sandpaper. Its eyes were black, beady, and oddly small in contrast to the rest of its hulking body. It had no lips, just plenty of razor-sharp teeth. Row upon row of them, like a shark.

The worst thing by far though, was its odor. It reeked of death. Eve had never been able to figure out if it was the creature itself or the fact that it adorned itself with the rotting flesh of its victims.

Eve spotted movement off to her right, and her sharp eyes locked in on it. The crops were moving, though it had nothing to do with the wind. The movement was unnatural, forced.

A galdago's head and upper body appeared, drawing itself up off its back and into a sitting position. It had been lying prone, waiting to draw her in. As it lumbered to its feet, Eve glanced hastily around, full circle, checking her surroundings for any more.

A third galdago emerged from the crops, lurching upward. It was behind Eve and slightly to her left. They'd caught Eve between them, pinching her in so she had little room to maneuver, and even less space to run.

The galdago triangle stood motionless, watching her.

Eve wasn't sure why they were delaying, but she wasn't going to wait to find out. Unfortunately, before she could lock on a target, the moon was covered by a thick gray cloud, blocking out all the light.

As if on cue, the three galdagos charged at Eve. The ground reverberated under her feet at their heavy, pounding footsteps, and Eve's sharp hearing zoned in on each set, coming in from different directions. The galdago stomping toward her from the right was fractionally slower than the others. The one behind and slightly to her left was fastest, charging eagerly toward its prey.

Eve's shotgun came up. She targeted the galdago behind first, wanting to give herself the option of running should she need it. A quick look up to the sky showed her that the cloud wasn't going to shift in time. She withdrew her torch, snapping it on and clamping it to the gun's barrels with a hasty hand.

The footsteps thundered in her ears, making her head hurt with the noise. She expertly aimed the shotgun, the vibrations from the ground moving up into her legs. The shotgun only held two rounds. Both shots needed to count. They needed to kill outright. The galdagos were smart all right. If any other shadowstalker had been caught in this trap, their inferior guns wouldn't have gotten them out of it. They simply wouldn't have enough time to empty a clip into each galdago's head. Time would run out long before then. A dark smile formed on her face. But Eve Valentine was no ordinary shadowstalker. And the gun she held in her hands was anything but inferior.

She waited as long as she could, knowing the closer it got, the more damage she would inflict. She opened fire, the resonating boom from the gun hanging in the cold night air. Eve swiveled around when the galdago began to drop, most of its head falling to lie beside its humongous body.

The galdago who'd led her out here was closest, so she took it down with her remaining shell. She got a good view of its head being blown apart, for the moon chose that exact moment to reappear from behind the clouds.

The last galdago bared its pointed teeth at her, growling angrily as it closed the last few feet, its bulging arms outstretched and grasping for her. Eve dove to one side at the last possible moment, recognizing that the galdago's large bulk and weight would carry its momentum forward for a few steps. It did, and Eve used the time to full effect, the shell belt on her waist providing easy access to extra ammunition, which was vital now. She reloaded her shotgun once more.

The galdago turned, only to find itself facing both barrels. Point blank, its head exploded into mulch. Some shards of bone remained, mixing with blood and brain matter. It rained down around Eve like sharp and grisly confetti.

With the moon's help, she was able to look around, see if any more creatures were lingering nearby. Eve saw none. She slipped a shell into the chamber she'd just fired, checking her surroundings again to make sure. She decided to return to the farmhouse, though she'd go around the back this time. She'd already used the front, and didn't like to use the same route twice—galdagos had a tendency to read your intentions and adapt to them. Plus, this way would cover more ground in the search for Garrett.

She looked down to the carnage at her feet. Three galdagos. At once. Eve was quite impressed with herself. She gave her shotgun an affectionate pat.

"Nice try," she said, stepping around the fallen giants.

Chapter Fifteen

VICKI SCRAMBLED BACKWARD, arms and legs beneath her like a crab. Her hand came down on something cold, metal, and she snatched it up, knowing instantly what it was. She clambered to her feet, aiming the pistol at the hulking bulk of muscle that loomed above her as it advanced. The galdago filled the hall in its entirety, both height and width. The farmhouse was quite large, its inner rooms quite spacious, but upon accommodating the towering beast, the rooms seemed to shrink in on themselves. Though the galdago was slow moving, its large strides carried it across a room in no time.

Vicki squeezed the trigger. She aimed solely for its head, like Eve had told her. She could see the round hole where the bullet entered its temple, but the galdago hardly flinched at the impact. Vicki fired a second shot, this time between its black, soulless eyes. The galdago snarled, stepping onto the farmer's corpse. Bones snapped and shattered at the immense weight, the loud cracks making Vicki grimace in dread.

She backed up farther into the kitchen. She wondered about going outside, out the back door, but that was the obvious move. The galdago had to have entered while they'd all been upstairs or they would have heard its approach, no matter how silent it had tried to be. Vicki guessed that such a large creature could muffle its approach by treading cautiously, but it couldn't completely deaden the noise. That meant this galdago had waited patiently to make its move. And it had already separated her from Cassie. She didn't want to fall into another of its traps. Vicki darted into the dining room instead, heading for the stairs. She knew the upstairs rooms were clear for they'd just searched them, and a galdago simply hadn't had the time to climb up the stairs while she ran around the ground floor. Also, she'd have heard its weight on the staircase.

Vicki knew she'd have to be quick—she wanted to reach the upstairs landing before the galdago started up the stairs. The stairs would restrict the beast's movement, and she'd have a clear line of sight as it came up them.

Vicki dashed around an overturned chair, then jumped over another. Her ears were highly attuned to the galdago's footfalls, hoping to hear it follow her this way. If the galdago went back along the hall, intercepting her, she'd have no choice but to go outside, either using the back door or by throwing herself through the front window. She'd been scarred enough by glass lately, and would leave such drastic action until she had no other choice.

The galdago was following her, Vicki could hear it crashing through the kitchen.

In the hallway, something caught her eye when she was about to dash up the stairs. It was on the welcoming mat. She briefly paused, hearing wood splintering as the galdago crushed the dining room chairs. It was an extra magazine for the pistol. Cassie must've thrown it in. Vicki lunged for it, scooping it up in one clean, fluid motion. She spared a glance out the front door, wondering where Cassie had got to. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the barn door swing closed. Vicki wanted to dash after her sister, but knew she had to take care of the threat first. After all, it wasn't like Cassie could back her up—Vicki had her gun. She slipped the extra clip into her jacket pocket, and then flew up the stairs two at a time.

Vicki was in position when the galdago appeared at the foot of the stairs. She didn't waste a second, firing repeatedly into its head. She had the creature exactly where she wanted it. As expected, the stairs slowed it even further, and it couldn't move side to side to try and dodge her attack.

Doubt started to creep in when her gun clicked empty, and the galdago was still advancing. She removed the empty magazine and slid the full one in, mentally thanking Cassie. Vicki had done what Eve said, not altered her shots. She'd kept to the same body part. It didn't seem to be working, and the galdago had reached the halfway point on the stairs.

Vicki couldn't run around the rooms up here like she'd done downstairs, they didn't link up. She would be trapped. Her heart hammered wildly against her ribs. She ran through what her mother had said earlier: Don't alternate your shots to other body parts. Vicki hadn't, she'd focused solely on its head. Stick to the same place. Before, Vicki had assumed that was an extension of the former sentence. Now, sudden understanding flashed into her mind.

Vicki chose a spot where she'd already shot, latching on to the bullet hole precisely. She fired repeatedly into the hole on its temple, sticking to the same exact place instead of just focusing on its large head. The galdago flinched more with each shot. Three steps from the landing, it stiffened and toppled backward, smashing the stairs and handrail to smithereens as it tumbled down them.

Vicki let out a long sigh of relief, watching the galdago closely for a few moments to verify that it was indeed deceased. Its chest no longer rose or fell—it wasn't breathing. It was dead.

Vicki checked the pistol: only two bullets remained. They wouldn't do her much good. She knew Cassie would have more ammunition on her, she just had to get to her. For Cassie's sake as much as her own, Vicki didn't like to think of her alone and unarmed. Since she'd seen the barn door closing, she assumed Cassie was at the barn, which was easily accessible from the front of the house. A swift sprint would get her there in no time.

A frown marred Vicki's features when she examined the wreck that had once been stairs. They didn't resemble stairs now. After the fourth step, the staircase simply ceased to be, the wood that had made up the rest lying splintered and broken on the floor below. It looked like a grenade had gone off.

In the fall, the galdago's body had tumbled to a halt by the front door, its large leg slamming it closed. Even if Vicki could've somehow gotten down to the ground floor, she doubted highly that she could move its heavy leg to open the door.

So much for the easy option, she thought. She would have to go out the back way. But first she'd have to figure out a way down.

RUNNING INTO THE barn, Cassie glanced sharply around, trying to ascertain whether the barn was deserted. As she fumbled for her torch, she used the fading light from the closing door to see by. She couldn't see well, but from what she could see, she seemed to be alone. Her fingers finally grasped the torch, and pulled it out of her side trouser pocket. Bits of plastic fell out along with it, onto the straw-ridden floor. Cassie flicked the torch on—nothing happened. She tried again. Still nothing. With dismay, she realized it'd been the torch that had cracked during her tumble down the porch steps.

The barn door closed, shutting out the remaining light. Everything went black. Pitch black. Even her breath, which should've been a cloud of white mist in the frigid air, she couldn't make out. The blackness was like a void, sucking everything, including herself, into it.

Standing still, she held up a hand and waved it in front of her face, close to. Nothing. She couldn't even see the movement. Though she could sense it.

Had Cassie known her torch was broken, she would never have entered the barn. Eve had told her the galdago could see perfectly well in the dark. It wouldn't be hindered by the blackness, but Cassie herself would. Though she hoped not to a disastrous degree. Or worse, a fatal one.

She remembered the mess of the bedroom door, how the galdago had simply smashed through it, and hoped it would do the same now, so at least some light would penetrate the gloom.

The galdago reached the barn, its footsteps slowing when it closed in on the door. As if to spite her, the door opened properly. The beast's towering shadow entered first, the galdago attached to the shadow's thick, black heels. Its black, bottomless gaze soon found Cassie, and its mouth widened in what looked like a grin. A depraved, maniacal grin. It slowly closed the door, careful not to damage it in any way, seemingly wanting to keep as much light out as possible. The galdago was clever, it knew of her limitations and was using them against her, to its own advantage.

The Valentines had been expertly divided, one by one. Despite knowing the tactics, they'd still fallen prey to the creatures' traps. A galdago had been lying in wait for her by the farmhouse

front door, and Cassie assumed there would be another at the rear, blocking any escape attempt. She just hoped Vicki had figured the same.

Cassie held her breath, trying to hear its approach. She doubted it would come straight at her; it was too smart for that.

A soft thud came from the void of blackness ahead of her, though it was slightly off to her left. Cassie, still rooted to the spot, listened intently. Her ears strained to hear more. How something so large could make so little noise was beyond her. The galdago had clearly stopped moving.

Cassie speculated on whether the galdago had purposely herded her into the dark barn for this very outcome. It had no idea she carried a torch. Though it was of little use to her now, broken as it was. No, she'd herself chosen to head for the barn. To search for both Garrett and anything she could use to help defend herself. But since she couldn't see to search, Cassie now knew it would be fruitless. She needed to get past the galdago, and back into the light.

Cassie wondered if the soft thud had been a single footstep. If it were to run, she guessed the sound of its solid feet hitting the floor would cause an echo around the entire barn. The galdago, try as it might, couldn't completely muffle the sound as it moved.

Another soft thud, closer this time. It was advancing on her in the dark, slowly but surely. Her heartbeat quickened, and despite hunting creatures for nearly a decade, Cassie still felt goosebumps rise on her arms.

A loud bang rang through the air, making her jump. It came from outside, in the distance. Cassie recognized the familiar sound instantly. It was her mother's double-barreled shotgun. Cassie's lips quirked upward, her mother had killed one.

Moments later, another shot rang forth. Make that two. Cassie knew without a doubt that two galdagos were dead. Eve was an absurdly good shot. In fact, Cassie had never known her to miss. Not once had that gun missed its target—not while in Eve's hands anyway. Unless of course, she had wanted it to.

From Garrett's account, that left at least three more galdagos. One of which, was in the barn with Cassie.

As the ring of the shot died out, Cassie heard another thud. Much closer than she expected. The galdago was using the noise of the gunshots to mask its approach. She realized its reputation for cleverness was well deserved. The stench from the galdago was growing stronger, just like it had in the hallway as it'd drawn near. Her heart was pounding, resonating loudly in her ears.

A third shot was fired. It had barely rung out when Cassie's honed senses alerted her to the threat. She jumped back, feeling the whistle of air pass by as the colossal fist just missed her.

Withdrawing both daggers from her belt, she darted forward, slashing strongly with her left hand, then stabbing with her right. She felt both strikes hit home, and the galdago grunted, though Cassie sensed it was more from surprise than pain. These creatures were not used to being harmed—they were usually the ones doing the harming, with no discrimination about what to kill: men, women, children, animals, and even other creatures were all on their menu. Though they only ate the internal organs, they made the most out of getting to them—Cassie had seen that firsthand in the farmhouse. They liked inflicting pain.

She'd kept her daggers sheathed until the last moment on purpose, wanting the galdago to think her unarmed and completely helpless. The surprise at being harmed bought Cassie the time to dive out of its reach. She'd intentionally kept the barn door's position in her mind's eye, and she darted for it now. She was fast on her feet, it didn't take long.

As if enraged to find it was bleeding, the galdago charged after her, its pounding footsteps no longer muffled. They were terrifyingly loud.

Cassie threw the door open and dashed through it. It bounced off the wall before slamming shut once more. She ran into the open field ahead, putting some distance between herself and the door. As if to taunt her, the galdago now did what Cassie had wanted it to do earlier. The wooden door suddenly exploded, disintegrating into dozens of pieces. A single blow from the massive beast had totally wrecked it. Only one long jagged piece remained, hanging by the now bent hinge.

Cassie drew to a stop in the middle of the field, between the barn and the farmhouse. This galdago was starting to piss her off. She turned to face it.

The galdago wrenched the piece of wood free as it stepped through the doorway. It carried it effortlessly as it approached Cassie. They were both now armed. Since Cassie could've easily outrun it, the galdago looked from side to side, as if wondering if it were a trap. Cassie thought it was probably expecting to see that she had some form of backup. She imagined not many people willingly chose to face a galdago. And certainly not without a gun.

The last time Cassie had fled from a fight her father had died, so she was extremely reluctant to do so now, even under these circumstances. Rage overtook her at the memory. She wasn't going to run this time. She would stay and fight. And she would win. Her fury clouded her judgment to the extent that Cassie believed, in that moment, that if she were able to defeat the galdago, it would somehow alter the events that took her father, that her actions now would alter the past. Committed fully to the fight, Cassie shrugged out of her pack and threw it aside. She didn't want to be encumbered in any way.

The galdago growled menacingly as it came forward, its prey nearly in reach. What it didn't, or couldn't comprehend, was that Cassie had never been its prey. She was a shadowstalker, it was her job to hunt down creatures of the night. She was the huntress. It was the prey.

Cassie smiled ferally, and then ran at the beast. The galdago's stride faltered, clearly not expecting such a response. People usually ran away, not the other way around. For the first time in her life, Cassie felt small, the galdago towering over her by a good two feet.

In the moonlight, Cassie could make out a human ear embedded in the creature's chest. The farmer had had an ear missing.

The galdago, still gripping the chunk of door in one hand, swung it at Cassie. Cassie easily dodged it, jumping to one side, then the other when it swung once more. The galdago changed tack, stabbing outward, toward her chest and head. Cassie simply ducked or sprang back, careful to alter her reactions. She was patiently waiting for the right moment when she could get in close to strike back. Her moment came. The beast lashed out, and she dived underneath its outstretched arm, tucking herself into a roll. She came up behind it, sticking both daggers into its back. The skin was incredibly thick, Cassie had to use all her strength just to penetrate its tough hide, and her daggers were dangerously sharp. She shoved the blades farther in, yanking downward and slicing through its thick, rough flesh. She felt its blood gushing over her hands.

The galdago roared with anger. It swung a powerful arm back, as if hoping to dislodge her, or to get lucky and elbow her in the face. Cassie ducked, stabbing three, four times more into its putrid body. She heard a whistling sound, and felt the air move as something swung down toward her. Cassie realized too late what it was, and as she moved she felt the thing strike her.

The galdago, in an effort to save itself, had swung the wooden door chunk straight behind itself, over its own shoulder. It apparently didn't care that it would damage itself in doing so. Since Cassie had begun to move, the wood only grazed the side of her head, though it connected solidly with her shoulder. Despite her best intentions, the sharp, unexpected pain made her cry out.

Cassie stumbled away from the creature, clutching at her now dislocated shoulder. She barely managed to stay on her feet. One of her daggers remained embedded in the galdago's back, but she was still armed with the other. How she had managed to hold on to it was beyond Cassie, but she was immensely grateful that she had.

The wood had shattered further at the impact, and there was so little of it left the galdago dropped it. The beast staggered, it was in worse shape than she was. Cassie wasn't keen to fight it with only one arm though, and she was dizzy from the blow. She shook her head, trying to clear her blurring vision. She felt warm blood flowing down the left side of her head and face, and she impatiently wiped at her eye as blood obscured her vision even further.

Cassie kept on backing away. Given a choice, she wouldn't fight it now. She wasn't that arrogant. It would be foolish to think she would win in her current state. Though Cassie didn't like to back down from a fight, and hadn't since her father had passed away, she wasn't suicidal. Whatever crazy impulse had taken control of her before, it'd been knocked out of her with the blow to the head. She was now all too aware of her limitations.

The galdago came at her. Though badly, possibly even mortally wounded, these creatures fought until their last breath. Cassie cursed silently. She hadn't been given the choice whether to fight or not, she would have to defend herself as best she could, which in this case was to run. She wished desperately that she hadn't given Vicki her gun. She needed it herself.

Cassie had no choice—she turned and fled toward the farmhouse, hoping Vicki was still there. She had no way of knowing, and realized she should've removed the silencer from her pistol, then she'd have heard any gunshots, and would now have a better idea of where Vicki was.

Each step jarred her shoulder painfully. She passed an old, rusty tractor on her right. Cassie pushed herself past the pain, managing to get up to a quick pace. It wasn't fast for her standards, but it was fast enough—the galdago was steadily falling behind. Her eyes blurred again, and a wave of dizziness hit her. She couldn't see properly, so just kept heading toward the blazing lights of the farmhouse. Her footing faltered, her trainer slipping into a slight dip in the grass. She nearly went down, but the dizziness was starting to fade, and she managed to stay on her feet. She ran on, the pain sapping more energy from her than she would've liked.

As Cassie increased the distance between her and the threat, she glimpsed movement out of the corner of her eye. She looked directly at the spot, but after looking at the bright houselights her eyes needed time to readjust to the dark shadows, and she found it difficult to make anything out. She was just starting to wonder whether it had simply been another blur in her vision when she spotted movement again.

From the side of the farmhouse, another galdago emerged from the shadows. Cassie knew she would never make it into the house now. She would have to change her plan. She altered direction to head past the farmhouse, into the grass field where her mother had disappeared earlier. Where she thought the gunfire had come from. Cassie needed help. She just hoped her mother was still in that area.

And that it wasn't too far. Though she had little choice in the matter.

With a jolt of horror, Cassie realized that it wasn't merely another galdago. It was an infant galdago. It closed in on Cassie swiftly, and she had to alter her trajectory significantly, along with increasing her pace, to miss being grabbed by its outstretched arms. Normally, it wouldn't have fazed her. She was very fast on her feet and even a young galdago couldn't get close. But with her injured arm she could barely break into a sprint, let alone reach her full speed.

Cassie was in agony, arm jerking excruciatingly as she ran. Though she knew if the galdago caught her she'd be in a hell of a lot more pain.

She was now running in the wrong direction. Away from her original target. Away from the help that she now so badly needed.

IT DIDN'T TAKE Vicki long to figure out how to get down. In fact, she was somewhat embarrassed that the answer hadn't come to her straight away. It was obvious.

She reluctantly returned to the blood-red room, holding her breath as she stepped over the threshold. At the window, she watched carefully for a while, trying to make out any movement. She gulped in the fresh air from outside when she could no longer hold her breath.

Vicki removed several shards of glass from around the edges of the broken window. She didn't want to cut herself. Garrett clearly hadn't had the time for such luxuries, instead having to jump straight through the pane of glass.

The manure directly below was plentiful, the mound thick enough to help break her fall. The manure was in what looked to be a pig pen. Fences to three sides joined on to the house wall, enclosing the animals, though none were to be seen. No doubt the galdagos had killed them. Several troughs were lined up along one fence—the pigs' feeding station. Vicki had to wonder what type of pig the farmer had kept, for the fences seemed awfully high for such a small animal. They were around five feet tall. There was a gate on the fence facing her, at the end of the pigs' compound. There was also a wooden structure to the right of the pen, a shelter of some sorts. It was level with the top of the surrounding fences, and was quite large—the farmer must've kept quite a few pigs. Unfortunately, Vicki was too high up to be able to see under the shelter's wide roof, but she quickly surmised that it was far too small in height to hide an eight foot galdago.

She tucked the pistol beneath the waistband of her black trousers, feeling the cold metal against the side of her hip. Since the silencer was still attached, putting it anywhere else would be quite uncomfortable. It wasn't particularly pleasant as was, but Vicki preferred to have her hands free for the drop, and she didn't want to risk losing the weapon by placing it in a pocket that wasn't deep enough.

She took one last look around the surrounding area, then climbed out of the window, sitting on the ledge for a moment before committing herself to the jump. Her hands pushed strongly off the ledge, making sure she was well clear of the wall as she fell.

Despite being slightly flattened by Garrett's earlier use, the manure pile still cushioned Vicki well, absorbing the majority of the impact. No doubt she would stink, but that couldn't be helped. And compared with the awful aroma of death inside the farmhouse, manure really didn't smell so bad.

Now nearer to the ground, though not quite on the surface yet, she could finally see underneath the roof of the shelter. Her blood ran cold as her mother's words screamed through her head. *If you use a tactic once, don't use it again. They learn fast, and it will have adapted. Don't repeat anything.*

Though Vicki had never before jumped out this window, Garrett had. And staring back at her from beneath the shelter, sat patiently waiting, was a galdago.

Chapter Sixteen

THE BEAST REACTED the same instant Vicki did, both scrambling for their footing. Vicki shuffled and rolled, trying desperately to get free from the manure pile. The sponginess that had just cushioned her fall now became a hindrance, sucking her in and cloying her down. She needed to pass the galdago to get out the gate—there was nowhere to run in the pen. And two bullets simply wouldn't be enough.

The galdago lumbered upward, completely destroying the pig shelter as it straightened to its full height.

Vicki, finally off the manure pile, made a dash for the back gate. She knew she wouldn't make it as the galdago strode forward, its large stride carrying it the small distance in two steps. It faced Vicki, blocking her path entirely.

She drew the pistol, firing one of her remaining bullets into its forehead before inspiration struck her. She shot out its right eye, and the galdago roared in rage. If the beast couldn't see, it would be much less of a threat, and she could try and dodge it to get out of the pen. She aimed for the other eye—click. The chamber was empty. Vicki kept on squeezing the trigger, hoping that another bullet would somehow magically appear from the gun's spout. She shouldn't have fired that first shot. It had been wasted.

Vicki looked at the surrounding high fences. She could get over them, but not fast enough. The galdago would likely grab her trailing leg, either crushing it or ripping it clean off. That would leave her in a worse predicament than she was in now.

Vicki threw down the empty pistol, withdrawing her Bowie hunting knife from its sheath on her hip. The galdago roared again, its destroyed eye leaking oily black blood from the socket.

Vicki held her ground as it charged at her, she had nowhere to go. Clenching the knife handle tightly, she committed herself to trying to gouge out its other eye. Blinding it was still her best chance. She bent her knees, for she would have to jump to reach such a height.

The mammoth beast filled Vicki's vision as it drew close, its powerful arms raising to encircle and crush her. Seeing its bulging muscles up close, Vicki didn't doubt it could crush her

bones into powder. And all as if she were no more than a brittle leaf. A diseased-ridden, brittle leaf.

The still, highly charged air was suddenly cut by a thundering boom.

Vicki found herself covered with warm fluid, and she was surprised she felt no pain. That much blood had to be a mortal wound. The galdago had been quicker than she'd anticipated, for she had to confess she hadn't seen it deliver its final blow. Wiping the blood from her eyes, she no longer saw the galdago in front of her. Her mother was there instead, jogging across to her.

"Sorry about that," Eve said, gesturing to Vicki's gore-laden form. "Didn't have any choice." She expertly reloaded the shotgun as she approached.

Vicki blinked, recognition slowly dawning. She looked down at her fingers, which were coated with oily black blood. She spotted the galdago lying off to the side of her, though its head was now missing. Or rather, its head was splattered around the pig pen, and a good deal of it was covering her body and face. With shuddering relief, Vicki's legs buckled beneath her, and she found herself sitting in the mud.

"Vicki?" Eve increased her pace, sliding to a halt on her knees in front of Vicki, paying no heed to either the mud or the brain matter on the ground. Her hands ran searchingly across Vicki's body, as if checking for injury. "Are you hurt?"

Vicki couldn't find her voice, so she shook her head. It couldn't have been very convincing, for Eve continued to check her.

Shrugging out of her pack, Eve removed a cloth from the first aid kit and began to wipe away the black goo on Vicki's face. Eve's jaw was clenched, as if holding her tongue, and it was clear to Vicki that she was holding back a barrage of questions until Vicki gathered herself. No doubt she wanted to ask where Cassie was, and why Vicki'd been about to face a galdago armed with only a knife.

Slowly, Vicki felt her composure return. She noticed that Eve kept checking their surroundings, shotgun within easy reach at her side. Vicki took the cloth from Eve as she finished cleaning her face, and wiped her slippery black hands on it. The cloth was then cast aside, thrown onto the manure pile.

"Garrett?" Vicki asked.

Eve shook her head. "No sign of him." Vicki let out a heavy breath at the news. "Where's Cass? I told you to stick together."

"I think she's at the barn. We got split up."

Eve nodded. She picked Vicki's knife out of the mud, and slid it back into its sheath on Vicki's hip. "Why didn't you use your gun?"

Vicki's eyes opened wide in alarm.

Clearly noticing her reaction, Eve rested a calming hand on Vicki's shoulder. "It's all right. A weapon's easily dropped in a scuffle." Her gaze lifted to the above window, then she began to pick out bits of straw from the manure in Vicki's hair. Eve seemed to guess what had happened. "More so when leaping from a window."

Vicki remained silent, not wanting to lie to her mother. She could hardly tell her the truth—that she ran out of ammo, for they carried pack-loads, so she'd never find herself in that situation. She'd run out only because it was Cassie's gun, and Cassie still had the ammo with her. If they'd had more time, they would've likely swapped packs.

Eve squeezed her shoulder before standing. "I'll find your gun."

Vicki bolted to her feet. "I'll get it."

She headed straight for the pistol, putting her back to Eve as she picked it up so she could unscrew the silencer and slip the cylinder into her jacket pocket. The pistol itself went beneath her waistband, and Vicki fastened her jacket to cover the gun. She didn't want or need a lecture from her mother regarding her stupidity at forgetting her own gun. Vicki knew how stupid it was, and she just couldn't handle a scolding right now. It would break her.

When Vicki turned back around, she saw that Eve was looking at her oddly, worry evident in her brown eyes.

"Should we go find Cassie?" Vicki asked before Eve could put voice to whatever was bothering her. In case Eve was beginning to suspect something.

"I will," Eve said. "I want you to go and fetch the car."

"Why?" Vicki frowned, crossing her arms across her chest in opposition. "I'm not leaving until we find Garrett." She was adamant.

"That's why I want you to fetch the car," Eve said. "We can cover more ground that way. The search will be quicker."

Vicki didn't protest further. She didn't need to ask for the car keys, for they were always left in the car, beneath the driver's seat.

"How many galdagos did you kill?"

"One. This beast here," Vicki tipped her head toward the side of the pig pen, "makes two."

Eve nodded. "That's five then. Garrett said he saw five." She paused briefly. "There could be more, but let's hope five's the complete nest."

Footprints that didn't belong to either woman were embedded into the well-trodden mud. They were about Garrett's size. Eve and Vicki followed them out of the pigpen, hoping to find a trail to track. The grass around was lush, but no rain had recently fallen. The solid ground held no useable tracks. The only reason there were footprints in the pigpen, was because the thick mud took longer to dry out, and hadn't yet done so. There wasn't any sign of blood either, so no trail there. Vicki realized she should be grateful for that, but she desperately wanted to find Garrett. A trail would've helped greatly. Finding none, they reluctantly gave up, and both women separated when they reached the west side of the house.

"Drive up to the barn," Eve said. "We'll meet you there."

Vicki only nodded, too disheartened to speak. Her hopes had grown upon seeing the footprints, but they'd been dashed just as quickly as they'd arisen. She took off in a jog along the old track road, knowing it would lead her back, close to the car.

After a short while, she glanced over her shoulder—the farm had disappeared out of sight, blocked from view by the forest trees.

CASSIE WAS PANTING heavily, growing more and more tired with each agonizing step. She couldn't keep this up much longer. She could feel the galdago's hot breath on the back of her neck it was so close, and its thundering footsteps reverberated in her ears.

Limited options flew through her head. She knew she needed to change direction, but wasn't sure which way to head. If she went left, she would reach where she'd intended—see if her mother was still there. Though Cassie wasn't exactly sure how far away Eve was when she'd fired those shots. Right, meant she would end up back where she'd started. Cassie hadn't heard the shotgun for a while, so hoped Eve was on her way back to the farmhouse to regroup.

She would have to circle around either way, gradually altering her direction. Any sharp change and the infant galdago would finish her. Cassie had no idea which would be correct, though if she ran back to the farmhouse she had twice as much chance of success as Vicki might be there also.

In the end it came down to simple distance. Cassie knew how far it was to go back. And she felt it would be struggle enough to make that. She simply couldn't risk having to go farther—not with a young galdago snapping at her heels. The light from the farmhouse would also help, she'd have more difficulty being seen out here. Man-made light had diminished long ago, and Cassie was running solely by the light of the moon. She didn't dare look up, she was too busy focusing on where to place her feet, but she hoped that there were no clouds nearby, for if the moon's glow was to be covered, Cassie knew she would be done for. She had no torch to guide her. Unable to see, she would likely trip or stumble, and that would be the end of Cassie Valentine.

She chose right, to go back, and started to veer in that direction, careful to keep her footing. She couldn't afford to fall now. One missed step and the infant galdago would have her. Her only chance was to get near her mother or sister. In fact, once Eve saw she was hurt, she would likely eviscerate the galdago. Eve often said she lived by one simple rule, and she always stuck

to it, no exceptions— if someone hurt her daughters, she made them pay. With a high interest rate. Cassie almost felt sorry for the infant galdago. Or she would've if she hadn't been in so much pain. Her arm felt like it was on fire. If it wasn't for the adrenaline coursing through her veins at being chased, she may have even passed out from the intense pain.

A shot suddenly rang out. Cassie could've wept at the noise, she recognized it instantly. It was Eve's shotgun. And even better, it had come from the direction of the farmhouse, where Cassie was now circling back toward. She was relieved she'd chosen correctly, to head back. The sound injected new life into her legs, knowing for sure that salvation awaited her at the farmhouse. She just had to get there.

She prayed that she wouldn't have another dizzy spell, she needed to see where she was going. Cassie ran for what seemed an eternity, but finally, after circling around, she was heading toward the farmhouse. When she eventually caught sight of the building, it allowed her to push herself faster—she was on the home stretch. The galdago seemed to sense it too, for it growled and swiped at her. Perhaps it didn't want to share its meal with the others?

The infant's constant presence was wearing Cassie down, and she wondered if Garrett had met his end this exact same way, chased to exhaustion then torn apart. Cassie certainly didn't want to die in such a horrific manner, but she couldn't ignore that death was just behind her shoulder, literally snapping at her heels.

As she neared the house, Cassie yelled, long and hard. The little energy she had left depleted further. She hadn't dared to yell sooner. With her turning around, the rescue might've passed her by. She only had one chance. She had to get it right. The yell itself told her family that Cassie needed help and that danger was approaching. Eve had taught her daughters long ago to remain quiet on a shadowhunt, any noise could alert the creatures they sought to kill, and even tip the scales in their favor. You only ever yelled if it was life-threatening, were badly hurt, or if you wanted to alert someone to an unknown, oncoming threat. That had been drilled into Cassie since she was a child, and she used it now, yelling loudly, hoping against hope that her family were ready and waiting.

ALARM BELLS STARTED to ring in Eve's head as she spotted a sixth galdago between the farmhouse and barn. The galdago was sprawled on its front, dead, but it wasn't the creature that concerned her. Stuck out of its back, embedded near its sharp spines, was one of Cassie's daggers.

Eve paused by the galdago's body, placing a boot on its back to push against to get enough leverage to pull out the blade. The dagger was in deep, up to its hilt, but after a few tugs it came free. She wiped the blood-slicked blade on the grass before slipping it under her belt.

Farther across the field, lay Cassie's pack. She didn't stop to examine it. Eve crossed determinedly to the barn, worried as to why Cassie hadn't removed her dagger. Cassie loved those daggers, she wouldn't willingly leave one behind. In a fight she may not have much of a choice, but Cassie had killed the galdago, it'd been stabbed repeatedly. Why hadn't she returned to collect her dagger? Or her pack?

The barn door was no longer in existence, wood chips and splinters littered the ground. Snapping on her torch, Eve went inside, swiftly checking every corner of the barn for both Cassie and Garrett. There was no sign of either of them.

Anxiety was gnawing at her gut as Eve stepped back out into the open. She strode across the field, but had no idea where she was going. Or where to look next. She just knew she couldn't stand still and do nothing.

Her torch's beam, which she'd forgotten to switch off, highlighted a different color to the grass, not too far from Cassie's discarded pack. Eve raced across and squatted down, seeing thick black blood congealing in several pools. There was a lot of it—this was where they'd fought. Amongst the black were splotches of red, splatterings of crimson blood—Cassie's blood. She'd been injured. Eve's worry grew tenfold, but at least she now knew where to head. She started to track the red blood drops, the trail illuminated by the powerful torch beam.

She'd barely begun when a piercing yell cut through the night air. Eve's blood ran cold through her veins. Icy fingers crept along her spine and pierced through to her stomach, making her want to vomit. Cassie's life was in imminent danger, she knew it instinctively.

Eve burst into a sprint, heading for the noise, back across the field and toward the house.

Hold on, Cass, her thoughts screamed. Just hold on.

Chapter Seventeen

CASSIE FLEW PAST the farmhouse, back into the field where her run had started. It seemed like a lifetime ago. The infant galdago, upon hearing her yell, had grown frenzied and wild, clearly eager to finish the kill. Its eagerness drew it closer to Cassie, and every few strides its bulging arms reached out to try and ensnare her. Its hands were precariously close to her back, she could actually feel the rush of air when its large hand swept by. Cassie worried that the next time it grabbed for her it would gain purchase.

She spotted the adult galdago ahead, though it had finally succumbed to its wounds. The wounds she herself had inflicted. It lay across her path, dead. At least she had managed to kill one.

Cassie needed to slow the infant down, or it would have her in the next few strides. She was too exhausted to run any faster. The pain from her shoulder was sapping all her strength. She had to buy some breathing room, some room to maneuver.

She headed straight for the dead body. Cassie jumped over the corpse, buying herself a small lead as the infant galdago chose to go around it—even the smaller creature was too heavy to jump effectively. Cassie turned as she ran, putting all she had into throwing her remaining dagger directly into the galdago's chest. It pounded in with a sickening thud, and the beast slowed in both surprise and pain. But it still kept on coming.

Cassie was now completely unarmed. She cursed herself again for giving Vicki her gun. Her generosity was going to cost Cassie her life. And from the butchered bodies inside the house, bodies torn to pieces, she knew it wasn't going to be a quick or pleasant death. But despite the injustice of the situation, and her mental complaints, Cassie wouldn't have changed what she did. Even knowing the outcome, if she were to do it all again, she would still give Vicki her gun. Like her mother, Cassie would rather die than willingly put a family member in harm's way, it was just who she was. Today, it seemed, she would have to pay that price. Cassie was heartbroken to think she would never see her mother and sister again, and she silently told them that she loved them both. She said good-bye to Raven too, saddened by all of the missed opportunities that she herself had caused—her reasons seemed stupid now. Only one hope remained in Cassie's mind: that her father would be waiting for her.

Cassie ran solidly into something, and her head whipped back around in alarm. Firm hands pulled at her, moved her aside. She recognized her mother's touch instantly, even when her judgment was clouded by unadulterated fear. She didn't resist as Eve put herself between her and the oncoming threat.

Eve raised her shotgun calmly, firing both chambers one after the other. It was too close to take the chance that one shot alone would stop it. The first shot hammered into the galdago's chest, the second tore off half of its head. The force of two point-blank shotgun shells threw the beast back, and it dropped heavily to the ground. It didn't get up. It was dead.

Eve dropped her shotgun and took Cassie into her arms instead, helping her to stay upright. "How badly are you hurt?"

Eve kept a hand around Cassie's waist, the other she raised to examine her head injury. Cassie could feel that a substantial gash ran down the left side of her head, amongst her dark hair. From the large amount of blood, she could tell the jagged cut was deep, it would need stitching.

"My left shoulder's dislocated." Cassie was panting heavily, trying to catch her breath after the long run. "Maybe a concussion."

Since Eve herself had taught her medical knowledge, she seemed to trust Cassie's judgment. She peered into Cassie's eyes, pulling out the torch from her side trouser pocket and checking her pupils. "Are you light-headed?"

"It comes and goes," Cassie said, still pulling in air deeply. "Where's Vic?"

"Fetching the car."

"I take it the galdagos," she paused, breathing hard, "are all dead?"

"Every one we've come across," Eve said. "The noise should've enticed them all out." Her gaze stayed fixed on Cassie, thoroughly checking her. "We'll search the surrounding area by car, just in case there's any more."

Cassie read between the lines. "You don't want to leave until we've searched everywhere for Garrett." Her breathing was slowly beginning to ease, her lungs no longer hurt with the effort to draw breath.

"True." Eve sighed, taking her torch away. "But I don't think we're going to find him."

Cassie rested her good hand on Eve's shoulder. "Do you think he's dead?"

"I hope not. Though I know it's extremely unlikely. There were six galdagos here. Plus the infant. Without his car," Eve shook her head in distress, "I don't see how he could've gotten away."

Cassie agreed, but she stayed quiet, knowing her words wouldn't help matters. She supportively squeezed her mother's shoulder.

Eve gave her a tense smile. "All right. Sit down so I can reset your shoulder."

Cassie did so, not protesting in the slightest. She knew she would feel a lot better when her arm was back in its socket. She was glad she'd taken her backpack off when she had, for it would be excruciatingly painful to remove it now.

Eve sat also, facing Cassie. She placed a booted foot against Cassie's injured shoulder, and then took hold of her limp arm. "Ready?"

Cassie nodded, clenching her jaw tightly shut.

Eve pushed with her foot and pulled with her arms in unison. She seemed to put her all into it, as if wanting to reset it quickly to spare Cassie any unnecessary pain. Cassie groaned slightly, but nothing more. She both heard and felt her shoulder pop back into place. Eve gingerly lowered her arm, clearly knowing it would still be sore for a while.

Cassie took a deep, relieved breath. The worst pain had gone. "Thanks."

Eve came up into a kneeling position, gently brushing Cassie's cheek before removing her own backpack and digging inside it. She brought out their first aid kit, though Cassie knew this kit contained a lot more medical supplies than your average kit. Eve had seen to that. She opened it and retrieved some bandages, and a compress for Cassie's head wound. She also removed a triangular bandage, which would be used to make a sling.

Eve placed the compress over the deep gash, and started to roll a bandage around Cassie's head to keep it firmly in place. "I'll stitch it when we get in the car," she said. "In better light."

Cassie's tone was dry. "Hopefully while it's stationary."

"If you're lucky," Eve said, straight-faced. When Eve finished wrapping her head, she began to fit the sling around Cassie for her arm to rest in.

Cassie, spotting her dagger under Eve's belt, removed it and sheathed it back where it belonged.

"Not that I wasn't impressed with your knife throwing ability, Cass, but why didn't you use your gun?" Eve sat back to look at her, the sling now fixed in position.

Cassie focused on cleaning her hands, which were covered in black galdago blood. She found it quite difficult, since one arm was restrained in a sling.

Eve frowned at her hesitation. "Don't tell me you dropped yours too?"

"No, I..." Her head was pounding, it was difficult to think. "Vic's got it."

"Why does Vicki have it?" Eve asked. "She's got her own."

"I know that." Cassie stood, not offering anything further. She never lied, though she was trying to keep her younger sister out of trouble.

Eve rose to stand next to her. "So why did she need yours as well?" As if noticing Cassie's reluctance to look at her, Eve's voice grew more suspicious. "Cass?"

Cassie sighed, recognizing that tone. Eve would never let go of it now, not until she knew everything. "Vicki forgot hers."

Eve's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? I hope for her sake you're joking?"

"Afraid not."

"I don't believe this!" Eve's jaw clenched in anger. "Stalking is dangerous enough without making careless mistakes. This could've been disastrous." She pointed to Cassie's head as if to make her point. "It very nearly was."

“I’m fine, Mom. It’s nothing serious.”

“That’s not the point and you know it,” Eve said. “Your sister’s short-sightedness nearly got you killed!”

Cassie found herself defending Vicki. “She was worried about Garrett.”

“We all were!” Eve shook her head crossly. “That’s no excuse.” She bent down and started to put things back into her pack, throwing or shoving them roughly inside.

Cassie walked to the infant galdago and yanked out her other dagger, wiping it clean on the grass before sheathing it.

“So you gave Vicki your gun and went into this fight practically unarmed?” Eve looked disappointed. “I expect better from you, Cass. I know we’re a way from home, but all we had to do was travel to the nearest stalkers retreat and buy another gun.”

“I would’ve told you had I known!” Cassie said. “Vic didn’t tell me till we were in the middle of all this. I had no choice. I certainly wasn’t happy about it, but I wasn’t about to let Vicki go without a gun.”

“And what about you?”

“You know I’m a better fighter than she is.” Cassie wasn’t gloating, just stating the simple truth. “I’d intended to stick close, so I could call for the gun if needed, but we got separated.” She shrugged one shoulder. “Tell me, Mom, what else could I have done?”

Eve ran a frustrated hand through her hair. “Nothing,” she said. “You did what you could. It’s not you I’m angry with.”

“Good.” Cassie felt all the color drain from her face. “Cause I need you to lean against.” She reached out to her mother, swaying dizzily on her feet. Eve was there instantly, as fast as lightning. Then it all went black.

THE NEXT THING Cassie knew, she was on the cold grass, leaning back into her mother’s secure hold. She felt fingers softly stroking through her hair and, despite the situation and the dead galdagos all around her, felt oddly safe. Cassie always did when in her mother’s embrace.

Eve, as if feeling her stir, reassured her gently, “It’s all right, sweetheart. I have you.”

Cassie couldn't help but smile—anyone who was an acquaintance of Eve's would be astounded by this caring side of her. They wouldn't believe it if someone told them, they'd have to see it with their own eyes. Cassie sat quietly, content to stay where she was.

Several minutes passed, then she heard a car approaching. It came to a stop in the field, not fifteen feet from them. Vicki jumped out of the driver's side.

Eve spoke softly into her ear, "Are you all right to stand, Cass?"

Cassie internally assessed herself. The dizziness had gone. "Yes. It's passed."

Eve nodded and stood. She kept a supportive hand against Cassie's back.

Vicki appeared beside them, concern on her face at seeing that Cassie was injured. "Are you okay?"

Eve frowned at Vicki, her anger clearly returning. "Does she look okay?"

"I'm all right," Cassie said. "Don't fuss." She was helped to her feet, then led to the car.

"Vicki, get the door. It's the least..." Eve took a calming breath and shook her head, as if realizing now wasn't the time to reprimand Vicki.

Vicki opened the rear car door and Cassie climbed in. Eve followed, sitting in the back also. It was obvious to Cassie that Eve was worried and wanted to keep a close eye on her—concussions were serious.

Vicki fetched their belongings—the backpacks and Eve's shotgun—and loaded them all into the car. She jumped into the driver's seat, seeming eager to take the wheel once more. Cassie knew they still had the surrounding farmland to search, and suspected Vicki was still hoping that Garrett would show up.

In the backseat, Eve took the seatbelt out of Cassie's hand and fastened it for her.

"I could've done that." Cassie was feeling somewhat pampered, but she realized she had to have scared her mother half to death when she'd yelled like that, and Eve was molly-coddling her to reassure herself that she was all right, that she was safe.

"Humor me," Eve said, straight-faced.

Cassie raised her eyebrows, though soon lowered them as it pulled on her head wound. "Do I have a choice?"

Eve looked at her, a small smirk forming. "No."

Chapter Eighteen

“PULL OVER HERE.”

Vicki slowed the car and parked at the side of the road. She turned the ignition off and the engine fell silent.

The three women were all in a solemn mood. They'd searched the entire farm, and all of its surrounding land. They'd found no trace of Garrett. Though no one said as much, each woman thought he was dead. The atmosphere inside the car was somber, and barring Eve's recent instruction to pull over, not a word had been spoken since they'd left the farm behind.

They'd driven several miles away from the farm, enough to clear the galdagos immediate feeding area. Though the Valentines were pretty sure they'd killed all the galdagos in the nest, you could never be too careful.

Vicki put the hazard warning lights on and also switched on the interior light. She removed her safety belt, turned around, leaned through the gap between the two front seats, and flicked the interior light on there, flooding the back with white light.

Eve would've normally smiled at the courtesy, but she was still too angry with Vicki to do so. From the backpack by her feet, in the car's foot well, she withdrew a cloth, syringe, saline solution, and a small case from the first aid kit, which contained needles and thread.

Cassie was already unwrapping the bandage from around her head. The compress appeared to be stuck in place with some dried blood, and she carefully peeled it off, wincing as she did so.

“Let me see,” Vicki said.

Cassie turned her head to the side, so Vicki could get a clear look at the gash there. The wound began to bleed profusely again, now that the compress had been removed.

“Ouch.” Vicki's face was sympathetic. “What happened?”

Depressing the plunger on a bottle of alcohol hand sanitizer, Eve ensured her hands were clean. Then she prepared an injection of lidocaine. She lightly tapped Cassie's head, and Cassie turned the wounded side back to her.

“Hold still.” Eve moved some of Cassie’s dark hair out of the way. Since the wound was jagged and long, she had to inject the lidocaine into several places, to ensure all of the area was numbed.

Cassie sat rigid, unmoving. She answered Vicki’s question, as if to try and distract herself from the obvious pain she was in. “A galdago smashed a door over my head.”

“A whole door!” Vicki sounded half impressed, half mortified.

Eve’s hands faltered, shocked by Cassie’s words.

Cassie clearly noticed, for she attempted to play it down. “Part of a door. And it really only grazed me.”

“No wonder you passed out.” Eve felt her worried expression deepen. Waiting for the lidocaine to take effect, she turned Cassie’s head to make eye contact. “Is that how your shoulder was dislocated?”

Cassie nodded. “The same blow.”

Eve picked some small shards of wood out of Cassie’s hair and dropped them to the floor. “That explains these splinters.”

Vicki lightly tapped Cassie’s knee. “Might’ve knocked some sense into you.”

“Let’s hope,” Cassie said.

Eve had to forcibly bite her tongue. After all, Cassie wasn’t the one who needed sense knocking into her. Not after the stunt Vicki had just pulled. She held back her words only because of Cassie—the last thing she needed was an argument. No doubt she had a splitting headache. And Eve didn’t intend to put her through anything more tonight.

Eve concentrated on filling a syringe with saline solution, knowing the wound needed to be flushed out to remove any foreign matter. Once sure it was numb, Eve cleaned around the injury, and then sprayed the saline into the wound, checking carefully to make sure it was dirt-free. She had to repeat the procedure. When finished, she used a dry cloth to pat the wound.

“Okay?” Eve deftly threaded a needle. At Cassie’s nod, she pushed some dark hair aside and began to stitch.

In the front seat, Vicki removed Garrett’s silver hip flask from her jacket pocket. She unscrewed the cap and took a drink from it. A few moments later, she raised the flask once more. Then again.

Hearing the repetitive slosh of the drink, Eve paused in her stitching. She looked at Vicki in annoyance. “You’re driving.”

“I know.” Vicki sounded unfazed.

“That whisky is Garrett’s favorite. It’s the strongest we stock.” Eve held her hand out for the flask.

“Fine.” Vicki slapped the metal flask into her palm. “Take it.”

“Look, Vicki, I know you’re upset, but...”

“Upset?” Vicki laughed, though it was humorless. “Upset? That’s the understatement of the year.”

“We’ll all mourn Garrett, Victoria.” Eve was the first to say it aloud, to express the loss. She’d also used Vicki’s full name, which showed she was angry with her. “This isn’t just about you.”

“You weren’t the one who got him killed!” Vicki said.

Eve’s voice softened somewhat. “And neither were you. It’s true Garrett may have left because of you, but he had work in this area, he told me as much. He called in at the farm because of that. He was just doing his job as a shadowstalker. You could never have stopped Garrett from doing his job. Shadowstalking was his life.”

“You would say that,” Vicki said. “You don’t know the full picture.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me?” Eve felt her eyes narrow as Vicki fell stubbornly silent. “No?” She paused briefly. “Then please be quiet so I can concentrate. I’m trying to stitch your sister.”

An awkward and charged silence fell.

Eve refocused her attention back onto Cassie, finally continuing with the stitches. The silence continued until Eve was tying off the last stitch. Then she herself broke the peace. “There, all done.” She took hold of Cassie’s hand and squeezed it comfortingly.

Cassie gave her a tight, but grateful smile. “Thank you.” Her voice was slightly hoarse from the pain. She cleared her throat.

Eve placed a fresh compress on top of the newly stitched wound to help keep it clean, and stuck it down as best she could with medical tape. “I might have to wrap your head again if that tape doesn’t hold. It’s not sticking well because of your hair.”

Cassie slid her tall frame down in the seat, and rested her head against the back of it. She closed her eyes. “I don’t plan on moving much, so it should stay in place.”

“You can’t sleep, Cass. Not with a concussion. Not for the next twelve hours or so.”

“I know. I’m just resting my eyes. I won’t go to sleep.”

Eve used the hand sanitizer again, and then removed a bottle of water from her pack, rummaging further until she found what she was looking for.

“Here.” She popped out two Tylenol tablets from their packaging, straight into Cassie’s hand. She gave her some water to wash them down with. Once taken, Eve tapped the bottle to get Cassie to drink some more, knowing she needed to keep her fluids up. Cassie did so without complaint, then settled back in her seat and shut her eyes once more.

Vicki was still quiet in the front, so Eve decided to make amends with her—it was going to be a long drive, and she didn’t want this tension between them all the way home.

“What happened to Garrett wasn’t your fault, Vicki,” Eve said.

“What would you know?” Vicki shouted. She whirled around, anger lining every inch of her face.

Eve noticed that Cassie winced at the decibel. She knew Cassie was sensitive enough to loud noises normally, let alone with a pounding headache. “Lower your voice,” Eve said. “I think you’ve caused Cassie enough harm for one day, don’t you?”

Cassie’s eyes snapped open at that.

Vicki clearly read Eve’s meaning. She turned on Cassie, her tone one of outrage. “You told her?”

“She asked where my gun was,” Cassie said. “What was I supposed to say?”

Eve couldn’t hold in her temper any longer. Her words burst out of her, though she was careful to keep her voice low. “Don’t you dare be angry at her! Your sister’s been protecting you all the way tonight, and you leave her practically defenseless. I can’t believe you would be so reckless! Your father, and now Garrett, were both killed on a shadowhunt, and you show up to fight one of the most dangerous creatures without the protection of your gun! Then worse, you take Cassie’s from her, and now she’s had to pay for your careless mistake.” Eve paused in her rant to take a breath. “I swear, Victoria, I’ve never been so furious with you. Not ever.”

“I’m as much at fault as Vicki is,” Cassie said, as if unable to let Vicki take the whole blame.

“For giving her your gun?” Eve shook her head. “You were trying to protect her. I understand that.”

“No, Mom. I chose to face the galdago—Vicki played no part in that. I knew I had no gun, but I faced it anyway.”

“You chose to face it?” Eve’s doubt came through in her tone. “I thought you mustn’t have had a choice?”

“I could’ve run,” Cassie said. “I didn’t.”

“Whyever not?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “It pissed me off.”

Eve knew her well enough to know there was more to it than that. Still, she didn’t like to think of Cassie choosing to place herself in such danger. She frowned, not knowing which daughter to yell at first.

“Look, I know I chose wrong,” Cassie said. “But it was my mistake and I’m paying for it.”

Not for the first time, Eve wondered what was going on with her—Cassie was usually the sensible one. “That may be,” she said. “But we’re still going to discuss this later.” Eve just couldn’t bring herself to berate Cassie when she could see she was in obvious pain.

“I am sorry,” Vicki said. “I know it was stupid.”

Eve nodded emphatically. “To say the least.” She may have finished with Cassie for now, but she was nowhere near finished with Vicki. Her blood was still boiling at her youngest’s near-fatal error.

“Do you know how close Cassie came to being killed tonight? Do you?” Eve held her thumb and forefinger up, not even an inch apart. “This close, Victoria. And I’m not exaggerating. If I’d been held up at all, even for only a few seconds, it’s damn likely she wouldn’t be sitting here now!” Seething, Eve shook her head. “If you want to blame yourself for something, take credit for your irresponsible actions and blame yourself for this!” She pointed to Cassie’s head wound. “Because this, Victoria, is on you.”

Vicki had paled during Eve’s rant. And once the realization seemed to kick in, she paled even further. The anger had drained from her face, and distraught tears fell. “I didn’t mean...” she started to say to Eve. She looked to Cassie, clearly horrified by what her actions had caused, and what could’ve easily happened. “I’m sorry.”

As if knowing it wasn’t good enough—nowhere near good enough—Vicki got out of the car and walked off into the darkness.

The car was silent for a long moment. Then Eve sighed. “I don’t like being so hard on her. But if she thinks she feels bad now, imagine how she’d feel if something worse had happened to you. I’m just trying to spare her that.”

Cassie laid a consoling hand on Eve’s wrist. “I know. Give her some time to cool off.”

Eve nodded her agreement. Through the windshield, she watched Vicki's figure grow smaller as she walked away from the car. Minutes passed, then she turned to Cassie. "Though I'm not pleased by your choice to face that galdago, I have to say I'm impressed. I've never heard of a shadowstalker beating a galdago in hand-to-hand combat—none that lived anyway. I, myself haven't even done it." Eve gave her arm a proud, but gentle pat.

Cassie's smile was sad. "Shame I couldn't have been that good when it counted."

Lines crinkled Eve's brow. She knew Cassie was referring to her father's death. "How could you have been? You were still young. Without the experience that you have now." Eve tried to catch Cassie's eye, but she wasn't having it. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Cass." A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Is that why you chose to face that galdago, to prove some sort of point?"

"I wasn't about to run away again."

Eve drew her eyebrows together in confusion. "Again? When have you ever run away?"

Cassie rested her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, much like she had before. "You'd better fetch, Vic," she said, abruptly ending the discussion.

Eve made no move to leave.

Cassie opened one eye. "I'm fine. I'll honk the horn if I feel any worse."

Seeing the resoluteness on Cassie's face, Eve reluctantly dropped the conversation thread. She placed a tender kiss on Cassie's forehead before getting out of the car.

Scanning the road ahead, Eve was barely able to make out Vicki's form in the distance—she'd walked quite a way. The fact that Eve could make her out at all was only thanks to the bright moon. She broke into an easy jog and set off after her.

"VICKI," EVE CALLED out as she neared. "Please wait."

Vicki stopped and turned around to face her, tears still wet on her face. "No more, all right, Mom. I know I messed up. I've disappointed everyone—you, Cassie, Dad." Her voice broke. "Garrett. It's all my fault. Everything. Cassie's hurt because of me, and Garrett's dead because of me." Fresh tears coursed down Vicki's cheeks. "I was so awful to him. He died thinking that I didn't want him. Just like Dad." She burst into sobs.

"Vicki, slow down," Eve said. "I'm not following."

“The day Dad died,” Vicki began, words tumbling out of her mouth so quickly it was as if they were trying to escape. Eve supposed that in a way, they were—Vicki had kept her feelings regarding her father and Garrett bottled up inside for a long time. “Before you left on the shadowhunt, Dad came to me and asked if I wanted to come along. I was really keen to go on a hunt back then, before I’d actually been on one, before I realized what the life of a shadowstalker meant. Before I knew what it’d cost.” She sadly shook her head. “It was to be my first hunt. Dad thought it would be an easy initiation—just a small pack of lacerators. He had no idea what awaited.”

“I didn’t know Mathew had asked you along,” Eve said quietly, almost to herself. She didn’t want to say too much, for fear Vicki would stop—she was finally opening up, revealing pieces of the puzzle that Eve had long been trying to solve.

“Why would you? Dad died later that day, and I’ve never told you. Not even Garrett knew.”

Eve remained silent, patiently waiting.

“Though I was eager to go on my first shadowhunt, Garrett was in town, and he was only staying for a few days.” Vicki shrugged. “I idolized him back then.”

Eve easily remembered how close they’d been. She nodded to encourage Vicki to continue.

“I told Dad I’d rather stay and spend time with Garrett. That was the last thing I ever said to him.” Vicki sobbed again, her voice catching in her throat. “Dad died thinking I chose Garrett over him.”

“Vicki,” Eve whispered, heartbroken that she’d carried this burden around with her for five long years.

“I did choose Garrett,” Vicki said. “When Dad was alive I chose Garrett. But I never would’ve...Had I known...” She inhaled shakily. “I certainly wasn’t going to choose Garrett again after Dad’s death. He couldn’t just replace my dad. And that’s what I felt I’d be doing. That’s why I pushed Garrett away. I hated doing it, but I hated the guilt I felt at being around him even more. His presence constantly reminded me of that choice—that Dad died thinking I loved Garrett more than him.”

Eve stepped forward and solidly embraced Vicki, holding her tightly. Vicki shook against her, crying heavily into her shoulder.

Eve soothingly stroked her hair, and whispered words of comfort in her ear. They stayed entwined like that for some time, Eve’s grip never faltering.

When Vicki calmed, Eve withdrew slightly so she could look at her. She’d waited until now to speak her thoughts, because she needed Vicki to really listen and take in what she had to say. “Your father knew how much you loved him. Never doubt that, sweetheart.” Eve tenderly tucked a loose strand of hair behind Vicki’s ear. “He was never jealous of Garrett, they were like

brothers.” She held a finger to Vicki’s lips when she opened her mouth to speak. “Just listen. It pleased him that you both got on so well. He was happy to share his family with Garrett, that’s why he was invited into it.” Eve paused to let that sink in. “Tell me, what was Mathew’s response when you said you wanted to stay behind?”

“Dad said ‘that’s fine, there’ll always be another hunt.’” Vicki’s eyes filled again. “Except of course there wasn’t. Not for him anyway.”

“That doesn’t sound like someone who was angry or upset with your choice. Did he look it?”

“No, but...”

Eve cut her off. “Don’t you see, honey? Your dad understood. I can tell you right here and now that it wouldn’t have even occurred to him to think of it in the way you just described. He would never have looked at it as Garrett over him.” She laid a hand on Vicki’s cheek to soften her next words. “And he would be mortified to know that you’ve spent all this time berating yourself over a decision that he discounted straight off.” Eve sighed. “As am I. Why didn’t you tell me about this before now?”

“If I’d gone on that hunt, maybe things would’ve turned out differently. Maybe...” She didn’t get to continue.

Eve shook her head, distressed by her youngest’s thoughts. “Vicki, no.”

“You asked. Let me tell you.”

Eve nodded and fell silent. Though it was upsetting her to hear it, she wanted Vicki to get everything off her chest, to clear it all out of her system. It wasn’t healthy to keep such things bottled up.

“If I’d been there, I could’ve helped. I might’ve been able to affect the outcome, saved Dad somehow. That’s why I always go with you and Cassie on shadowhunts, no matter what. I didn’t with Dad, and look what happened. I daren’t not go in case it happens again.”

Eve was biting her lip so hard she thought she might draw blood. She wanted so badly to dispute what Vicki was saying, but she had to wait until she’d finished.

Vicki locked her brown eyes onto Eve’s, vulnerably open. “I didn’t tell you, Mom, because I was worried you’d feel the same way. That if only I’d gone with you, Dad would still be here. And you’d blame me, like I blame myself.”

Eve felt tears sliding down her own cheeks at the admission. Sure that Vicki had now finished, she said, “How could I blame you, Vicki? You did nothing wrong. And I want you to stop blaming yourself right this instant. I was there when Mathew died, and you have to trust me when I say there was absolutely nothing you could’ve done to change things. Do you think your father gave up his life willingly?” At Vicki’s headshake, she continued, “He sacrificed himself so

we could get away. That was the only way, or Cassie and I wouldn't be here now. We'd have all died there. I'm so relieved that you weren't there, Vicki, or I'd have lost you too. I have no doubt of that." Eve reached out and lovingly caressed her cheek. "And I couldn't have born that. I barely managed to get Cassie out alive, and as you know she nearly didn't make it. If I'd lost either of you..." She shook her head, dismissing the appalling notion. "Mathew and I were completely overwhelmed by the lacerators' numbers, to say nothing of the demon. What could you, a fourteen year old, have done that we couldn't?" Eve could see that Vicki was mulling things over, considering her words.

"Nothing," Vicki finally said.

"Nothing." Eve confirmed with a nod.

Vicki released a heavy breath. "But with Garrett, I don't have the luxury of blaming my young age."

Eve's brow creased. "Truth isn't a luxury, Vicki. It is what it is. Don't make out like you're excusing what you did, because there's nothing to excuse." She caught and held Vicki's chin. "You need to trust me when I say that."

"I do." Vicki held her gaze. "I just need to process what you've said."

Eve smiled at her. "That's my girl." She draped an arm around Vicki's shoulders, which were slightly lower than her own, and began to lead her back toward the car. "Now what's this about Garrett?"

"Remember when Garrett left, this last time? How upset he was?" Eve was nodding to show she recalled. "Well the night before, when we had that huge row, I was so nasty to him." Vicki shook her head at herself. "Garrett said something about looking out for me as a father, and I blew up at him. I told him he wasn't my father, and that I wished he'd died instead of Dad."

Eve fell silent. No wonder Garrett had been so upset. Vicki's words were harsh and cruel. Though now it had been explained to her, Eve could at least understand why Vicki had reacted that way.

"I know it was unforgivable. I shouldn't have said such a thing. And now Garrett's dead."

"Words or thoughts can't make things happen, Vicki."

"I know. But he's died believing I meant those words. That I hated him. And it's just not true. I loved Garrett, it was just too difficult to be around him. That's why when he asked me to go with him on this trip, I turned him down."

"Well I can't say I'm upset to hear that," Eve said. She didn't like to think what might've happened had Vicki gone with Garrett to the galdago nest.

“You don’t understand. When you told me about Garrett’s phone call, it reminded me of what happened with Dad. It’s so similar. I panicked, that’s why I forgot my gun,” Vicki said. “Both times, when I haven’t gone on a shadowhunt, people I care about have gotten killed. I should’ve gone with Garrett. It’s my fault.”

Eve saw the unfortunate coincidence, but knew that’s all it was—coincidence. She realized she would have to be cruel to be kind. “Vicki, sweetheart, how good a fighter do you think you are?” She saw Vicki blink, clearly taken aback. “Did you see any galdago carcasses when we arrived?”

“No.”

“So that means Garrett didn’t manage to kill any. Not one. To be fair, his situation was no doubt different from ours, and he had no one to back him up.”

Vicki jumped in, as Eve had wanted her to. “He would’ve if I’d gone.”

“Right, let’s say you did. In that situation, Garrett, a stalker of exceptional talent, plus thirty years of experience, couldn’t manage to kill a single galdago. Now granted, if you’d been there it would’ve evened up the odds a little, and together you may have bagged one or two. But what about the others? There were seven in total, including an infant galdago.”

Vicki’s eyes widened. “There was an infant there?”

“That’s what nearly killed Cassie,” Eve said. Vicki had clearly only been concentrating on her injured sister when she’d pulled up in the car, for the infant galdago’s slain body had been nearby. Eve spotted Vicki’s grimace at the news, and continued before she could say anything. Despite the apparent carelessness of forgetting her gun, Eve now understood that Vicki’d had an awful lot on her mind, and that her feelings had simply overwhelmed and impaired her judgment. It wasn’t an excuse, but it was at least a reason. “So that leaves five other galdagos. You really think you could take all of them on?”

“Of course not,” Vicki said.

“Good. Because the three of us only just managed.”

“Not even with my gun,” Vicki joked self-deprecatingly.

Eve smiled, pleased to see some of her spirit returning. “You know, Garrett would never have invited you had he actually believed the galdagos were real. Not just you anyway. We’d have all gone. He wouldn’t have put your life at risk like that.”

Vicki nodded, as if knowing the truth of that.

“I can’t say anything that will help ease his loss,” Eve gave her shoulders a squeeze, “but I can tell you that he loved you. That’s what you need to remember.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Vicki returned the squeeze, though her arm was around Eve’s middle.

Eve placed a soft kiss in Vicki’s hair. “And thank you for telling me all of that, I know it can’t have been easy.”

Vicki was quiet for a long moment. “It probably sounds clichéd, but I feel better for telling you. Lighter somehow.”

Eve wasn’t surprised. Vicki had been carrying quite a burden. Sharing it with someone was bound to help. Eve was relieved that Vicki had finally opened up, and was touched that she’d chosen her to confide in. “I’m glad.”

They were nearly back at the car. Eve noticed that Cassie leaned forward in the back seat upon hearing their voices, no doubt wondering where on earth they’d been, as quite a bit of time had slipped by. Eve nodded to her, letting her know that everything was fine.

“I’ll drive.”

“I’m all right,” Vicki said. “I’d rather drive and keep my mind off Garrett.”

Eve nodded. “Fair enough.” She patted Vicki’s shoulder as they separated, clambering into the back seat as Vicki got into the front.

Cassie reached forward and touched Vicki’s arm, getting her attention. Vicki twisted around in her seat.

“Are you okay?”

Vicki smiled. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“I wasn’t the one upset.”

“True. But you are the one with a gaping hole in your head.”

“Not anymore. Mom stitched me up.”

“I’m sorry you were hurt because of my mistake, Cassie.” Vicki’s face was sincere. “Truly.”

Cassie waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry about it. In a few days, I’ll be showing off my new scar.”

Eve smiled across at her eldest. She’d expected Cassie to go easy on Vicki—Cassie always did. She was kind natured by heart, and incredibly giving. Even despite the obvious pain she was in. “When stalkers find out how you got the scar, fighting a galdago hand-to-hand, you’ll be treated like a superstar.” Eve thought about the constant attention that Cassie already received. “Even more than you are now.”

“On second thoughts,” Cassie quickly recanted, “I think I’ll keep it hidden under my hair.”

Vicki started the car’s engine, turning off both the interior and hazard lights before pulling away from the side of the road. The headlights cut a path through the darkness, illuminating the way home.

Chapter Nineteen

RAVEN WAS RELIEVED to see the Valentines’ car parked next to the pub. They were home. She’d been worried sick since yesterday morning. When she’d arrived and saw that they’d gone, it wasn’t difficult for her to put the pieces together—they’d left to find Garrett. Raven wondered if they’d received word about Garrett, or maybe heard from Garrett himself, to warrant leaving so abruptly. Then again, she knew Eve was a woman who preferred action above inaction, so perhaps she simply got fed up with waiting. Raven didn’t blame her, the search by phone had been long and fruitless— she hadn’t been able to locate the trio of missing shadowstalkers. The man who she’d been waiting on to return her call, Garth Andrews, hadn’t known where his friend was—he’d simply vanished.

Since Raven knew where the Valentines were headed, she was able to calculate the distance and time needed for a round trip. She added several hours on to the time for the search itself, and so had a rough estimate of when they’d return. It was now late afternoon, and she parked her Range Rover next to the Valentines’ green Land Rover.

Raven knocked on the pub’s front door, then opened it and stuck her head inside. She spotted Eve on a barstool by the counter, nursing a drink. Eve gestured for her to come inside. Raven hastily stepped forward, her stomach knotting unpleasantly at Eve’s solemn demeanor. She could tell something bad had happened. She almost forgot to close the door behind her in her hurry, and had to backtrack a few steps to do so. She then made her way to the bar.

Raven laid a hand on Eve’s back, desperate to know what had occurred, but fearful to hear it at the same time. “Did you find Garrett?”

With her foot, Eve pulled out the stool next to her. Raven did as she wished and sat down, swallowing nervously. Raven knew that wasn’t a good sign, getting her to sit before going any further.

“We didn’t find his body, but Garrett’s dead.”

Raven was devastated for a moment, but then a flicker of hope emerged. “How can you be sure, if you didn’t...?”

Eve interrupted. “The place was a death trap, Raven. There were seven galdagos there.” She paused, as if to let her words sink in. “We found the missing shadowstalkers. What was left of them anyway. We never found their heads, and I believe Garrett’s body will be wherever they are. We searched the entire farm and its surroundings but...” Eve shook her head and drank some scotch. “Garrett’s car was still there. He didn’t make it out.”

Raven touched her forearm sympathetically. “I’m sorry, Eve. I know you’d been friends for a long time.”

A slow nod. “I’ll miss him terribly.”

Raven knew there wasn’t anything she could say that would help, so she fell silent, keeping her supportive touch on Eve’s arm.

A few minutes passed as Raven thought about Garrett. She wasn’t as good at controlling her emotions as Eve, and soon felt tears slipping down her cheeks. She quickly wiped them away. Not because she was at all embarrassed, but because she knew her grief was nothing compared to Eve’s, or the rest of the Valentine family. They’d known Garrett for a lot longer than she had. Cassie and Vicki had known Garrett since they were born. At one time, so she’d been told, Vicki had considered Garrett to be like a second father to her. Raven closed her eyes upon remembering that.

“How’s Vicki holding up?”

Eve grimaced. “Not good. She hasn’t stopped crying since we got home.”

“And Cassie?”

“I don’t think it’s sunk in yet for Cass. Her injuries are keeping her distracted.”

Raven felt her heart constrict in her chest. “She’s hurt? What happened?” Her questions tumbled out in a rush. “She will be okay though, won’t she?”

Eve now placed a hand on Raven’s arm, halting her anxious rambling. “She’ll be fine. Though she took a bad knock to the head. She got concussed, but she seems to be through the worst of it now. We’ve just got to keep an eye on her. Cass’s shoulder was also dislocated, but that was much easier to fix.” Eve downed the rest of her scotch. “We could’ve easily been mourning two today, let’s be thankful for small mercies.”

Raven paled, pleased she was sitting down. Her legs had turned to jelly. She couldn’t lose Cassie, the thought alone crippled her. “Can I see her?”

“She’s resting upstairs.”

“I won’t disturb her,” Raven said.

Eve tipped her head toward the hallway. “You know the way.”

Raven smiled gratefully, hopping off the stool and forcing her legs to work. She could hear Vicki crying as she ascended the stairs, though it sounded muffled—she guessed Vicki was crying into a pillow.

Eve had followed Raven most of the way, but when reaching the upstairs landing she veered off into Vicki’s bedroom, clearly going to comfort her youngest.

Raven continued on to Cassie’s room, opening and closing the door behind her as quietly as she could. She needn’t have bothered, for when she turned Cassie was watching her from the bed, looking alert and pleased to see her.

“I was trying to be stealthy,” Raven said. “You weren’t supposed to hear me.”

Cassie chuckled amusedly. “Then I probably shouldn’t tell you I heard you coming up the stairs.”

Raven flushed. “You did?” Blue eyes twinkled back at her in answer. “I’d better work at being lighter on my feet.”

She went to fetch the chair in the corner of the room, intending to carry it over and sit by the bed. She would’ve sat on the bed, but Cassie was laid flat on her back, long limbs sprawled across the single mattress.

“There’s no need for that,” Cassie said, rolling onto her right, uninjured side so Raven could join her on the bed.

Raven didn’t protest. She sat beside Cassie rather than lie next to her, stretching her legs out straight and leaning back against the wooden headboard. Raven was surprised when Cassie rolled forward and pressed against her, her head coming to rest in Raven’s lap. Cassie usually shied away from such close intimacies, but since she’d initiated it, Raven placed a gentle hand on her head, running her fingers through the dark hair, being mindful not to disturb the bandaged area.

After a while, Raven said, “Are you in much pain?” Her voice was quiet, tender.

“It’s not too bad. I’ve had worse.” Cassie paused for a second. “It’s a lot better now that you’re here.”

Raven couldn’t see her face, but she could hear the smile in Cassie’s voice. She found herself returning it. “I can stay as long as you want.”

EVE ENTERED THE bedroom, and fought to keep a smile from emerging. She'd always considered herself to have a good poker face, maybe even as good as Cassie's, but she struggled now, seeing Cassie and Raven entwined as they were. She was pleased to see they were growing closer—it had taken them long enough. Raven had been so patient with Cassie, and Cassie kept on holding her at arm's length. Eve didn't understand why, and when she'd asked Cassie about it, she clammed up and wouldn't discuss it.

Neither woman moved, though Raven did stop petting Cassie's hair.

Eve crossed to the foot of the bed, carrying on as normal. "How are you feeling, Cass?"

Cassie lifted her head to look at her. "I'm all right."

Eve noticed that Cassie seemed to be having similar problems to herself regarding her own poker face, for she was turning pink. Eve couldn't help herself, she winked at Cassie.

"How's Vicki?" Raven said, sobering Eve completely.

"She's asleep. Crying's tired her out." Changing the topic, Eve got down to business. "I need you to do me a favor, Raven."

Pale blonde hair bounced as she nodded. "Sure. Anything."

"I know you're probably quite sick of ringing people, but do you think you could do a few more?"

To her credit, Raven didn't hesitate or look put upon in any way. "Of course. What do you need?"

"I want the stalkers to know the pub will be closed for a week. Starting tonight."

Cassie sat up in surprise—or she tried to, she struggled somewhat because her arm was still in its sling. Raven assisted, carefully pushing her up the rest of the way. Eve watched the display warmly, easily reading the affection between them.

Eve continued on with what she'd been saying, explaining her reasons, "You're not up to it, Cass. Vicki's too upset. And frankly, I'm not in the mood either."

"I'll get right on it." Raven made a move to get up.

Eve held up a halting hand. “No rush. Take your time.” She made a show of looking at her watch. “There’s a couple of hours yet.” She smirked mischievously. “It’d be a shame to disturb you when you were so comfortable.”

With that, Eve sauntered to the door and let herself out, leaving them to it.

“RAVEN, WHAT ABOUT your client?” Cassie’s head suddenly jerked up in realization. She twisted her neck so she could look back to Raven, who was still seated beside her on the bed. After Eve had left, as per her suggestion, they had indeed gone back to their comfortable positions—Cassie lying against Raven’s seated form.

“The item we picked up from your estate, didn’t you say he needed it as soon as possible?”

“I met him yesterday, actually. The transaction’s completed,” Raven said. “It helped keep my mind occupied from worrying about all of you.”

Cassie nodded, pleased she’d found time to finish the deal. She wasn’t sure Raven would with all that was currently going on, and she knew Raven prided herself on providing a quick and efficient service.

“I’m sorry I didn’t ring you yesterday, we left in such a rush.”

Raven lightly patted her head. “There’s no need to apologize. I knew that you’d gone after Garrett.”

“It was awful,” Cassie whispered.

Raven’s request was gentle. “Tell me.”

“I’m used to shadowhunts. I’m used to seeing mutilated bodies and such, well, as much as you can get used to things like that. But this time was different. You’re always apprehensive on a hunt,” Cassie said, trying to explain to Raven since she herself wasn’t a shadowstalker. “You can’t predict all of the variables, no matter how well planned. Something unexpected can easily happen, and that helps to keep you focused, alert.” She took a deep breath. “After what happened with Dad, that hunt...no other hunt seemed particularly bad. I’ve never felt true fear on any subsequent hunt. Anxiety, yes, nerves, of course, but never fear. Yesterday,” Cassie paused for a long moment. “Yesterday, I was afraid. Terrified, even. I truly thought I was going to die.” She swallowed audibly.

Raven slid down the bed so she was lying alongside Cassie, as if she wanted to see her face.

“The fear wasn’t for how I would die,” Cassie said, holding Raven’s eye contact, “it was the thought of leaving my family behind.” She softly ran a hand down Raven’s cheek. “The thought of leaving you.”

Raven looked profoundly moved by her words. She shifted closer and wrapped her arms around Cassie, drawing Cassie’s head into her chest. “I’m right here.” Her voice was soft and lulling like the sea’s gentle tides. “And I promise you, I’m not going anywhere.” Raven laid a tender kiss in Cassie’s hair. “You’re safe now. You’re safe.”

Cassie nestled into her, feeling exactly that.

CASSIE POKED HER head around the bedroom door, to see if her sister was awake yet. A couple of hours had passed since Eve had told her Vicki was asleep, and while Cassie had been resting, Raven had spent the time letting people know the pub was closed for the week. It hadn’t taken as long as Cassie’d feared, for Raven had simply asked several shadowstalkers to pass on the message to their acquaintances. For Raven, they were apparently willing to do so. A stalkers word was their bond, and it could be relied upon—the task would get done.

Cassie saw that Vicki was indeed awake, and she went inside, Raven close on her heels. “How are you doing, Vic?”

“I’m all cried out. For now anyway.” Vicki’s eyes attested to that, they were all red and puffy.

Raven went straight to Vicki and embraced her. “I’m so sorry, honey.” She held Vicki close, clearly trying to give her as much comfort as she could. “Your eyes look sore,” she said when they drew apart.

Vicki rubbed at them. “They’re all right.” She glanced to Cassie, who’d sat down on the bed. Vicki perched next to her. “How’s your head?”

The pain in her head had improved (mostly thanks to painkillers) but it still ached quite badly. Cassie didn’t want Vicki to feel guiltier than she already did, so she kept that part to herself. “Much better,” she said.

Vicki seemed pleased to hear it. “You know, you’d better not go into town for a few days until your bandage is off. Not to mention that sling. People will grow suspicious with all these injuries.”

“She has a point,” Raven said. “They made a fuss over that bruise, God only knows how they’ll react to seeing you like this.”

Cassie chuckled. The townsfolk did have a tendency to overreact. “If I mention Allensville again, I have a feeling it’ll start a war.”

“It could well do,” Vicki said. “Especially if Mrs. Frye sticks her nose in. That woman is such a gossip. She probably knows nearly as much about people’s lives as Raven does.”

Raven looked insulted. “Are you saying I’m a gossip?”

“I wish!” Vicki said. “You’re as tight-lipped as a mute.”

Raven frowned as Cassie laughed.

“I just meant,” Vicki waved a hand, “that you have a wealth of information inside you, and you don’t share any of it. I bet you could tell some fabulous stories?”

Raven nodded. “I could.” Vicki eagerly leaned forward, obviously expecting to hear one. Raven kept her waiting. “But I’m not going to,” she said at last.

“Just this once?” Vicki pressed her hands together in a pleading gesture. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“You’re wasting your breath,” Cassie said.

“Please? I need cheering up.” Vicki, it seemed, wasn’t above using emotional blackmail.

“That’s not fair.” Raven’s voice lifted in protest. As Vicki’s face fell, she said, “I can make up a story if you’d like?”

Vicki waved her off. “It’s not the same. Can’t you just change the names or something? That’s what I’d do.”

Cassie chuckled, coming to Raven’s rescue. “Clients everywhere are breathing a sigh of relief that you’re not their trader, Vic.”

Raven laughed with her, and Vicki playfully slapped Cassie’s arm—the arm in a sling.

“Ow!” Cassie said loudly.

Four concerned hands reached out to touch her. “Are you all right?” Both Raven and Vicki asked in unison.

“I’m sorry.” Vicki looked perplexed. “I didn’t think I hit you that hard.”

“You didn’t.” A smirk drew itself across Cassie’s face. “Gotcha.”

The four hands now all smacked her in annoyance.

“Ow,” Cassie said. “Seriously this time.”

“I don’t believe you.” Vicki’s tone had lost all its compassion.

“And even if I did, it would serve you right.”

“Oh, that’s charming,” Cassie said. “Abusing an injured woman.” She laid it on thick, finally managing to draw a smile from Vicki.

Vicki lifted a warning finger. “I’ll give you abuse in a minute.”

“Not even with an arm in a sling,” Cassie grinned cockily, “could you take me.”

“Is that so?” Vicki jumped up from the bed, grabbing a pillow. “We’ll see about that.”

Cassie winked at Raven, letting her know she was just trying to distract Vicki from her grief. Trying to cheer her up in whatever way she could. Herself too, for that matter.

Raven appeared more than happy to help, for she joined in with their banter. “I can see I’m going to be forced to referee this.”

Chapter Twenty

CASSIE HAD BEEN the one to suggest that they go out for a walk. She’d been cooped up inside the house for two days straight, and before that she felt like she’d spent most of the week inside a car, which of course, she had. She wanted to go out and stretch her legs, get some fresh air into her lungs. She also hoped that the fresh air would help clear her mind and enliven her senses. Cassie wasn’t sleeping well, so found herself to be constantly tired. The cold air had done as she’d hoped, and Cassie felt somewhat revived.

As they walked, the wind turned bitter, and the flat, barren plain they were crossing offered no shelter whatsoever.

“Whose idea was this?” Vicki fastened up the top buttons on her coat. “Mom had the right idea.” Eve had chosen to stay behind at the house, enthralled by a good book.

“Stop moaning.” Cassie lightly shoved her sister.

“If my teeth fall out from chattering so much, I’m sending you the bill.”

Raven shook her head as she laughed. “You’re so melodramatic.”

“Don’t you always send me the bill?” Cassie said. A lot of the money she won at cards was spent on Vicki. Cassie didn’t mind in the slightest, in fact, she liked treating her to things.

“Touché.” Vicki giggled, as if knowingly guilty that she went through her own money too quickly. Surprise suddenly crossed her face. “Hey, you just pushed me with your right arm. Your sling’s gone.”

Cassie raised an amused eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’ve just noticed? It’s been off since this morning.” She tutted critically. “So much for your observational skills as a shadowstalker.” With a thumb, Cassie gestured off to her left. “Even Raven noticed.”

Raven scoffed indignantly. “Thanks for that.”

Cassie laughed, unrepentant.

“I suppose that is pretty bad,” Vicki said, laughing along with Cassie.

Raven frowned, though her twinkling eyes gave her away. “I’ll go and join Eve if you’re not careful.”

Cassie linked an arm through Raven’s, tugging her closer as they walked. They smiled at one another.

“What do you think of Marx?” Vicki asked out of nowhere.

“Marx?” Cassie thought for a moment. There were a lot of shadowstalkers to go through. “The guy with the floppy hair?”

“Wavy,” Vicki said. “That’s him.”

“He seems nice enough. Odd name.” Cassie shrugged. “It’s hard to tell, he keeps to himself. We’ve never had any trouble from him.”

“Odd?” Vicki’s brow creased. “I like his name.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it, I just said it was odd. Unusual.”

“Do you think it’s odd, Raven?”

“I’m named after a bird.” Raven’s tone was dry. “A bird that in some cultures, represents death. I don’t think I’ll comment on the oddness of a name.”

“I like your name,” Cassie said.

“So do I. Obviously, or I wouldn’t have chosen it.”

“I wonder what name I’d pick for myself?” Vicki paused, clearly thinking about it. “Helen,” she said, and then frowned. “I’m not sure about the name itself, but I like the image it invokes.”

Raven looked confused. “Image?”

“You know,” Vicki waved her hands in a flourish. “Helen of Troy. The most beautiful woman who ever lived.”

“Supposedly.” Raven smiled up at Cassie, her expression conveying that she thought that title belonged to her.

Cassie felt herself blush. The smile she returned was both touched and flattered. After a few moments, Cassie looked to her sister. “I think ‘conceited’ fits you better.”

Vicki scowled. She opened her mouth to retort, but Raven stepped in before she could speak.

“Why did you ask about Marx?”

“When I had that whole bodice fiasco, Marx was really nice to me.”

“I bet he was,” Cassie said.

Vicki glanced to her in annoyance. “No, he was genuinely nice.”

Cassie wasn’t at all convinced, and she didn’t hide the fact. “Mm-hmm.”

“What bodice fiasco?” Raven appeared completely baffled as to what they were talking about.

Vicki tugged on her earlobe in embarrassment. “I wanted to wear something nice...”

“And by nice she means see-through,” Cassie said with a smirk.

Vicki’s annoyed look turned into a glare. “It wasn’t that bad!”

“If you say so.”

“So what happened?” Raven broke them up again, giving Cassie a displeased look.

Cassie sighed internally. Raven was right—she was intentionally winding Vicki up. She was usually the one to let things go, the peacemaker in the family. Not today it seemed. Her conscious mind told her that the last thing anyone needed was for an argument to break out.

Everyone was still tense and upset about Garrett's death, emotions running high. It was only the third day since the trip to Oaksmount, so it was to be expected—not enough time had passed for things to calm down. Cassie knew her attitude at the moment wouldn't help things settle any faster, but her bad mood just wouldn't shift.

“Let's just say it didn't go well,” Vicki said. “I'm sending the bodice back for a refund.” She gave Cassie a challenging look, as if daring her to say something.

Raven squeezed Cassie's arm, still linked through hers, and Cassie remained silent.

Unchallenged, Vicki went on, “Marx was a gentleman. He was the only one who treated me decently.”

“I take it you like him?”

“He's very handsome.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “You need more to go on than that, Vic.”

“I know!” Vicki said. “That's why I wanted to ask Raven's opinion. She'll know more about him than I do.” She looked expectantly to Raven.

“He's shy. Well-mannered. Marx opens up more when you get to know him. He's a lovely lad.”

Cassie knew that's all she would get from Raven—she didn't gossip. Still, she pressed for information. “So you don't know of any reason why Vicki should stay away from him? I know you can't break confidences, but I don't want my little sister dating just anyone. He has to be worthy of her.”

Vicki now smiled at Cassie, as if their brief tiff had never happened.

“You think I'd encourage her otherwise?” Raven looked upset by Cassie's insinuation.

“No, you're right. I'm sorry. I know you care about Vicki too.” Cassie rubbed her temple, realizing the headache was now more from lack of sleep than it was from her actual head injury. And that's what was causing her to have such a short fuse. She noticed Raven's worried, questioning look, and managed a small smile. “I don't know why I said that.” She shook her head. “I'm tired. I am sorry, Raven.”

Raven squeezed Cassie's arm again. “Forget it. I have.” She stopped walking, bringing Cassie to a halt beside her. “Let's head back. You need to get some rest.”

Cassie nodded meekly, wishing it was only that simple.

The three of them turned around and started to head back toward the house.

“And in answer to Cass’s question,” Raven said to Vicki, “I don’t know anything about Marx that should put you off.”

Vicki gave her a grateful smile. “That’s all I wanted to know.” Doubt suddenly crept across her face. “He might not even fancy me, perhaps he was only being polite?”

Cassie shrugged. “His loss.”

“Of course he will,” Raven said. “And you’ll never find out if you don’t ask.”

“Maybe in a few weeks when things have settled a bit. I’ll see.” Vicki looked uncertain. “What if I ask and he says no? I’ll have to see him every night! Talk about embarrassing.”

“It’s not like you to doubt yourself.” Raven patted Vicki’s back. “He won’t say no.”

“But what if he does?”

“You could always get Mom to bar him from the pub,” Cassie said, only half joking. Eve probably would anyway if Marx declined and upset Vicki too much.

Vicki jumped on the idea. “Ooh, I like that.”

Raven’s brow creased. “That doesn’t seem fair to Marx. Date me or be barred.”

There was silence for a brief moment, then all three of them burst into laughter.

When Vicki stopped laughing, she said, “Marx doesn’t know how lucky he is!” Her confidence, it seemed, had returned in full force.

Both Raven and Cassie creased up with laughter once more, so much so that they became hysterical. Vicki looked as if she didn’t know whether or not to be insulted, but she clearly chose not, for she joined in with their laughter.

EVE ENTERED THE kitchen, looking surprised to find she wasn’t alone at this early hour. “You’re up early.”

Cassie glanced up from the stove, where she was busy frying an egg. “So are you.” A thought struck her. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. How come you’re up?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“I’d think you’d be exhausted. You had that four day journey with Raven, then all the way to Oaksmount and back. Plus the shadowhunt. Not to mention you’re injured, so your body will want to sleep so it can focus on healing itself.”

“I get it, Mom.” Cassie irritably pushed the egg around the pan. “But I can’t force myself to sleep.” She realized there was indeed a way, and said, “I won’t take sleeping tablets.” The tablets meant she couldn’t wake up from her nightmares, no matter how bad they got.

Eve shook her head, as if knowing of her aversion to them. “I wasn’t going to suggest that you did.”

“Good,” Cassie said. Her mother was right, she was incredibly tired. And that was why she was so bad tempered. Unfortunately, every time Cassie did sleep, she was plagued by the nightmare that had haunted her over the years—the memory of her father’s death. Normally, the dream only cropped up on occasion, never frequently. In fact, they’d been lessening as time went by. But since Oaksmount, the dream occurred every time Cassie slept, disturbing her and keeping her from getting any solid rest. The nightmare was as real and as vivid as it had been when the event originally happened, Cassie thrust helplessly back there to relive it again and again. She had chosen instead to stay awake, but of course that had proven an impossible task. As Eve had pointed out, Cassie was exhausted and needed rest. Cassie surrendered to it, but the nightmares woke her anyway, so it was a futile predicament.

It was fortunate that the worst pain from her injuries had passed, or Cassie would be even more ill-tempered. She took a calming breath, annoyed at herself for snapping at her mother—it was hardly her fault.

“Mom?” In an effort to make amends, Cassie raised the spatula when Eve looked her way. “Do you want an egg?”

Eve smiled. “I’d love one.”

“It’s nearly ready,” Cassie said. “I’ll do the toast in a minute.”

Eve instantly moved from the kettle to the bread bin. “I’ll do that.”

“Okay.” Cassie managed a smile. “Thanks.”

Eve removed a loaf of bread and carried it to the toaster, patting Cassie’s back as she passed by. “I’m headed into town if you want to come? We need groceries. It might do you good to get out the house for a while.”

Cassie thought about it. She nodded. “You’re probably right.” Her lips curled up at the edges. “As always.”

“Cassie can’t come.” Vicki plodded into the kitchen. She yawned widely. “You’ve still got that bandage on.”

“I’ll take it off,” Cassie said. “My hair will cover the rest.”

She dished the egg out onto a plate for her mother, then cracked another for herself, whipped it up, and poured it into the frying pan. Eve added two slices of toast to the plate, and began to eat her breakfast where she stood.

Eve backed Cassie up. “No one will notice.”

“She looks like death warmed up,” Vicki said, as blunt as ever.

Eve coughed on her food, as if it’d been hastily swallowed. “Vicki.” Her voice held a warning edge. She shook her head, giving Vicki a stern look as she did so.

Seemingly taken aback by Eve’s response, Vicki quickly said, “All right, I’m sorry. Jeez.”

Cassie didn’t react, she just kept on frying the eggs. She was in no mood to be teased, whether it was the truth or not. Her view in the mirror that morning had revealed dark shadows beneath her eyes—it was very clear she hadn’t slept well for days.

“How come you’re up at this hour?” Eve redirected the conversation.

“You mentioned last night that you were going into town,” Vicki said. “I need to take that parcel back.” She sat down at the kitchen table. “That’s the only reason I’m up at this ungodly hour. I don’t see why you can’t go later like a normal person.”

“Because this way I don’t have to stop every two minutes to chat to some nosy busybody,” Eve said.

Vicki indicated the clock. “The shops won’t even be open yet.” Her eyes brightened as she noticed what Cassie was doing. “Are those eggs?”

“We have an hour’s drive,” Eve said. “The shops will be open by the time we reach Long Meadows.”

Cassie fought to hold back a sigh. “Do you want one?”

“Go on then.” Vicki grinned cheekily at Cassie. “Bacon goes well with eggs.”

“We haven’t got any.” Cassie dished out the fried egg onto a plate. Her egg now went to her sister.

Eve placed some toast on the plate, and put it on the table for Vicki.

Vicki didn’t dig into her food. Clearly doubting Cassie’s words, Vicki crossed to the fridge and began to search through it. “The fridge is practically empty.”

“I know,” Eve said. “That’s why I’m going shopping.”

Vicki crossed back to her seat and dug into her breakfast.

Cassie whipped up another egg and began to fry it. Perhaps she would get to eat this one?

Chapter Twenty-One

AS DUSK FELL around The Smoking Gun, Cassie heard a car approaching. She looked out the window. “I wonder who this could be?” A yellow taxi was trundling along the track road, heading their way. “Perhaps someone didn’t get the message about the pub being closed?”

Eve didn’t reply, clearly favoring the more direct method—she would go and find out. She beat Cassie to the door, and stepped outside.

The taxi pulled to a stop not far from them. Their mouths dropped as the car’s back door opened, revealing a ghost inside. They were mistaken of course, he wasn’t really a spirit, just someone they’d previously thought dead.

“Garrett?” Eve asked, as if doubting her own eyes. “Is it really you?”

Garrett slowly began to extract himself from the car, his progress hampered by his injuries. His face was cut in numerous places, and his arm was in a cast. It was obvious from how he moved that he had more serious injuries, but they couldn’t be seen.

“It’s me all right,” he said with a smile. “Now are you just gonna stand there, Eve, or are you gonna give me a hand?”

That seemed to snap Eve out of her shock. She darted forward, looking abashed that he’d had to ask for her help. Cassie also quit gaping at Garrett and moved in to assist. They helped him out of the car. He could walk himself, if a bit stiffly, and the three of them headed toward the house.

“Thanks, Charlie,” Garrett called back to the driver. “Tell Frank we’re quits now.”

A gruff voice came from inside the car. “Will do.” A moment later, the taxi drove away.

“Doesn’t he want paying?” Cassie asked.

“Nah. His brother Frank is one of us. Frank owed me a favor, so I called it in.” Garrett smiled at her. “Good thing too, for it would’ve cost me a fortune to get here.”

“I’d have picked you up,” Cassie said. “If I’d known you were alive that is.”

“Quite.” Annoyance crept into Eve’s tone. She stopped walking, and the others halted with her. She fixed solely on Garrett. “Where have you been? You couldn’t have rang to let us know you were all right? We all thought you were dead!”

“I’ve only just been discharged from hospital this morning. And I’ve been travelling all day to get here,” Garrett said. “I have been unconscious, you know.”

Eve sounded skeptical. “For five days?”

Garrett shook his head. “No.”

“We’ve been mourning you, Garrett.” Eve crossly folded her arms across her chest. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put us through?”

“Just calm down and let me explain. The hospital over at Buckland, where I was being treated, was hit by a storm. The whole area. Power lines were down, phone lines too.”

Eve interrupted him. “What about your mobile?”

“It got trashed. Why’d you think I used the farmhouse phone to call you? The first chance I got to call was today, Eve. I swear it.” Garrett held her gaze. “I would never intentionally put you through that. I chose instead to call Charlie, get him to bring me here, since I thought it’d be better to turn up.” A smirk appeared. “And I’m glad I did, I wouldn’t have wanted to miss out on this warm welcome.” His tone dripped sarcasm. “Or those expressions.” Garrett’s eyes opened wide in imitation, and his mouth opened and closed like a fish.

Cassie laughed, finding his impersonation of them to be quite accurate.

Eve embraced him solidly, causing him to take a step back to keep his balance. Garrett grunted in pain, but didn’t voice a protest. He held Eve tightly, and they stayed that way for a long time.

“Now this is more like it,” Garrett said in her ear. “This is the welcome I’d been expecting.”

Eve’s voice trembled. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“I don’t plan on it.” Garrett cleared his throat, his own voice hoarse from emotion.

Cassie went to hug him next, though she hesitated. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You look as bad as I feel, so I don’t think there’s much chance of that.” Garrett hugged her warmly, and Cassie returned the embrace. “Are you sick?”

Cassie shook her head, averting her eyes when he withdrew from the hug.

Thankfully, Garrett didn’t ask anything further. Instead, he glanced to his watch, then looked around at the empty parking area. “It’s quiet tonight, Eve. Where are all your punters?”

“The pub’s closed. Has been since you died.” Eve now smiled at saying that, as if relieved she no longer believed it.

“It’s closed for a week,” Cassie said. “Two more nights now, after this one.”

Garrett’s surprise was evident. “Wow, Eve, I don’t know what to say. You never close your pub. Unless it’s for a shadowhunt.”

“We were grieving you, Garrett. We weren’t in the mood to play bar.” He looked deeply moved, so Eve lightly slapped his shoulder.

“Don’t get bigheaded about it.”

Garrett chuckled. “No, ma’am.”

“Let’s get you inside.” Eve started forward once more.

Garrett didn’t follow. “Don’t you think you’d better tell Vicki first? Then she can leave the room. I did say she’d never have to see me again.”

Cassie shared an amused, and somewhat furtive look with Eve.

“Vicki’s in her bedroom, crying her heart out,” Eve said. “Over you.”

Garrett appeared truly surprised. Surprised and oddly hopeful. “Really?”

“It’s true.” Cassie nodded. “Raven’s trying to comfort her.”

Garrett, it seemed, didn’t need any further encouragement, for he walked forward with a new spring in his step. He was soon in the house, though it took him a lot longer to get up the stairs. Eve and Cassie followed him up. When they finally reached Vicki’s room, crying could be heard beyond the closed door.

Cassie slowly opened it, holding up a silencing finger when Raven spotted Garrett. Vicki didn’t appear to notice that she had visitors, for she was turned away, laying on the bed with her back to the doorway.

Raven, who was sitting beside Vicki, spoke to her as if nothing had changed, “What would you say to Garrett if you could?”

“I’d tell him how sorry I was,” Vicki said amidst her tears. “And the reasons why I acted like I did. That I’ve lost two fathers, because that’s what I considered him to be—a father.” She sobbed. “I loved him so much. But I never once told him.”

Garrett entered the room without further delay, as if unable to bear seeing Vicki so upset. “You just did.”

Vicki, clearly recognizing his voice, jumped out of bed, almost falling out in her haste. She rushed into Garrett’s open arms, crying now with joy.

Garrett kissed the top of her head. “I love you too.”

Vicki wept against him, apologizing repeatedly.

“Hush,” he said. “There’s no need for that now. We can discuss it later, if you’d like?”

Vicki nodded, smiling up at him.

“I think Garrett should sit down,” Eve said.

Garrett glanced gratefully to her, and Vicki led him to the bed. Once seated, Raven hugged him. Garrett grinned—it was clear he was enjoying all of the attention.

“You had us worried there for a while.” Raven, it seemed, had picked up Cassie’s flair for downplaying things.

Garrett patted her back. “Sorry about that.”

Vicki carefully raised his left arm, which was in a cast. “Are you injured anywhere else?”

“Three cracked ribs. Bumps and bruises.” He tapped the cast. “Broken arm. Not too bad considering.”

Eve asked the question everyone was dying to know the answer to. “How did you get away?”

“When I rang you, I didn’t think I was going to make it out, and I wanted you to know what was going on. I didn’t want you to come looking for me, and not know the galdagos were real. I wanted you to be prepared. I was about to tell you there was an infant galdago there...” Garrett shook his head, as if still astonished. “Can you believe that, Eve? That they were breeding?”

“Only because I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Did you kill it?”

“The three of us took care of the nest,” Eve said with a nod. “There were seven.”

Garrett whistled. “Bloody hell. I’m glad you girls are on my side.” He gave each of them an impressed smile. He ruffled Vicki’s hair.

“Cass here,” Eve laid a proud hand on her shoulder, “fought one hand-to-hand. She killed it too.”

“Get out!” Garrett’s eyes widened. “Truly?” At Cassie’s humble nod, he said, “No wonder you look shattered, I would too after fighting that thing.”

Cassie laughed, amused by his take on things. She wished that was the real reason for her tired state. “It was hard going.”

Garrett blew out a breath, as if he had no doubt of that. “I bet.” When Cassie didn’t offer anything further, he continued, “Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. I had to drop the phone because this brute of a galdago came charging in, right through the door and taking out a chunk of the wall.”

Eve tipped her head. “We saw.”

Raven’s eyes grew as round as saucers. “The wall too?”

“Oh yeah,” Vicki said, now that she’d pulled herself together. “They crashed through walls like they were made of tissue paper.”

“Jesus.” Raven looked shocked—she clearly hadn’t known the galdago could do such a thing.

“The galdago struck me as I jumped back from the phone, breaking my arm and cracking my ribs. I ducked underneath it, about to head back down the hall when I heard this thundering of footsteps coming up the stairs. It was too fast for an adult, it had to be the infant. I knew I wouldn’t stand a chance against it in my condition, so I ran for the window and jumped through it.” Garrett gestured to his cut face. “As you can see, I didn’t have time to open it.”

Vicki chuckled. “And you landed on manure.”

Garrett glanced to her in surprise. “How’d you know that?”

“We tried to retrace your steps,” Eve said.

Vicki lightly bumped Garrett with her shoulder. “I also had to use the same escape myself.”

“I was wondering what that smell was,” Garrett joked, drawing a giggle from Vicki. “And before you say it’s me, the nurses were kind enough to wash my clothes.”

Eve sounded amused. “Did they now?”

He smiled self-assuredly. “They found me charming.”

Eve smirked. “Did they check you for cranial trauma?”

Garrett narrowed his eyes at her, but their twinkling betrayed his humor. He went on with his story. “So I ran out of the pigpen and headed straight for my car, which was parked alongside another vehicle. Presumably, it belonged to the family who lived there. Anyway, between the two cars, waiting for me, was a galdago.”

Raven inhaled sharply. “What did you do?”

“I considered shooting it, but two more came around the house, one on each side, trying to hem me in.” At Raven’s startled look, he said, “They’re pretty smart.” Garrett paused for a moment, as if to keep them all captivated. “I had only a limited time before the infant, realizing I’d gone, would come back down the stairs to find me.”

Raven appeared confused. “Why didn’t it follow you out the window?”

“They don’t seem to like to jump,” Garrett said. “And also, if it did, from a first floor window, it would likely get itself stuck in the ground—the weight of it would just smash through the dirt.” He took a breath. “I knew I could never kill them all, and I wouldn’t get around them and to my car before the infant turned up. So I turned and ran.”

“But there was nothing around for miles,” Cassie said, not seeing how he’d managed to escape. “You had to know the infant would be chasing you down.”

“I did.” Garrett nodded. “But on the way in, I drove past another car. At the time, I assumed it belonged to the farmer. When I learned that the galdagos were real, and I found the bodies of the missing shadowstalkers, I began to wonder whether the car belonged to them. I had little choice but to go on that hunch, and I ran for it, going as fast as I could.”

Garrett ran a hand down his face. “That was the longest run of my life. I never thought I’d make it.”

Cassie leaned against the wall, understanding that all too well— though she hadn’t had cracked ribs or a broken arm to contend with. Her respect for Garrett grew tenfold.

“Wouldn’t the car be locked?” Raven asked.

“He was hoping the stalkers had used the group safety system.” At Raven’s questioning shrug, Eve said, “When there’s more than one stalker on a hunt, it’s sensible to leave the car keys hidden in the car. If someone gets killed, and it happens to be the person with the keys, it leaves the others vulnerable if they need to get away quickly.” Almost as an afterthought, she said, “We use it ourselves.”

Raven nodded. "I see. I don't suppose the car has much chance of being stolen, not in the middle of nowhere."

"So I make it to the car, jump in, and the keys are above the sun visor," Garrett said. "I'm just pulling away, when the infant comes into my rear-view. I stomped on the accelerator, knowing that if it even so much as touched the car, I'd be finished." He glanced to Raven. "The galdago's strength would crush the car in moments, rendering it useless. Fortunately for me, the car was the sports model. The infant fell behind, and it soon stopped chasing me. It knew it couldn't catch a car. It kept on watching though, until I drove out of sight. Hoping I'd break down no doubt." Garrett took hold of Vicki's hand, as if to comfort himself. He looked pleased when she squeezed it.

"I drove to the nearest hospital, and then passed out. At the farm I must've knocked my head somehow, though God knows where, I was too busy trying to get away." Garrett showed them an egg-sized lump on his head. He looked at Eve. "You know the rest. Oh, that reminds me, I'd best ring the family of those dead stalkers. They deserve to know what happened."

Eve shook her head. "Raven and I took care of it."

Garrett nodded, seeming relieved that he didn't have to do it himself. Cassie couldn't blame him, she wouldn't want to deliver such awful news either.

"You can stay here till you're better," Vicki said, patting Garrett's arm. "We'll take good care of you. You can have my bed. I'll bunk with Mom."

Garrett looked pleased by the offer. "I'll admit I wasn't relishing the idea of returning to a motel." His eyes lifted to Eve in question.

"It's fine with me." Eve smiled at him. "Someone's gotta keep you out of trouble."

VICKI ALMOST FORGOT to knock on the door. Since it was her room, she'd never had need to before. She tapped on the wood, hearing Garrett call her in.

Vicki balanced the tray full of food with one hand as she opened the door, then used her foot to kick it closed behind her. She smiled at Garrett, who was under the bedcovers, but sitting up and reading.

He held the book cover up for Vicki to see. "Your mom tells me this is a good book."

"I haven't read it," Vicki said.

"It's good so far. Plenty of action."

Vicki smiled, it did sound like a book her mother would read. She lifted the tray in indication. "I thought you might be hungry, after the long drive."

"That's kind of you, Vicki. And yes, I'm famished." Garrett put the book aside and rubbed his hands together eagerly. "What've you got there?"

"I made your favorite."

A hopeful expression appeared. "Spaghetti?"

Vicki had to laugh at the childlike look of wonder on his face. That in spite of all his prowess and bravado as a shadowstalker, his favorite meal was spaghetti. Garrett was a man of simple tastes.

"Yes, spaghetti." She laughed again. "And for dessert, apple pie and custard."

Garrett's scar creased as he grinned. "What have I done to deserve this?"

"For coming back to us." Vicki shrugged. "And for just being you." She set the tray down on his lap, smiling when he leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

"Well thank you. It smells delicious."

"Mom sent you this up." Vicki indicated the half pint of beer. "She thought you could probably do with a drink. But only half because of your pain medication."

"God bless that woman." Garrett earnestly took a long drink, and then released a happy sigh. "I needed that."

"Which reminds me, I have something for you." Vicki moved to her bedside cabinet, and from the top drawer removed a silver hip flask.

Garrett took it from her gratefully. "I thought I'd seen the last of this." His fingers ran fondly across the shiny, metallic surface. "We've shared some good times together." He patted the flask, and then smiled at Vicki. "Thank you."

She nodded, pleased by his reaction. She was deeply appreciative that she'd been given the chance to return Garrett's flask to him, that he was alive, and given a little time for healing, would soon be well. Feeling blessed, Vicki threw her arms around Garrett, who dropped his cutlery in shock. He laughed delightedly, and returned her embrace.

A few moments later, Vicki spoke again, changing the topic slightly, "Mom also wanted to know whether your car could be connected to you. We left it at Oaksmount, you see, thinking you were dead."

He waved a hand. "Nah. It's registered under a false name. No worries there."

“Mom thought as much. She just wanted me to check.” Vicki watched as Garrett tucked keenly into his spaghetti. “Is it okay?”

“It’s wonderful,” he said around a mouthful.

Vicki smiled, gratified. She hesitated, having so much to tell him, so much to explain, and not knowing quite where to start, or even whether this was the right time. She didn’t want to overwhelm Garrett, he had only just returned. But she very much wanted to explain herself, so they could put it all behind them and move on, get passed it. If Garrett was still amenable to it. To her. She believed his words before, that he loved her. But that didn’t necessarily mean things could return to how they’d been all those years ago. She knew some things couldn’t be corrected, and what she’d said to him had been horrible, to say the least. Vicki had seen his reaction, the pain she’d caused him, and she didn’t know whether Garrett would be able to forgive her for that, even after she’d explained herself. It might not be enough.

“You know, Vicki,” Garrett said, as if reading her thoughts, “while I’m eating, we can have that discussion if you’d like? The one we mentioned earlier?”

Vicki smiled in relief. But now that she had the go ahead, she couldn’t think of where to start. She decided to begin at the most logical place. “The day my dad died…”

VICKI LEFT HER room elated. It was nearly two in the morning, and she’d just finished talking with Garrett. Everything had been discussed. She felt lighter, and immensely relieved. Garrett had been wonderful, understanding and accepting as to why she’d acted badly toward him. He’d forgiven her, for he had told her so, and wanted to put everything behind them, just like Vicki herself did.

The air now clear between them, Vicki had left Garrett to get some sleep. She quietly carried the tray downstairs, taking the now empty plates back to the kitchen. She was surprised to find the kitchen light still on, but soon found the cause.

“Cassie, it’s two a.m.” Vicki dumped the plates in the sink.

“You’ve never brought me food,” Cassie said.

“When you die and come back from the dead, I will.”

Cassie chuckled. “Fair enough.” She held out the pack of playing cards she was shuffling. “Want a game?”

“It’s two in the morning.”

“You said that.” Cassie started to deal out the cards. “One game. You can even pick what we play.”

“It’s two in…”

“You’re like a parrot. I’m perfectly aware of the time.”

“Then you should know it’s time for bed. You could certainly do with the sleep.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You look like a zombie, Cassie. You just need to sleep.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Cassie said. “How silly of me.”

Vicki pulled up a chair and sat down. “I’ll play a game with you if you answer one question first?”

“Okay. Shoot.”

Vicki caught her gaze. “What’s going on with you?”

Cassie looked away. “Nothing.”

Vicki pushed back her chair and started to stand.

“All right, all right,” Cassie said. She waited for Vicki to sit down. “I’m having nightmares again. But they’re all the time. That’s why I can’t sleep.”

“About Dad.” It wasn’t really a question, but Cassie nodded anyway.

“I’d hoped the nightmares would stop now that Garrett’s back. I could understand before, since I thought he was dead, how losing a family member would bring back memories of Dad. But now Garrett’s fine, and the nightmares haven’t gone away.” She looked helplessly to Vicki. “I don’t know what to do to make them stop.”

“Take it from someone who knows, Cassie, it doesn’t help to keep things inside. Now everyone’s aware of that stuff with Garrett, I feel so much better.”

“Did you tell Garrett?”

“Just now.”

“And?”

Vicki smiled widely. “He was great. He understands.”

“I’m happy for you, Vic. Truly.”

“So you see,” Vicki reached across the table and took her sister’s hand, “if you talk about what happened with Dad, you’ll feel better too. Your nightmares will stop.”

“I can’t, Vic.”

“I thought that too.” Vicki shrugged. “But I could. And I did. You can too.” At Cassie’s headshake, she said, “Isn’t it at least worth a try?”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.” Cassie’s blue eyes locked onto the playing cards, clearly desperate for a distraction.

“It was for me.” Vicki held out her hand. “I’ll deal.”

Cassie gratefully passed the cards over.

Vicki decided to be brutally honest. “Sooner or later you’ll break, Cassie,” she said. “Just like I did. And from the looks of you, I’d say it’ll be soon.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

EVE STRODE PURPOSEFULLY to the van that had just pulled up outside The Smoking Gun. Movement was heard inside the van’s storage area, so she made her way to the vehicle’s back doors. Both swung open, revealing a portly man inside.

“Hello there,” he greeted as he hopped down from the van, a sweaty smile plastered onto his face. A smile which faltered slightly when he spotted her weapon.

Eve held the shotgun casually in her arms, not aiming it. The man looked suspicious to her, so she’d come out armed.

The man eyed the gun nervously. “No need for that, ma’am.” He wiped sweat from his brow with a sodden handkerchief

Eve dismissed him as a threat. She had as soon as she’d laid eyes on the stranger. “What do you want?” She wasn’t one for time wasting or idle chit-chat.

The unexpected visitor didn't seem to hear her, let alone register her words. His gaze was fixed solely behind Eve, over her shoulder. She turned and followed his dumbstruck gaze, finding Cassie on the end of it. His eyes were raking every inch of her, and he wasn't being at all discreet about it. Though Eve often saw Cassie ogle in this fashion, it was a difficult thing for a mother to get used to. She didn't like it. Not one bit. She loudly cleared her throat.

From beside Cassie, Vicki sniggered. "Damn, girl! Even when you're sleep-deprived and have stitches in your head, they're still falling at your feet."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure he's just..." Cassie faltered, as if she'd just noticed how the man was looking at her. "I'm too tired for this. I'm going back inside."

Vicki slapped her head. "Sorry. I said I wouldn't tease you any more." She made a zipping motion across her mouth.

Eve lost her patience, snapping her fingers in front of the stranger's face. "Are you actually here for a reason? Or have you just come to ogle my daughter?"

Her tone held a sharp edge, a warning edge, and that seemed to snap the man out of his trance-like state. With obvious reluctance, he tore his gaze from Cassie and looked to Eve instead.

"N...No," he nervously wiped his brow. "I'm here to install your machine."

Eve raised her shotgun and pointed it at him. "Wrong answer. We haven't ordered any machine." She took a step toward him. "I strongly suggest you leave. Right now."

"But..." He raised his hands defensively, as if a hand in front of his face would somehow stop a shotgun shell if fired. "But I have the paperwork right here." His shaking hands gestured to the breast pocket of his shirt, but he didn't reach in to take it out. Perhaps assuming she'd think he was reaching for something else, a weapon of his own maybe, and would open fire on him.

"Your paperwork's mistaken," Eve said.

Cassie suddenly came jogging over. "It's all right, Mom. It's for me. I ordered it."

"Ordered what?"

"I'm sorry about that," Cassie said to the man. "I forgot it was today you were coming." She held out a hand. "I'm Cassie." She smiled at him. "And you are?"

"Craig." Flashing a grin, he eagerly took her offered hand and shook it, seemingly forgetting that only a moment ago he'd had a gun trained on him.

"Nice to meet you, Craig."

“Excuse me,” Eve raised her voice, “but what exactly is it that you’ve ordered?”

“I can’t say. It’s a surprise.” Glancing to Craig, Cassie made a shushing motion, looking pleased when he nodded his agreement to keep quiet.

Eve grew uneasy. “Cassie, you know I hate surprises.”

“Trust me.” Cassie started pushing her toward the house. “Go on inside. And stay away from the kitchen till we’re finished.”

“THANKS AGAIN FOR your help,” Cassie said as she showed Craig to the front door.

Eve was waiting impatiently on one of the bar stools nearby. She noticed that Craig winked at Cassie.

“Anything else you need, anything at all, you give me a call.” He pressed a card into Cassie’s hand.

Cassie smiled politely. “Thanks, Craig.”

Craig beamed at her, as if pleased she’d remembered his name. He looked around keenly. “I might come back here for a drink sometime.”

“Oh, it’s not a pub,” Cassie lied. “I mean, it was, obviously, but we’ve just moved in. We’re renovating the place. It’s just going to be an old boring house when we’re finished with it.”

Eve held back a smile at Cassie’s quick thinking. It wouldn’t do to have civilians dropping in for a drink.

“That’s a shame.” Craig sounded upset that he couldn’t just call back in. “Anyway, you have my card.”

“I certainly do. Thanks again.” Cassie closed the door behind him, and rested against it for a moment.

“You’ve been ages,” Eve said from her stool. “What were you doing? Re-fitting the entire kitchen?”

Cassie shook her head in amusement. “You’re so impatient.”

Eve didn’t deny it. “And *still* you keep me waiting.”

Cassie rolled her eyes. “Your surprise is through there.”

Eve hopped down off the stool, and quickly headed around the bar. Entering the kitchen, her sharp eyes spotted the change instantly. On the outside wall, close to the sink, a new white appliance had been fitted amongst the cupboards. “Is that what I think it is?”

“You’re always saying you’re too tired at the end of a shift to do the washing up, so...” Cassie indicated the dishwasher.

A wide grin formed on Eve’s face. “Did you buy this with your poker winnings?”

“Sure did.” She shrugged modestly. “The guys I play with aren’t very good.”

Eve embraced her warmly. “Thank you, sweetheart.” It was a thoughtful, yet practical gift.

“It wasn’t just for you, it means Vic and I don’t have to do it either.”

Eve withdrew slightly and put a hand on Cassie’s cheek. She wasn’t going to let her play the kind gesture down. “Thank you.”

Cassie smiled, though it did little to relieve the dark shadows underneath her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

Eve gently traced the shadows with a finger. “Still not sleeping well?”

Cassie sighed. “No. I wanted to apologize actually, I know I can’t have been easy to live with lately.”

Eve waved a dismissive hand. “Nonsense.”

“I’ve been snapping at people all week.”

“Well I’ll admit I am worried about you.”

Cassie grimaced. “I don’t want you to worry.”

“Then talk to me,” Eve said. “It breaks my heart when you won’t.” She shook her head sadly. “That you feel you can’t even talk to your own mother.”

“Mom,” Cassie said, looking distressed that she was upsetting her. “I do talk to you. I tell you everything.”

“But not this, not about what happened with your father.”

“Only because I’m a coward,” Cassie whispered. “Only because I can’t face you after,” Her voice broke. “I feel so bad...” She swallowed audibly.

Eve took both of Cassie's hands and led her to the table, pushing her down into a chair. She drew another chair close for herself and sat down on it, taking up Cassie's hands once more. She could tell Cassie was about to reveal everything, so she waited patiently, not wanting to say or do anything that would break the moment and cause Cassie to change her mind. After a short while, Eve lifted Cassie's hands and kissed them in encouragement.

The gentle affection seemed to help Cassie to begin. She looked so tired—clearly she couldn't hold it in anymore. "When we were at that warehouse, where Dad was...killed..."

Eve nodded to show she remembered, but Cassie didn't get the chance to continue.

Vicki came barging into the kitchen. "So, what was this surprise you mentioned?" She pointed at it herself and rushed over to it. "A dishwasher? Finally, I can paint my nails and not have them ruined by washing up!" Her smile faltered at Eve's glare. "What?" Vicki looked between them, at the silent tableau in front of her. "Did I interrupt something?"

Eve nodded forthrightly. "Yes."

Cassie shook her head at the same time. "No." She paused briefly. "It's okay, Vic, we were finished."

"Cass, please?" Eve said, though she knew it would do no good, the moment had been broken.

Vicki thrust her thumb toward the door. "I can leave?"

Cassie ignored them both and moved to the dishwasher. "Let me show you how this thing works."

EVE LEANED FORWARD and lowered her voice, not wanting anyone to overhear her words. Though she and Raven were currently alone in the bar—it was midday—she didn't want to risk Cassie coming in and being offended that she was the topic under discussion. Neither Eve nor Raven liked discussing Cassie behind her back, but she had left them no other choice.

"She's having nightmares again," Eve said. "She woke up screaming last night. She wouldn't talk about it, but when I went back to my room, remember Vicki's sharing with me at the moment, Vicki told me she's been having the dreams since returning from Oaksmount. That's why she's not sleeping."

Raven's brow scrunched up in confusion. "I thought the dreams were becoming less frequent?"

“They *were*. But since the galdago incident they’ve only been getting worse.” Eve paused, thinking. “I can see why the situation would bring back bad memories—nearly losing someone close to her. It’s brought back the memories of Mathew’s death, just like it did for Vicki. Cass was also injured, though less so than on the day her dad died.” She sighed heavily. “The anniversary of Mathew’s death is also coming up.”

Raven grimaced in sympathy. “That’s bound to make the nightmares worse.”

“It usually does,” Eve said with a nod. “But they’ve never been this bad. Not since they first started after Mathew’s death. I’m at my wits end with this, Raven.” She ran a frustrated hand through her hair. “I don’t know what to do to get Cass to open up.”

“Cassie won’t talk to me either. She just clams up.” At Eve’s disheartened expression, Raven said, “I’ll keep trying. That’s all we can do. Just show Cassie that we’re there for her. We have to trust that she’ll tell us when she’s ready.”

Eve made a small annoyed sound in her throat. “She’s too bloody stubborn.”

Raven’s eyebrow lifted. “I wonder where she gets it from?”

“I’m not that bad!” Eve said. Seeing Raven’s pointed look, she scowled. “Don’t make me bar you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

EVE STEALTHILY FOLLOWED Cassie into the warehouse. She looked to her husband, who was in the lead—they always wedged Cassie protectively between them. The warehouse was in an old rundown commercial district, not far from the docks. From the looks of its empty, disheveled state, it had been abandoned long ago, at least by humans anyway. A group of lacerators had taken up both uninvited and unwanted residence.

Lacerators were pack creatures. Very territorial. They fought against other rival packs in abundance, killing as many of their own species as they did humans. Lacerators were bipeds, and looked a lot like a human, though they were yellow in color, making them look badly jaundiced. They had piercing red eyes, but no eyelids. Its skin was stretched taut, and the bones beneath stood out prominently. Freakishly, they could talk, though they had their own dialect. They could also understand and speak English quite well. They had three talons on the end of each arm,

instead of hands, and they were the lacerators' most dangerous weapon. The talons were long, wickedly sharp, and used with deadly efficiency—they knew just where to cut, and how deep.

The pack the Valentines were stalking only contained four lacerators. Not large by any means.

Eve spotted a single lacerator on the opposite side of the warehouse. The creature's back was to her, and it was in an odd position—it looked like it was praying. She gestured to her husband, letting Mathew know that she was going to dispose of it. She handed over her shotgun in exchange for Mathew's crossbow. Stealth was needed here.

Mathew nodded to her, then led Cassie deeper into the building.

As Eve neared the lacerator, crunching sounds reached her ears, and she knew that the creature was feeding. As her eyes adjusted further to the gloom inside the warehouse, she saw what it was feeding on: a teenage girl, not even Cassie's age.

Since it was kneeling and hunched over feeding, Eve couldn't get a shot at the lacerator's head. She wanted an instant kill, so it didn't make any noise and alert others that might be close by. Though Eve could see there was currently only one lacerator on the warehouse floor with them—the warehouse was expansive, but completely empty, allowing her to see into every corner—she knew that the rest of the pack wouldn't be far away.

Eve slowly moved in on the lacerator, shifting to one side so she could get a shot at the creature's head. Once she had the shot, Eve freed the arrow, the slight twang of the crossbow barely loud enough to hear. The arrow hit its mark, and the lacerator slumped across the girl's ravaged body—the killer and the victim now entwined heinously together in death.

Eve slid another arrow into the crossbow, and then hurried to catch up with her family, who were headed for a staircase at the end of the warehouse. At the top of the stairs, off the landing, was a separate room, which presumably at one time had been an office. The door to the room was closed though, so Eve couldn't be certain. She followed Mathew's logic, realizing why he was headed that way—it wasn't simply to make sure the room was clear, though that was part of it—it was due to the creatures preference. Lacerators liked small, enclosed spaces in which to nest, which was why she'd thought it odd when they'd tracked the pack back to this immense warehouse. It would make more sense if the lacerators had holed themselves up in the confined, much smaller office room.

The upstairs door suddenly opened, and all three Valentines raised their weapons. Out stepped a sole man, a human, his hands darting up in surrender.

“Don't shoot!” he yelled. “Please, I'm just the caretaker. Don't shoot.”

The stranger was in his mid-twenties, well-built, and strikingly handsome. His looks befit a man of confidence, quite the opposite to his display.

Eve drew to a halt alongside Cassie, and shared a confounded look with Mathew. Neither lowered their weapons. Cassie looked unsure, but she followed their lead, keeping her gun trained on the man.

“God help me.” The caretaker pointed a shaky finger to the two bodies at the other end of the warehouse. “You’ve killed someone!”

Eve didn’t bother to correct him. Because of the gloomy shadows, he couldn’t be expected to see that one of the bodies wasn’t in fact human. Assuming he didn’t already know. Something was off about the man, but she couldn’t pinpoint what it was. He was very well dressed for a caretaker; smart black trousers and a dark red silk shirt, but that wasn’t what was bothering her.

“Please, let me live, I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Cassie said, her gun faltering slightly.

Sensing Cassie was about to lower her weapon, Eve spoke to her, “Gun up, Cass.”

Cassie’s indecision seemed to disappear, clearly trusting Eve’s judgment. Her gun now held steady.

“No takers?” the man asked, his anxious, frightened state vanishing along with Cassie’s hesitance. He now only looked disappointed. “Oh well, it was worth a try. I can never seem to get the emotions right.” He smiled at them—a wicked, soulless smile.

“You humans are so complicated.” He tutted critically. “This one in here,” he patted his own chest, “keeps yelling in my ear, shouting at me to leave. Can you believe that?” A shake of thick, black hair. “Talk about rude! He has a guest. You wouldn’t shout at your guests, would you?”

He looked to the Valentines expectantly, but no answer came forth.

“Ah. I see rudeness is inherent to human nature.” His dark eyes narrowed. “Well, if you’re not going to play nice...” The man leapt over the balcony railing, falling four stories and landing gracefully on his feet.

With Eve’s shotgun, Mathew let rip with both barrels, the shots tearing holes into his chest and flinging him back into the wall behind. Cassie emptied her gun into the man, firing repeatedly until all it did was click. Eve didn’t fire the crossbow, seeing that several bullets had penetrated the man’s skull. She took back her shotgun and reloaded it. Mathew swapped his crossbow for his revolver.

“What on earth was that?” Cassie asked in fright, her voice an octave higher than usual.

Both Eve and Mathew answered in unison, “Demon.”

“We need to completely destroy the body or it’ll come back,” Mathew said. “Tear it apart or burn it.”

“I can cut it up.” Cassie withdrew her knife and ran forward.

“Cassie, no!” Eve shouted.

Cassie kept on running. “It’s okay, Mom, I can do it.”

Eve and Mathew ran after her, but Cassie was fast on her feet, always had been.

The demon’s leg twitched. Cassie began to stop, but it was too late. With a blur of motion, the demon was in front of her, holding her off the ground by her throat. With one hand, he began to choke Cassie.

“No!” Mathew yelled. “Don’t hurt her.”

“Now you want to talk?” The demon sneered, openly enjoying the blatant fear on their faces. “You were so rude before you hurt my delicate human feelings.” He laughed. “I think it’s only fair to return the favor.” He lifted his other hand to Cassie’s neck, as if preparing to snap it.

Eve answered his earlier question, more out of desperation than anything. “No, I wouldn’t shout at my guests.” She was terrified, one flick of his wrist and Cassie would be dead.

The demon paused, a surprised smile coming to his face. He lowered Cassie to the floor so she could breathe, but he kept hold of her, using her body as a shield.

Cassie noisily sucked in air, gasping and coughing as she wheezed.

“Do be quiet,” the demon glanced impatiently at her. “Your parents and I are about to have a conversation.” He paused until Cassie settled down. “It occurs to me we haven’t been introduced. I am Vexarva. A demon.” He produced a twisted grin. “Though I’m sure you’ve already guessed that part?”

“We did,” Eve said quickly, not wanting to anger him in any way. Not while he had Cassie in his vice-like grip.

“Loosely translated into your language, my name means The Cruel One. I am quite notorious among my own kind, even if I do say so myself.” Vexarva laughed, the hollow sound echoing around the warehouse. “And I see you met my friend down there.” He pointed toward the dead lacerator. “But I must confess...it was only bait.” He gave them a devilish grin. “Bait for you. It worked quite well, didn’t it?”

Eve shared an anxious look with Mathew.

“You see, I know precisely who you are, you have quite a notoriety of your own.” With one hand, Vexarva gestured to them theatrically. “The Valentines.” He laughed again, seemingly amused at himself. “And you’re becoming a pest. Killing off creatures left, right and center. Creatures like myself.” He raised his fingers to his lips, and delivered a shrill, piercing whistle.

From the upstairs office, and the two access doors at either end of the warehouse, came lacerators. They even came through the entrance the Valentines had used. They poured into the warehouse, surrounding the Valentines completely. There were nearly fifty in total, way too many for one pack. It was obvious to Eve that Vexarva had been amassing a small army, using the lacerators’ fear of him to keep them in line. She knew that lacerator packs didn’t get on well with one another, but their fear of the demon was apparently greater than that of their mutual hate.

Vexarva fixed his cold eyes on them. “You see, we’ve had enough of your interference. It stops now.”

The lacerators closed in, though stopped when Vexarva clicked his fingers.

Vexarva handed Cassie off to a nearby lacerator. “If either Valentine shoots me, kill her.” His voice was loud enough so all could hear. “I’m not going to let the lacerators massacre you. Though that would be fun to watch.” He paused abruptly, seeming to think about it for a moment. “No,” he said finally. “I want to be the one to personally kill the Valentines. I want to see what all the fuss is about.”

Vexarva swaggered cockily forward. “Mathew, isn’t it? You first.”

“I won’t fight you.” Mathew shook his head firmly. “Not until you let my family go.”

Vexarva laughed condescendingly. “How noble. But why would I want to do that, when I can just kill you all?”

“If I don’t fight, you don’t gain the prowess you so badly want. There are witnesses here.” Mathew gestured to the encircling lacerators. “You can’t lie and pretend we fought. One of them will tell what happened—you can’t keep them all quiet.”

Vexarva flicked his wrist off-handedly. “I could just kill them.”

“True,” Mathew said. “A demon would have no issue taking out a pack this size. But who then would verify that it was you who killed us? Shadowstalkers get killed all the time. Why would they believe you were the one to bring us down?”

Eve was edging closer to Cassie, but she was still too far away to make a move on the lacerator that held her. One slice with its long talons could be fatal. She couldn’t use her shotgun, for the creature was shrewdly shielding itself behind Cassie.

“Hmm.” Vexarva tapped his forefinger against his lower lip repeatedly, as if thinking about Mathew’s words. “I like how you think, Valentine.” A smirk appeared. “Fortunately for me, Mathew, I hold all the trump cards.”

Vexarva nodded to the lacerator holding Cassie, and three razor-sharp talons slid into her leg, sinking deeply into her thigh. Cassie screamed in agony. The talons drew swiftly down, tearing through her flesh until it reached the knee.

“No!” Eve yelled. She charged forward, tackling the lacerator off her daughter and snapping its neck before it could react. She rushed back to Cassie, who was now writhing in pain on the floor. Eve grabbed her beneath the armpits, and dragged her away from the now seething lacerators. She was horrified to see the wide trail of blood that Cassie left in her wake.

“Enough!” Vexarva shouted, stopping the lacerators in their tracks. “They’re mine.” He turned back to Mathew. “Your only chance to save your daughter is to fight me, or she’ll bleed to death where she lies.”

Eve knew they’d been outmaneuvered. Vexarva had just cleverly ensured Mathew’s participation. If Cassie were to live, Mathew would have to act fast. Eve was busy trying to stop the bleeding, but though the belt tourniquet was helping, she knew it was only a temporary measure. Eve hastily wrapped bandage upon bandage around the ghastly wounds, the white material turning crimson as blood started to seep through. Cassie was already shaking, her body going into shock. They needed to get Cassie to a hospital fast, and fortunately, St. Luke’s was close by—they just had to get Cassie there.

With a furious growl, Mathew threw himself at the smirking demon, but Vexarva simply batted him aside like he was no more than an irritating fly. Mathew was thrown through the air, and his gun skittered out of his grasp as he landed with a solid thud.

Eve’s sharp eyes latched onto the warehouse floor, surprised to see it was lined with wood instead of concrete. She knew Mathew could use that to his advantage if he could just get an opening.

Vexarva descended upon him before Mathew had even managed to get to his feet, pounding fists and legs relentlessly into Mathew’s body and face. Mathew struggled to stand under the vicious barrage of blows and kicks.

Eve’s shotgun boomed, the impact throwing Vexarva away from Mathew. “The floor,” she yelled, hoping Mathew would understand her meaning. She didn’t get a chance to explain further. Since the demon was down, the lacerators were free to attack. And attack they did.

Cassie weakly passed her gun to Eve, who shot everything that came at them. She started with the ones that posed the most threat—the ones closest—and when the clip emptied, Cassie passed her another, clearly not having the strength to do anything further. That simple task looked like it took all she had.

Mathew staggered to Vexarva as the demon started to come round once more—in spite of the fact that a large chunk of its head was now missing. Mathew raised his crossbow and shot the arrow through the demon’s forearm and down into the wooden boards below. He shot the next arrow, once loaded, through the other arm, pinning Vexarva in place.

Glimpsing his actions, Eve felt relief flood her—Mathew had understood her meaning. Mathew dropped the crossbow and yanked out a Bowie knife. He began to cut through Vexarva’s neck, clearly intending to decapitate him.

Eve knew that she and Cassie were about to be overrun. There were just too many of them. As if seeing this, Mathew stopped his cutting and grabbed the reserve gun from his ankle holster, firing it and keeping the hordes of lacerators back. Eve used the time to reload.

Cruel laughter came from beneath Mathew, and, despite the arrows securing him, Vexarva pulled a hand free by yanking the floorboard up with his inhuman strength. The arrow was still through Vexarva’s arm, and the floorboard was now also attached, but he paid no heed to either.

Mathew tried to pin Vexarva down, using his weight, but the demon just laughed at him. Vexarva tugged to free his other arm— nothing happened. Vexarva frowned, trying again.

Eve guessed that the arrow must’ve lodged into a supporting beam as well, not just the floorboard. She knew this was Mathew’s opening. His one and only chance.

Eve fired off several rounds, taking down yet more lacerators. She held out a hand for the next clip, but Cassie didn’t hand it to her. Her attention was pulled down to Cassie, whose eyes were barely open. Eve yelled at her to stay awake, to stay with her, and she knew time was running out for her daughter.

Eve slapped in a new clip. Amidst shooting, she began to doubt they’d escape this fight alive. Even if Mathew could somehow beat the demon, there were still dozens of lacerators remaining. They couldn’t take them on all at once. And certainly not within such a short timeframe—with the excessive blood loss, she knew Cassie didn’t have long.

“Get Cassie out of here!” Mathew suddenly yelled. “Do it now!”

Eve locked eyes with her beloved husband, and saw the same thoughts reflected back at her. There was futile recognition in his eyes. In that timeless look, Mathew smiled at Eve, smiled and nodded. He was telling her it was all right. Telling her to go to protect the rest of their family.

Tears flowing down her face, Eve hauled Cassie up off the floor, struggling with both her and the shotgun. She headed for the nearest exit, half carrying, half dragging Cassie with her.

The pain at being moved seemed to revive Cassie some, for she managed to pull her pistol out from under Eve’s belt. She started shooting at any lacerators in their way, but she missed as many as she hit—the blood loss was clearly affecting her focus.

Mathew began to scream behind them—a bloodcurdling scream, filled with both anguish and agony. Eve kept them moving, not daring to look back.

They finally neared the exit, dozens of lacerators hot on their tail. Only three now blocked their way. Eve had purposely saved her remaining shell for such an outcome. She used it now, the spray of the shotgun pellets taking two of them down. Eve smashed the butt of her shotgun into the face of the last, then charged through the door.

A blast knocked them both off their feet. Mathew had obviously waited as long as he could, until they were clear, but not a second longer. His screams had shredded Eve’s nerves, and she knew he’d done all he possibly could. A second blast occurred only moments after, though that was farther into the warehouse, where Mathew had been fighting the demon.

Eve knew what had happened, even without seeing it. Mathew always carried two grenades, though he’d never had need to use them before. He’d thrown one at the mass of lacerators that were following her and Cassie, waiting until they were clear of the warehouse to take the creatures out. The second grenade Mathew had used to blow apart the demon, and himself along with it. He had sacrificed himself so that his family might live.

Eve picked up Cassie once more, practically carrying her now—the girl was barely conscious.

“Hold on, Cass,” she said. “I won’t lose you too.”

Eve managed to get Cassie to the car, then broke every speed limit in creation as she headed toward St. Luke’s hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“GOD.” VICKI HUFFED out a breath as she came to the bar to unload her tray of empty glasses. “Cassie’s in a foul temper tonight. Bit my head off for asking a simple question.”

It was busy and overcrowded inside the pub—the shadowstalkers had been without it for a week, and droves had flooded in when the doors first opened, every one of them apparently keen to get back inside.

Eve looked across the full room, fixing on Cassie worriedly. She wondered whether she'd done the right thing reopening tonight, maybe she should've kept the pub closed for a few more days?

Garrett, sat alongside Raven on his usual barstool, smiled as Vicki leaned against him.

"Phew. This shift is hard work."

"It is packed," Garrett said. "But you already knew this was a popular joint."

"Not if Cassie has anything to do with it. Her mood's gonna drive them all away." Vicki lowered her voice. "Did you see how she clipped that guy?"

Eve nodded while Raven and Garrett shook their heads.

Vicki continued for those who hadn't seen, "Cassie caught one of the guys checking her out, so she walloped him with her tray."

Garrett nodded approvingly. "Good for her."

"It was quite funny actually." Vicki giggled. "His eyes nearly popped out of his head!"

"She didn't hit him that hard," Eve said.

Vicki giggled further. "He should think himself lucky there weren't any glasses on the tray."

Eve noticed that Cassie was looking harassed, so she gestured for her to come closer. "Why don't you take a break? There's a poker game going on."

Cassie shook her head. "They've already asked me. We're too busy."

"You're taking a break, Cass. Right now," Eve said in no uncertain terms.

"Sit." Raven grabbed Cassie's arm and pulled her down onto a stool. "Don't argue."

A smile appeared on Cassie's face—the first all night. "Two against one. I don't fancy my odds."

Eve smirked. "Damn right."

Cassie pointed across the room. "I just need to finish cleaning that table."

Eve spotted the one Cassie meant, seeing an abandoned cloth on the table's surface.

To her credit, Vicki said, "I'll do it."

Eve smiled at her youngest, pleased by the selfless gesture. Especially since she knew Vicki was overloaded with work herself.

Cassie looked surprised by the offer. “No. I’ll do it. You’ve got your own tables to see to.” She held up a hand, as if to forestall any protests. “I’ll come straight back and take my break, then Vicki can take hers. All right?”

No one answered. Cassie got to her feet—she’d clearly taken the silence for agreement.

As Eve watched Cassie walk away, she felt a niggling sensation in her gut. She had a sudden desire to call Cassie back.

CASSIE WEAVED BETWEEN the tables, eager to get back to the bar and take her break. She badly needed one—her patience had worn out long ago, and she was too easily losing her temper. She returned to the awaiting patrons and finished mopping up the spilt beer, her dour expression keeping them from giving her any lip about the slow service.

The atmosphere inside the pub was light-hearted, jovial, in complete contrast to what Cassie herself was feeling. The happy laughter grated on her nerves.

A chair suddenly knocked into Cassie’s leg—her bad leg. It hurt.

“I’m sorry,” said the man, looking startled to find her behind him. “I didn’t see you...”

Cassie grabbed his collar and hauled him to his feet. The pain, though only momentary, had unleashed her temper. “Watch what you’re doing!”

Another man at the table spoke up, “Easy, Cassie, it was an accident.”

She recognized Terry’s voice instantly. Terry was a regular, and spoke in a deep, gravelly voice, which didn’t at all befit his looks. He was scrawny, and quite small in height for a man, but despite his diminutive size, or perhaps because of it, he always had something to say, and could never mind his own business, sticking his nose in where it didn’t belong.

At Cassie’s cold glare, Terry smiled at her, clearly hoping it would calm her temper. It didn’t. In fact, it only angered her further. “Stay out of this, Terry.”

Terry ignored her warning and regarded his companion. “You’re sorry aren’t you, Gus?”

Gus nodded repeatedly, looking a bit frantic, as if he knew of the Valentines’ reputation. “I just pushed my chair back to stand,” he said meekly. “I honestly didn’t see you. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

Eve, whose sharp eyes never seemed to miss anything, called out from behind the bar, “Cass, take a break.”

“There you go,” Terry said. “Listen to your mother.”

His statement irritated the hell out of Cassie—as if he had the right to tell her what to do. Her hands clenched around Gus’s collar, but it now wasn’t Gus that she wanted to throttle.

Terry unwisely continued, “It was a simple accident, Cassie. It’s not like anyone died.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Cassie only ever had her father on her mind at the moment, thanks to her nightmares, and he had indeed died. Terry had no way of knowing that, but Cassie’s logic had vanished along with her patience. She harshly shoved Gus away from her—the man tripping over his own feet and stumbling to the floor from the force. She grabbed Terry instead, yanking the mouthy shadowstalker up from his seat and pulling him along behind her, away from his table.

A sudden silence fell across the room, as everyone’s attention was drawn away from their conversations and onto the unfolding dispute before them.

“Hey!” Terry said, alarm entering his deep voice and making him sound quite comical. “What are you doing?” He tried to pry Cassie’s fingers off his T-shirt, but she held tight.

Gus scrambled to get out of the way. The rest of the shadowstalkers watched in mute silence—not one of them dared to interfere.

“Cass!” Eve was yelling at her now. “Just let it go.”

Cassie pushed Terry ahead of her, and he collided solidly with the front doors.

“Where are we going?” His voice had risen a few octaves.

“My mother doesn’t like fights inside.” Cassie threw his own words back at him. “And you just said I should listen to her.” She barked a humorless laugh. “I have to set a good example, you know.”

Cassie opened the left of the double doors and dragged Terry forcibly through it.

AS THE DOOR slammed ominously closed, Eve leapt onto and over the bar counter. “Vicki, watch the bar. Garrett, keep everyone inside. No one comes out.”

“Got it.” Resting a warning hand on his gun, Garrett faced the room full of shadowstalkers.

Eve darted after Cassie, hearing Raven fall in step behind her. She didn't bother to tell Raven to stay put, for Eve knew she wouldn't listen, not where Cassie was concerned.

Rushing outside, Eve couldn't quite believe the scene in front of her. She wondered if she'd stepped through a door into an alternate universe, where her kind, generous, and usually calm daughter had been replaced by a woman who was the complete opposite—she'd never seen Cassie so out of control, so full of wild fury that her eyes threw blue sparks.

Cassie was screaming at Terry, the shadowstalker she'd dragged outside, and he looked absolutely terrified.

“Hit me!” she yelled, shaking Terry fiercely. “Hit me, or I'll hit you!”

Having little choice, a bewildered Terry struck her—a left hook to the face. Cassie didn't even try to defend herself, she just took the blow.

“Again,” she said, her eyes mad with anger.

Eve was beyond mortified, aghast by what she was seeing. Terry raised his hand once more, but Eve, though running, was still too far away to physically stop him. She shouted at him instead. “Don't you dare!”

Terry halted at her words, lowering his arm in evident relief.

“Inside,” Eve said as she drew alongside them.

Terry tried to leave, but Cassie grabbed his bicep, stopping him from going anywhere. “I'm not finished with you yet.”

“You *have*,” Eve said in no uncertain terms—the decision had been made. “Let him go.”

Cassie ignored her, which was evidence enough of her affected judgment. “Hit me.”

Eve fixed Terry in place with a dark glare. “You do, you'll answer to me.” She didn't want Cassie to take another hit, for she already had a head injury, and that injury was nowhere near healed. The stitches hadn't reopened, but only because Terry's strike had landed on the right side of Cassie's face, and the wound was on her left—she'd been fortunate.

Terry looked torn, as if he knew he was caught between two women who were more than capable of pulverizing him if they wished. Eve knew her threat would win out, despite the fact that Cassie was a better fighter. Every shadowstalker who knew of the Valentines, knew how protective she was of her daughters.

As Eve expected, Terry chose her side, and raised his head with as much defiance as he could muster. “I won't hit you.”

Cassie's blue eyes glinted like ice for a moment, then she reluctantly pushed him away. Terry bolted as soon as he was released, sprinting back toward the pub as if being chased.

Eve understood that Cassie's irrational behavior was down to an accumulation of factors, the main of which being her sleep deprived state. What she didn't understand was Cassie's reasons, or what was going through her mind, which was clearly in turmoil. More than anything, Eve wanted to understand.

"Why did you want him to hit you? For Christ's sake, Cass, you have a head wound!"

Cassie was pacing back and forth, like a caged animal. It was clear she was seething mad, boiling over with rage.

Eve injected some force into her words. "Damn it, Cass, you answer me! Why did you want him to hit you?"

"To make me feel better!" Cassie shouted, her tone coated with so much vehemence that it hardly sounded like her own voice.

Never in her life had Eve heard such a confusing or contradictive statement. "About what?"

"About Dad. About everything."

Eve stepped in front of her to stop her pacing. She firmly gripped Cassie's shoulders and held her in place. "Why do you feel bad? I don't understand. You need to talk to me so I can help."

"I don't want your help. I don't deserve it." For the briefest of moments, Cassie looked as if she was going to break down, burst into tears, but the anger overrode her once more.

Eve's worry for Cassie grew. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"I can't talk to you about this. Just leave me be." Cassie wrenched free of Eve's grip and stormed brusquely away, but not back toward the pub. She headed out across the surrounding plains, as if wanting to put some distance between her and everyone else.

Raven, who'd been stood off to one side, came to join Eve. She placed a hand on Eve's arm to stop her from following Cassie. "Eve, I've got this. I think I've just figured it out."

Eve nodded unhappily and stayed where she was—Cassie had just said she couldn't talk to her, so she had to let Raven try. "Don't let her out of your sight." In Cassie's unbalanced state, Eve was concerned as to what she might do.

"I won't. I promise."

RAVEN KEPT HER distance, wanting Cassie's anger to wane before confronting her. She wasn't at all frightened that Cassie would hurt her—Cassie would never do that—but Raven wanted her to be open to reason, which Cassie wouldn't be if she was swallowed in the heat of a temper.

By Raven's reckoning, they'd walked half a mile before Cassie began to slow, the anger visibly seeping from her body.

Raven closed the distance, hurrying when Cassie bent over at the waist as if to be sick. Cassie didn't throw up, but stayed in that position, with her hands braced on her knees. When Raven reached her, she laid a hand on Cassie's back. She didn't say anything. She just wanted to let Cassie know she was there.

"I'm sorry," Cassie whispered.

"You don't need to apologize, not to me."

Cassie slowly straightened, rising to her full height. The light cast by the moon was sufficient enough for Raven to see Cassie's expression—she looked exhausted. Her strength seemed to have drained along with her anger.

"Seriously, Cass, sit down." Raven kept a hand on her in concerned support. "You look like you're about to keel over."

"You could be right about that." Cassie used Raven's guiding hands and sat down on the cold ground. Raven knelt directly in front of her, so they could see one another clearly.

"I do need to apologize to you, Raven. For pushing you away when you're trying to get close. For being the one who keeps you at arm's length, when we both know we want more from each other. For stopping us from becoming more than just friends."

Raven's sole intention while following Cassie had been to get her to discuss her father. But despite the tangent, Raven let her continue, wanting to hear what she had to say.

"I know how much it upsets you, especially since you know I feel the same way." Cassie reached out and caressed Raven's cheek. "And I do feel the same way."

"Me too." Raven smiled, taking Cassie's hand from her cheek and kissing it.

"The least I owe you is an explanation for why I am this way." Cassie swallowed, then withdrew her hand from Raven's grasp. "For why we can't be together."

Raven's heart sank. She fought to keep her voice level. "I'm listening."

"I was eighteen when Dad died. Old enough to clearly remember what life was like before his death. To remember how my mom was around him, how happy she was, so full of love for him that she practically glowed with it." Cassie's eyes grew sad. "When Dad died, a chunk of Mom died with him—a large chunk. She was...is, so devastated by his death that she's never recovered, she's only a shadow of her former self. I don't know how Mom can even look at me," Cassie whispered brokenly, "knowing I cost her her one true love." She bowed her head in defeat. "She must hate me for it."

Despite her own personal anguish, Raven couldn't bear that Cassie thought such a thing. "Eve would never think that. She certainly doesn't blame you, Cass."

"Well she should. It was my fault." Cassie continued before Raven could protest further, getting back to the original topic. "So you see if I allow myself to love you in the same way, I open myself up to that. I won't risk that kind of pain, Raven." She shook her head. "I can't. I barely cope with the death of my dad. I couldn't handle it if I lost you too."

"I understand why you're scared, Cassie. I really do. But you have to know that I'm not going anywhere. I won't give up on us."

"There is no 'us', Raven. I'm sorry but there can't be. If there was anyone for me it would be you." Tearful blue eyes held Raven's for an infinite moment. "But I won't allow it. I'm sorry. We can only ever be friends."

Cassie dropped her gaze, as if unable to bear the look of misery and hurt on Raven's face. She shook her head distraughtly. "I hate myself for causing you pain, and for destroying our chance at happiness." Cassie spoke the next words so quietly, it was as if she was speaking to herself, "I haven't changed a bit from that day at the warehouse, I haven't moved forward at all. I'm still running away. Harley was right all along—I'm a coward." With that, Cassie stood and started to walk back toward the pub.

"I *will* wait for you," Raven called out, disheartened when she got no response. She set off after the woman whom she loved more than life itself, the woman who had just broken her heart. Raven had promised Eve she would keep Cassie in her sights, and she intended to keep that promise. More than that though, Raven personally wanted to see that Cassie got home safely—her distressed state was still very much apparent. Even if they were destined to only ever be friends, Cassie was still the most important person in Raven's life. Nothing would ever change that.

EVE WAS STILL outside The Smoking Gun. With some difficulty, she had remained where Cassie and Raven had left her, and she'd anxiously been awaiting their return. Sheer willpower

had kept her rooted to the spot, since every part of her was itching to follow Cassie. Eve had been waiting for what seemed like an eternity, and she felt some relief when she finally made out Cassie's shape heading toward her, though that relief diminished somewhat when her eldest walked straight by her without a word.

"Cass?"

"I'm done talking," Cassie said in an abrupt tone. "I'm going upstairs to rest."

Eve let her go. She could tell from Cassie's demeanor that things hadn't gone well. The fact that Raven wasn't walking alongside her, and was behind her a short way, also wasn't a good sign. The door to the pub slammed behind Cassie, and as Raven neared, Eve noticed the tears on her face.

"What did Cassie say? Why are you upset?"

"The usual. She won't let me in. I start to get close, then she pushes me away."

Eve frowned. "I thought we were past this. You seemed to get closer after we returned from Oaksmount." She shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with that girl. Cassie loves you, Raven. She's in love with you. I can see it every time she looks at you."

"I don't doubt that, Eve," Raven said. "And I love her." She paused a moment, as if trying to sort through her thoughts. "The best I can figure it is like this—she nearly died at Oaksmount, and the fear that caused overrode the reasons why Cassie believes she can't be with me. But then when the nightmares returned, it's brought back all that stuff with her dad, and reinforced her original reasoning."

Eve felt her brow furrow further, but in confusion this time. "How are the two connected?"

"Cassie saw the change in you after Mathew died. How devastated you were. And how you've never recovered from his loss. Cass fears losing me in the same way, so she won't allow herself to become involved romantically."

Eve thought about the explanation, impressed by Raven's profound insight. "How did you figure that out?"

"I didn't," Raven said. "Cass just told me now. She explained why we can never be together." Fresh tears rolled down her grief-stricken face.

Eve embraced her, rubbing her back reassuringly. "She'll come around, Raven. You'll see."

Raven withdrew, wiping away her tears in a clear effort to try and pull herself together. "This isn't important right now. Cassie thinks you must hate her for Mathew's death."

Eve was so shocked by Raven's words it barely even registered that the trader had just broken her own code and divulged a secret. "What?" she asked, aghast. "Of course I don't. Why would she think that?"

"Because she blames herself. Cassie assumes everyone else does too. The guilt is eating away at her. I tried to set her straight, but only you can do that, Eve. You were there." Raven pushed Eve toward the pub. "You have to go and talk to Cassie right now, and don't let her push you away." Her tone became desperate. "She's on the edge, Eve. You can't allow her to go any further. You have to get Cassie to tell you all of it."

Eve broke into a run. "I will."

"LEAVE ME ALONE," Cassie said as Eve barged into her bedroom unannounced.

Eve came in and shut the door, getting straight to it. She wasn't going to be brushed aside this time. "Why should I hate you?"

Cassie looked taken aback for a second, then annoyed realization seemed to set in. "Oh. So Raven's confidences don't extend to me I see." Her voice rose. "She had no right to tell you that!"

"Don't be angry at her! Raven's only trying to look out for you."

"Well I want you both to just leave me alone."

"We can't do that, Cass. We love you too much."

"That only makes it worse!" Cassie yelled. "You should hate me. I don't want your love, or your praise. I don't deserve it. You should be shouting at me for what I've cost you, not praising me," she said. "You should hate me. I don't know how you can even stand to look at me!"

"Because I love you. With everything that I am."

Cassie clamped her hands over her ears. "Please don't say that. I can't bear it."

"What have you cost me? Why should I hate you?" Eve repeated, determined to get to the bottom of this. She held her ground, despite the fact that she desperately wanted to gather Cassie in her arms.

"Dad. The love of your life. I took that from you." Tears started to fall, but Cassie brushed them away with a furious swipe.

“You’ve never cried over your dad, not even when it first happened.”

“Because I don’t have the right!”

Eve scrunched up her brow in objection. “He’s your father. Of course you have the right.”

Cassie jabbed a finger into her own chest. “I killed him. I have no right being upset because it was entirely my fault. I have no more right being upset than a murderer does over his victim.”

Eve was beyond mortified, appalled to hear her saying such things. And worse still, was knowing that Cassie truly believed them. She was overwhelmed by the anger that Cassie had in her— anger for herself.

“I should have listened to you, instead of rushing in half cocked. That was the mistake that cost Dad his life. You told me to stay away from Vexarva, but no, I had to go rushing in, thinking I could handle it.” Cassie laughed derisively at herself, though the laughter turned into a sob.

“You couldn’t have known,” Eve said.

“You did.”

“No. I was being cautious.”

“As I should’ve been. My arrogance cost Dad his life.”

“You don’t have an arrogant bone in your body, Cass.” Eve softened her voice. “It was an unfortunate mistake, nothing more.”

“It was still my mistake.” Her finger jabbed again at her chest. “That makes it my fault.”

“Vexarva would’ve gotten us another way—it was a trap,” Eve said. “We’ve never come across a demon since who’d amassed an army, or who was as smart as Vexarva. He was well known for a reason. If it’d gone down another way, we may have all been killed.”

“But it didn’t,” Cassie said. “And then worse, I left him there. I ran away.”

Eve felt her voice lift in protest. “You could barely walk! Let alone run. I practically carried you out. And we,” she emphasized the word to point out that she was also involved, for Cassie seemed to have forgotten that, “left because your dad told us to. He knew it was the only way to save us. He sacrificed himself so that we could live. That was the *only* way.” Eve paused to let that sink in. Realization suddenly dawned on her—that was the fight Cassie had been referring to, the reason behind Cassie’s rash decision to confront the galdago. The wrongly placed guilt that Cassie had taken upon herself had seriously impaired her judgment. Eve could see that such a weight on her shoulders was slowly crippling Cassie, more than her badly injured leg had ever done. She had to make Cassie see sense.

“You couldn’t have done any more for your dad, neither of us could’ve. You almost died as it was.”

“I should have,” Cassie whispered, looking down at the floor.

Eve stepped forward and gripped both of Cassie’s biceps. “No, sweetheart. Don’t you ever say that. Don’t even think it.”

Cassie lifted her chin, and Eve felt her heart clench painfully at the sorrow she saw in those blue eyes.

“I try to…” Cassie swallowed audibly. “I do all of Vicki’s work, trying to make up for what I cost her—he was her father too. I worked hard at physio to overcome my leg injury, then became the best fighter I could so I would never be a liability again. I try to make amends, but I know I never can. No matter what I do, it’ll never be enough.”

Eve now understood why Cassie was so lenient with Vicki, why she bought her sister gifts all of the time, why she’d been so fixated on her fighting, and why she pushed herself so hard—guilt was the driving factor. The pieces finally fell into place.

“You don’t need to make amends, Cass.” Eve squeezed her arms to quieten her when she opened her mouth to argue. “The only one to blame for what happened is Vexarva. The demon killed your father, not you. That’s who I and everyone else holds accountable. Not you. Never you, Cass. I’ve never, nor will I ever blame you. And as for hating you,” Eve shook her head, a small smile forming, “I could never hate you. You’re my daughter. I love you.”

Cassie’s tears finally broke free, the dam now burst. She sank to her knees, violent sobs wracking her body. Eve knelt with her, wrapping her arms securely around Cassie and holding her tight. Cassie returned her hold, clinging to Eve desperately. They cried together—Cassie finally allowing herself to grieve over her father’s death, and Eve cried for Cassie, for the pain and guilt she’d carried around inside her all these years. Eve whispered soft reassurances in Cassie’s ear, while she trembled and shook against her. They stayed that way for a long time, Eve providing Cassie with the comfort she so badly needed.

When her crying eventually abated, Cassie seemed completely drained, as if the emotional release had taken every last bit of her strength. Eve helped her to stand and led her to the bed. They sat down on it.

“You’re going to sleep with me tonight, Cass.” Eve gently tucked a strand of dark hair behind Cassie’s ear. “Hopefully now you’ve opened up, you’ll be free of the nightmares. But if not, I’ll be there.”

Cassie nodded tiredly, and managed a weak smile. “I love you too, by the way.”

Eve smiled and kissed her brow. “I know, sweetheart.” She was so relieved that Cassie had finally unburdened herself, and she knew it was largely thanks to Raven. Eve thought of how sad

Raven had been when she'd last seen her, and wanted to return the favor. "And speaking of love, Raven told me why you keep pushing her away. Because of how upset I was after losing your father."

Cassie simply nodded. This time, she didn't appear annoyed by Raven's indiscretion.

"Despite the pain over losing Mathew, I wouldn't have been without him," Eve said. "I would rather have the pain and the good memories, than no memories at all. Tell me," she patted Cassie's hand affectionately, "I know you love Raven, but could you imagine loving her any more than you already do?"

Cassie's reaction was instantaneous. "No. I love her completely."

"Then how does becoming a couple change anything?"

Cassie frowned, as if she hadn't thought of it like that.

Eve answered her own question, "It doesn't. You'd be just as devastated if you lost Raven now, because the feelings are already there. Don't deny yourself this. We both know Raven is the one for you." She could see she had made her point, and patted Cassie's hand once more. "Think it over."

Eve got to her feet, reaching out to help Cassie. "Come on, let's get you into bed. You're exhausted."

IN THE PUB, Raven was helping to clear the tables of their empty glasses. For without Eve or Cassie, Vicki was completely snowed under with work. Garrett was also helping, but because of his injuries he was limited to serving drinks.

Raven had seen Cassie at work enough times to know what her job entailed. She picked it up quickly, but still took three times as long as Cassie would've, as nearly every person or group she passed seemed to want a word with her. And she was too well-mannered to ignore their requests. She was able to keep the conversations relatively short, and promised several shadowstalkers they would revisit the discussion tomorrow if the topic warranted more time. Clearly seeing she was busy, and after Cassie's earlier outburst, no one protested the delay. It was a good thing too, for Raven couldn't have concentrated on what they had to say, as she couldn't think clearly at the moment—her mind kept wandering back to Cassie. Was she all right? Eve had been gone a long time. What was going on upstairs? Would Cassie ever forgive her for breaking her confidence?

Raven had just returned to the bar when Eve appeared from the hallway. She quickly set down her tray. "Is Cassie okay?"

The question seemed to alert Vicki and Garrett to the fact that Eve had entered. They'd both had their backs to Eve, and were busy serving drinks. They immediately stopped what they were doing and looked to Eve expectantly.

"I can't be long," Eve said. "I have to get back to Cass."

Vicki's brow was lined with worry. It'd clearly alarmed her to see her older sister so off-balance. "Is she all right?"

Eve laid a calming hand on Vicki's shoulder. "She will be." Her gaze fixed solely on Raven. Eve nodded to her. "I know everything."

Raven smiled, relief flooding through her. She'd known Cassie couldn't continue carrying such a burden, and that Eve would not only help, but she would set things straight in Cassie's head. She'd make her see that none of it was her fault, and no one blamed her for what happened, least of all, Eve herself.

Eve indicated the pub full of shadowstalkers. "Are you managing all right here, Vicki?"

"Yeah. Raven and Garrett are helping out."

Eve nodded to them both. "I appreciate that." She glanced back to Vicki. "But you can close the pub early if you need to."

"I've got it, Mom. Don't worry about us. Just take care of Cassie."

Eve smiled, brushing her knuckles across Vicki's cheek in gratitude. "You'll have Cass's bed tonight, she's in with me."

Vicki nodded in understanding. It took Raven a moment to realize that Garrett was still staying with them, so had Vicki's bed, and she'd been bunking in with Eve.

"Raven." Eve tilted her head toward the kitchen. She obviously wanted to speak to Raven privately, where there'd be no chance of eavesdropping. "A word."

Raven didn't hesitate. She quickly followed after Eve, who led her down the connecting hallway.

When alone in the kitchen, Eve faced her directly and got straight to it. "I know you don't break confidences. Thank you for doing so tonight."

"It was Cassie," Raven said by way of explanation. "Even if she hates me for it, I couldn't let her go on suffering like that." It was the truth. Raven had broken her 'strictly confidential' rules, knowing full well that she might suffer the fallout and face the backlash of such an action, but she'd willingly done it anyway, because it was the best thing for Cassie

“I’m not the kind of woman who’s easily impressed, Raven—but I’m impressed.” Eve smiled at her. Her gaze became reassuring. “Cass doesn’t hate you. Not in the slightest.” She paused briefly. “I do realize it’s difficult, but I’m asking you to wait until morning. I know Cass will want to see you, but she’s not in the right frame of mind now.”

Raven nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Eve stepped in and gave Raven a comforting hug. “Everything will work out. Trust me.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

RAVEN TOOK A deep calming breath, trying to compose herself and settle her nerves. She didn’t know why she was suddenly so anxious, for nothing had changed. Yes, she’d been rebuffed by the woman she loved, but they were still friends, nothing had changed in that department. She just had to act as normal, and surely that couldn’t be so hard, could it? Now at least she knew where she stood, where to draw the line. That had to make things easier. Raven took another breath, and was about to knock on the door to The Smoking Gun, when it abruptly opened.

Cassie stood there, a beaming smile on her face.

Straight away, Raven noticed a visible improvement in her, though it had little to do with her winning smile—which she couldn’t help but return. The dark shadows beneath Cassie’s eyes weren’t as prominent, she was no longer unsteady on her feet, and most importantly, the pain and misery had vanished from her expressive blue eyes.

When gestured inside, Raven entered, spotting Eve pottering around behind the bar. Eve nodded to her in greeting, then discreetly disappeared, as if to leave the two of them to talk.

“How are you, Cassie?” Raven copied Cassie’s action and sat down on one of the barstools.

“Good. *Really* good,” Cassie said. “The last time I felt like this was before Dad died.”

Raven felt her eyebrows rise, surprised by how easily Cassie had brought up her father’s death, and pleased to see no lurking shadows cross her face at the mention of it.

“And I have you to thank for it, Raven. If you hadn’t told Mom what I said, I’d probably still be in the same situation.” A rueful smile appeared. “We both know how stubborn I can be.”

Raven nodded. "I know all too well." It came across harsher than she'd intended, but the pain over being rejected was still fresh. She tried to cover it up with another question. "So I take it you're not mad at me for breaking your confidence?"

Cassie shook her head vigorously. "Just the opposite. I slept well last night, no nightmares."

Raven smiled at the news, genuinely happy to hear that. "I'm glad for you, Cass."

"I worked through a lot of stuff," she said. "And I want to put it behind me, move forward."

"That sounds like a good plan."

Cassie took hold of Raven's hand, cradling it between her own.

"I want to move forward, with you by my side, Raven."

Raven's eyes locked onto Cassie's. They stayed that way for a long moment. "As a friend?"

"As a partner," Cassie said. "If you'll still have me?"

Raven was elated, but she managed to contain it. She had to be sure. She couldn't let her hopes build, only to have them dashed once more. "How do I know you won't back away again?"

Cassie held her gaze as she spoke, "You have my word I won't."

Raven knew a shadowstalker's word was their bond, and they lived by it. It could be trusted. She knew of only one group who had an even stronger code of honor, whose word you could literally bet your life upon—the Valentines. Cassie's word was more than enough for Raven; she trusted her completely.

As if trying to reassure her further, Cassie reached out and tenderly cupped Raven's cheek. "How could I back away? When I love you so much."

Raven felt a delighted grin spread across her face. "I love you too, Cassie."

Cassie smiled, looking profoundly moved. She gave Raven a playful tug, pulling her to her feet. Raven stepped closer and wrapped her arms around Cassie's neck, finding it easier since Cassie was still seated, so wasn't as high up. She felt Cassie's arms encircle her waist, one hand sliding up her back to bury itself in her blonde hair. When their lips met, it was all Raven had imagined it to be, and more. She poured all her affection into the kiss, and they both took the time to explore one another.

When they parted, Raven whispered, "We'll take things slow. I don't want to rush you."

Cassie smiled. "Not *too* slow. I think we've waited long enough."

“I WAS COVERED from head to toe in galdago blood,” Vicki said, enjoying telling her tale. Garrett had wanted to know about their shadowhunt at Oaksmount, and she was more than happy to fill him in on the details. She wasn’t quite sure when it’d happened, but she found that the topic of shadowstalking no longer bothered her. In fact, she was becoming quite fond of discussing such things, like she had been all those years ago.

Vicki shook her head dramatically. “It completely ruined my outfit.”

Garrett chuckled. “Stalking is a messy business. Though many shadowstalkers would consider it an honor to be covered in galdago blood. It’s quite a feat to wound one, let alone kill it.”

Vicki gave him a knowing look. “I bet you’re one of those stalkers.”

Garrett grinned. “I am indeed. I don’t suppose you saved me any?” He glanced keenly around the bedroom, as if expecting to find a jar, or perhaps even a bucket, of oily black blood.

“Ew! Gross.” Vicki laughed. “My clothes are in the bin, so knock yourself out.”

Garrett appeared pleased by the news. His eyes darted to the small waste bin. “I can’t see them.”

“They’re in the outside bin. They reeked.” Vicki’s nose scrunched up as she recalled the smell. “Even the galdago’s blood had an offensive odor.”

“Yes, but its blood is very distinctive. It’s proof that you fought and managed to wound one.” Garrett shrugged. “Technically, I didn’t wound it, unless I hurt its fist when it bounced off my ribs.”

Vicki nodded gravely. “I’m sure you did.” She burst into giggles. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

Garrett crossed his arms across his chest. “I must be getting old, not killing any.”

Vicki realized his pride was somewhat dented. Eve, Cassie, and herself had all managed to kill at least one galdago each, and he hadn’t. She didn’t imagine he’d had much of a chance—being wounded and surrounded like he had—but that knowledge didn’t seem to appease Garrett’s ego any.

Vicki tried to make him feel better. “No way,” she said. “We’d written you off completely. We didn’t see how anyone could get out alive, alone as you were. But you proved us all wrong.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Even Mom was amazed you made it.”

Hope appeared on Garrett's face. "Really?"

"Absolutely."

Garrett nodded, looking cheered by her words.

"Tell me about some of your other shadowhunts?" Vicki leaned eagerly forward. "That hunt in the swamp was hilarious."

"It wasn't hilarious to me! I was stuck out there all night."

Vicki shook her head as she laughed. "If you're that much fun on a hunt, you'll have to come along with us sometime."

Garrett grinned broadly. "I usually work alone, but I suppose I could make the odd exception."

Vicki returned his smile. "I'd like that."

"JEEZ. WAS IT something I did?" Vicki asked the lone man left at the table. She'd come to clear away the empty glasses, and four of the shadowstalkers had abruptly got up out of their chairs and walked away. She looked around self-consciously, wondering what she could've possibly done to offend them. Her eyes returned to the lone man, to see if he could shed any light on their sudden departure. At second glance, she realized who it was—Marx.

"They'll be back in a minute." Marx cleared his throat somewhat apprehensively. "Would you please join me?" He stood and chivalrously pulled out a chair.

Vicki reluctantly shook her head. "I'm working."

"Please?" Marx said. "It'll only take a moment."

Vicki finished stacking the glasses onto the tray and sat down.

Marx took a sip of his beer. He gestured to his glass. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Not while I'm working." Vicki saw his face fall, and quickly said, "But I'll take a rain check."

Marx smiled. He seemed to grow more confident by Vicki's response, and leaned toward her. "Do you think you and I could...?" He broke off with a shake of his head, flicking his wavy

brown hair aside with a finger when the ends fell into his eyes. "I'd be honored if you would allow me to take you out sometime. To dinner, perhaps? Or wherever takes your fancy."

"A date?" Vicki felt her voice rise in excitement. Here she was, mulling things over, trying to think of the best way to go about asking Marx out, and what, if anything, she'd say. And here was Marx, one step ahead of her, thinking along the very same lines.

His smile grew nervous. "If that would be amenable to you, yes."

Vicki looked to the shadowstalkers who had left the table only moments earlier, now all stood clustered by the bar. An inkling of recognition dawned, and she suspected she knew why the group had made themselves scarce. Not one to be coy, she confronted Marx directly with her suspicions. "Did you ask them to leave so you could ask me out?"

Marx nodded. "I did, yes. I didn't want to put you on the spot."

Vicki appreciated the thoughtful gesture. "That's sweet."

"Plus," Marx shrugged humorously, "if you turn me down, I thought it'd be less embarrassing this way."

Vicki laughed. She could see he was nervous, and found it endearing. She decided to put Marx out of his misery. "I'm not going to turn you down."

His smile transformed into a grin, enhancing his boyish good looks. "No?"

"No," Vicki said. "I'll go on a date with you. To dinner."

Marx nodded emphatically. "Dinner it is."

"Somewhere nice."

Marx chuckled. "I can see I'll have my work cut out with you."

Vicki tipped her head in all seriousness. "You will." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Are you up to the challenge?"

Marx didn't falter. "If you're the prize, I'm up for anything."

Vicki laughed girlishly, picking up her tray as she stood. "Flattery works well on me."

"I'll remember that," Marx said as she sauntered away.

Vicki called back to him over her shoulder, "You do that."

“GOOD MORNING,” RAVEN said as she ambled into the kitchen, a happy smile on her face.

Eve took a bite of her toast. “Morning.”

Garrett’s spoon of cereal paused on the way to his mouth. He was surprised to see Raven at this hour. “You’re here early.”

Raven switched on the kettle. “I never left.”

“You have a full house, Eve,” Garrett said with a smile.

“That I do.” Eve sipped her coffee. “Someone’s gotta take in the riff-raff.”

Garrett ignored her dig. “Perhaps you should start charging? Though not until I go of course.” A sudden thought struck him—the Valentines didn’t own a sofa, for they had no living room to put it in. Their communal room was the kitchen. He peered at Raven. “Where’d you sleep?”

Raven’s lips quirked upward. “With Cassie.”

“In that single bed?” Garrett raised a dubious eyebrow. “You must’ve been cramped in there?” He shoveled another spoonful of cornflakes into his mouth.

A twinkle appeared in Raven’s eye. “We didn’t mind. It was...cozy.”

Eve laughed, nearly choking on a mouthful of coffee.

Garrett frowned mid-chew, not understanding why Eve thought that was funny. Before he could ask, Cassie entered the kitchen, crossing to where Raven was boiling the kettle and hopping up to sit on the worktop. Some of Cassie’s dark hair fell in front of her face, and Raven reached up and tenderly brushed it back.

Garrett couldn’t help but notice, since his chair was facing them directly. The look they were sharing made him feel like he was prying. Realization dawned that they were more than just friends, and as if to confirm it, Cassie pulled Raven closer by her belt loop and soundly kissed her on the mouth.

Garrett felt his eyes widen, and he glanced to Eve, who was watching him amusedly. Despite having her back to them, Eve seemed to know exactly what was going on.

After a quick cup of coffee, which they shared, Cassie announced she and Raven were going out for the day.

“Have fun,” Eve called after them as they left.

Garrett spoke into the following silence, “Well, I now know that the mysterious ‘right girl’ you mentioned is someone I know.” At Eve’s chuckle, he said, “How did I not see it?”

Eve shrugged. “It’s beyond me. Perhaps you don’t notice things that are right in front of your face?”

He snorted. “Clearly.”

“You didn’t have a clue.” A self-satisfied smile formed on Eve’s face. “But I had fun messing with you.”

His gray eyes narrowed, not pleased she’d managed to get one over on him. He knew Eve would never let him forget it either. However, he dismissed all of that when he identified one of the perks. Many a heart was going to break over the news that Cassie was taken, and the fact that the lesbian rumor was to be confirmed only added icing to the cake.

“You know what this means?” Garrett slapped the table excitedly. At Eve’s blank look, he said, “It means I get to see some grown men cry after all!”

Eve chuckled. “I can see you’re quite taken with that notion.” She paused, as if thinking about his words. “Actually, I wouldn’t mind seeing such a thing. You’ll wait till I’m there.”

Garrett sniggered, already picturing burly, tough shadowstalkers in floods of tears. “Will do.” He began to butter a slice of toast. After a few moments of quiet reflection, he said, “They make a good looking couple.”

Eve nodded. “Sure do.”

“Why doesn’t anyone know they’re an item?”

“They’ve only recently got together,” Eve said. “But they’ve only ever had eyes for each other. That’s one of the reasons why Cassie’s never responded to any of her suitors.”

“Ah.” Garrett tipped his head as clarity hit him. He felt a bit better hearing that the romance was new—in act if not by thought—it made him feel less dense. “Why’d it take them so long?”

“Cassie had issues, but she’s past them now.” Eve smiled. “I couldn’t have chosen a better partner for Cass, she and Raven are so well-suited. I knew they were right for one another years ago.”

Garrett gave her a knowing look. “And you’re always right.”

“*Nearly* always.” A slight pause. “I was wrong about you being dead.”

“Well there’s a first for everything.” Garrett felt a smile emerge. “Does that mean I’ve blemished your unblemished record?”

“I was glad to be wrong,” Eve said seriously. She raised a warning finger. “But don’t make a habit out of it.”

Epilogue

EVE CARRIED ACROSS a large succulent joint of roast beef. She placed it in the center of the kitchen table, the steam still rising from the freshly cooked meat.

Garrett sniffed the air in obvious appreciation. “That smells delicious.”

Moving around the table, he continued pouring wine into each glass, jumping hurriedly out of the way when Vicki rushed over with a bowl of piping hot potatoes.

Cassie came next, carrying a bowl full of vegetables, and a plate piled high with Yorkshire puddings. They all took their seats as Eve and Raven brought the last dishes to the table.

As she sat down, Eve said, “Before we start the meal, I’d like to say a few words.” She paused briefly, waiting until she had everyone’s attention. “We all know why we’re here. To pay our respects to Mathew, on the sixth anniversary of his death. Mathew left behind a wife and two beautiful daughters, who miss him dearly.” Eve held a hand out to each of her girls, sitting on either side of her, and smiled when both immediately clasped her hands. “Mathew also left behind a close friend, a brother in spirit if not by blood. Garrett.”

Garrett nodded and tipped his drink to Eve.

Eve’s focus then slid across the table, to the seat next to Cassie. “And Raven. Though you never had a chance to meet Mathew, I know he would’ve welcomed you into this family just as the rest of us have.”

Raven smiled, looking touched by the inclusion. Her smile grew when Cassie’s hand rested on hers.

Eve raised her glass in a toast, and everyone around the table followed suit. “To Mathew.”

“To Dad,” Vicki and Cassie said in unison, while Raven and Garrett repeated Eve’s sentiment.

Garrett began to tell one of his stories as they all tucked into their dinner, and Eve recognized it instantly. It was a shadowhunt that she, Mathew, and Garrett had gone on many years ago, before Cassie had been born.

Eve looked around at her family, pleased to see that both Cassie and Vicki were enjoying the tale. It was the first time she’d seen them happy to remember their father, instead of just saddened by the memory of his death. It warmed her heart to see it, and she was pleased that they’d finally begun to heal—to look toward the future, instead of only recalling the past. It was Eve’s greatest hope that they could all now move forward with their lives, taking pleasure in one another, as a family.

Garrett soon had them all laughing, and Eve realized with some delight that her hopes were already coming true.

About the Author

Sky was born and raised in England. From a young age writing has been her greatest joy, and she likes nothing more than to immerse herself in whatever story she is working on. She also has a passion for the outdoors, and enjoys long walks at the beach or in the countryside. Ideas for several more stories are rattling around inside her head, all of which are just waiting to be written.

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