

MEMOIRS
OF A
VAMPIRE HUNTER
VOLUME 0.5

AN OMINOUS OPENING

OLIPHIA ELLISON

Memoirs of a Vampire Hunter

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To all those who have come before me, thank you.

One

On a drowsy night in March, I drove through Chicago's streets. At roughly three in the morning, it was pretty quiet, but not dead, and I was trying to keep a low profile. Fortunately, my black Suburban went relatively unnoticed, and I didn't have too much trouble finding my destination courtesy of my fancy GPS system.

The two-story building was an odd but pleasing geometric shape in the architectural style branded by the 1960s and took up a corner of its block. Having not done enough research first, I had to drive all the way around the next block to get the rear entrance I needed.

I pulled into the driveway that ran the length of the building and parked as if I was supposed to be there. I walked right up to the back door, quickly picked the lock, and slipped inside to search for the alarm system. After it was disabled, I looked for the door that would lead me to the bodies. I easily located the body I was looking for lying on an embalming table.

Formerly a Caucasian male in his midtwenties, the corpse had dyed black hair was dyed black, and his skin was tattooed by ink and track marks. He was a victim of his own addictions, and I suspected his death was a part of problem I was looking into. Said problem was a string of suspicious-looking deaths in Chicago. On paper, they were either outright drug overdoses or some other complication related to drug abuse. This guy was no different.

I stood at the head of the table and shook my hands out before I placed my fingers on the dead guy's temples. Whether I was an actual crazy person was debatable, but there was a reason I had broken into a funeral home and put my hands on a corpse. I was the überpsychic vampire hunter, and I was looking for a vampire up to no good. Psychometry, or the power to see the history of just about everyone and everything I touched with few exceptions, was one of the many ways it sucked to be me, but it definitely helped me determine which vampires to hunt.

The dead guy had gotten himself hooked on the wrong endorphin rush in the form of a goth girl pretending to be a human pretending to be a vampire. This was the fourth victim I had seen, but he was the earliest. He had been dead awhile, only recently discovered, and his psychic history was degraded. It made the stream of what would normally be like a time-lapse film in reverse, complete with thoughts and feelings, become waves of static in between bits of way too much information. There was enough left to identify the killer, which was good. But I spent too much focus on that and didn't notice the cops arriving to investigate a disturbance, which was bad.

I sighed and dug out a travel-sized bottle of hand sanitizer. The officer found me scrubbing my hands as he shined a flashlight at me set to stun and ordered me to freeze and put my hands up.

I did and followed further instructions to walk forward and turn around. I let myself be cuffed and escorted out to his patrol car, which was all lit up behind my Suburban with his partner standing not far away. I was then bent over the trunk, and not gently, before I was searched. When asked if I had any weapons, needles, or other sharp objects, I admitted to the silver-coated throwing knife in my pocket, because that was all he was going to find.

Despite my total cooperation, Cop One wasn't taking any chances. Given his experience as a police officer and what he had learned when he ran my license plate, and given the way I looked, I couldn't really blame him.

I stood at five foot eight, and "curvy" was a description often applied to me. I didn't do myself any favors by wearing skintight black leather pants and a custom-made black leather corsets. I also wore military-grade black combat boots and a knee-length black leather jacket. I left my shoulder harness for a pair of matte-black Glock handguns and silver-coated throwing knives in the Suburban. My long, naturally occurring dark-red hair was up in a high ponytail, making me look even younger than my actual age of twenty-one. So did my pale skin, pouting lips, and glacial blue eyes with about as much warmth.

Cop One made a pile of my belongings from my jacket near my head on the trunk. A handful of disposable gloves. The bottle of hand sanitizer. A very useful multi-tool. A small but powerful flashlight. A lock-pick set. A small bottle of sunscreen, SPF not enough. Lip balm. Simple dark-tinted sunglasses. Several pens. Keys. And my cell phone. The rubber-banded stack of items of the utmost importance never made it to the pile.

He finished his pat down, helped me upright, and marched me to the front of the cruiser. He then got in it to go through my stack of identifying information. Cop Two kept an eye on me the way rookies usually did, while he pulled on the front of his flak vest to be comfortable and occasionally answered the radio clipped to his shoulder. I flashed him a cold smile that made him uncomfortable before I stared off at seemingly nothing and scanned my surroundings out of habit.

I wanted to ignore the psychic broadcast of my epic failure as some of the nearby residents peeked out windows and cars slowed to gawk. Cops at a funeral home in the middle of the night made people wonder, and they usually

weren't wrong. Sadly, this was a pathetically common occurrence for someone they called the Seer, and having telepathic and empathic abilities on the list of my powers didn't help me feel any better about it.

As for the fuzz, I wasn't too worried what they thought. They could take me in on a breaking and entering charge and at least two dozen weapons charges if they decided to open up my Suburban, but I was really hoping to avoid yet another mishandling of a corpse charge. They would all go away regardless of my being arrested, but these things showed up when the fuzz ran the name Jayde Matthews. So did a Florida-issued concealed-carry permit the state of Illinois didn't recognize and a matching PI license that was basically useless everywhere. There were other things of lesser relevance attached to my name, but not a word about being a card-carrying member of the supernatural world. The cops usually thought I was an overzealous PI or a loony in need of a bin, which wasn't entirely untrue in either case.

But I was in Chicago, and I knew people in the Chicago PD. This became apparent when an unmarked cruiser arrived and a plainclothes detective entered the equation.

Detective Espinosa was a homicide detective but also a vampire. You couldn't guess just by looking at him that he had a set of retractable fangs and a special diet, but I rarely had a problem identifying a supernatural being. Vampires had a drastically different view of the world, and that made it easy for me to identify them. More importantly, most vampires, including Espinosa, were living and breathing people and not evil and unnatural creatures of darkness. Espinosa appeared to be in his fifties, with his longish hair slicked back and the hard eyes of a cop who had seen it all. At five foot ten, weighing two hundred pounds, and with wide shoulders, he cut an imposing figure that he often used to his advantage.

Espinosa ignored me while he had an exchange with Cop One and told a story about me being an overzealous but helpful PI that he had asked to look into a case. This was true enough, because he had asked me to look at a case, and it wasn't the first time. It wasn't the first time he had to bail me out of a jam either. He showed a case file as proof and claimed his ass would be in a sling for my screwup, but he would take it from there. Cop One wasn't impressed, but he was happy enough to let the detective deal with the paperwork.

At that point, I slipped my cuffs and earned a frown from Espinosa. I smiled sweetly and held them out in reply. He handed them off to their rightful owner and gave me another set to put on. I barely refrained from rolling my eyes but put them on like a good girl with my hands behind my back and everything.

Espinosa took me by the elbow, bagged up my crap on the trunk, and retrieved my stack of important items before marching me to his cruiser to stuff me in the back. He climbed in front but didn't go anywhere so he could sort out the mess I made over radio and cell phone. I slipped the second set of cuffs and waited patiently.

When he was less busy, he held up his hand for the cuffs and said, "I thought we were past B and E, Jayde."

I winced. I could have avoided a scene if I had just called Espinosa first. "I was in a hurry, and I apologize for making your life more difficult, but I didn't have much choice. Degradation was setting in."

He sighed. "Tell me it was worth it."

"It was," I said and proceeded to explain why.

After going over the case file with him, I had gone to see the bodies still in medical examiner custody. That hadn't gotten me much more than a face, phony names, and a hunting ground amongst the local goth scene. My next step had been to pick up every newspaper with obituaries that I could get my hands on. I had gotten a psychic hit, had done some more research, and had learned how very little time, if any, I had to get anything useful. The guy in the morgue had gotten closer to the vampire than other victims, and she had divulged many details to him, including a real name and a home address before she had ultimately killed him in a fit of childish rage.

Espinosa listened until I was done and said, "All right, kid. You did good. Just call first next time, will ya?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks to you we can move forward, but you don't want in, do you?"

"Not really, but if you need me, I'll help," I said because even though I killed people for a living and I was good at it, I didn't like it.

Espinosa knew this about me and wasn't surprised by my answer. "Don't worry about it, kid. You're free to go."

He handed me my bag of crap, and I thanked him. While I stuffed my pockets, he got out to open the back door for me. The other cops were gone, and the world had moved on from my epic failure, which I was grateful for. Espinosa's next words? Not so much.

“One more thing. Simms was spotted in the area.”

I scrunched my nose. “I don't know why.”

“Me neither. I was told to give you a heads-up though.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing, kid. Stay out of trouble.”

I smiled at that and said goodbye before trotting over to my ride. I got in and left rather than sitting and thinking about what it meant that Travis Simms had allowed himself to be spotted.

I drove aimlessly while I put in some calls to find a new case. I didn't start with my actual employer though.

The supernatural world was full of tired clichés and unoriginality, so it was run by a supernatural government comprised of mostly vampires, and everyone in the know was under its rule. There weren't that many of us in the supernatural world, only ten million or so, and vampires made up roughly half that number. Unlike fictional representations, the vampires and their government weren't that bad. There were other supernatural types within the system at all levels, and even though humans didn't have much say, there were laws against murdering and enslaving them. There was also a law against exposing the supernatural world that was nonnegotiable.

And because the supernatural world was full of tired clichés, there was Venator. It was a human organization that operated outside of vampire and human law and disguised itself as a kind of supernatural law enforcement. In reality, it was all about fueling a pointless and bloody feud with the rest of the nonhuman population, but mostly vampires.

I avoided getting caught up in said feud but it had been going on for the better part of three centuries and I was a member of Venator. Avoiding it was sometimes impossible but I liked to think hunters were doing some good in the world even though that was highly debatable. Despite the drama, I was good at the job, bad at being around people, and unable to hate blindly. I did my job better with the help of vampires and supernatural government. I didn't care

much if my boss liked it either. That said, I exercised discretion and made sure my ass was covered at all times.

Loyalty in Venator was as non-negotiable as exposure.

Once my life manager gave me the details of a case in Reno, Nevada, I put in a call to Venator and requested the assignment from an underling. My story was that I received a tip worth following up on, which was a common enough occurrence that it wasn't questioned further. I scheduled a file pickup even though it would be all but useless to me and then moved down my list of problems.

I worked out the details of picking up the information the vampires had via a courier. I grabbed breakfast from a drive-through. I picked up the Venator file from a guy at a Starbucks in Aurora, Illinois. I made a supply run. I found someone had broken into my Suburban, but nothing had been taken. Something had been left behind.

Hanging from the rearview mirror was a single ~~United States~~ Marine Corps—issued dog tag. I already knew who had done the breaking and entering the instant I touched the door, and I didn't need the name on his dog tag to tell me. Rather than get dragged into a conspiracy, I dropped the file on the other seat as I climbed in. I got out a glove to remove the offending item and dropped it into the center console to be ignored. I then hit the road because I had work to do.

Two

Somewhere off Interstate 80 in western Nebraska was a truck stop with a restaurant in it and I usually avoided it like the plague. There was nothing wrong with the place. It had decent food, and the staff didn't even blink at a strange redhead in black leather. The tables were clean, the chairs only a little uncomfortable, and the decor offered pleasantly boring earth tones. I avoided it simply because it looked and felt like a diner.

The meet with the courier had been outside of the truck stop, and I decided it was a good time to refuel and get a better look at my new case. I had already spent the day on the road and still had a long drive ahead of me, so I ordered coffee with my lunch despite my usual aversion to caffeine.

I pulled my work out when I was finished eating and the table was cleared. Eventually my waitress was curious enough to ask what a pretty young girl like me did for a living. Telling her the truth wasn't going to work, but my options for an answer were limited. I had crime scene reports spread out in front of me while I made notes in a yellow legal pad. I went with private investigator so I wouldn't have to lie outright. The inevitable question of how I got into that followed. I answered with, "I just sort of fell into it," because that was as close to the truth as I was willing to go.

Even if I could tell people the truth, I usually didn't. It wasn't a simple explanation, and some reacted better than others. Saying "I kill people for a living" rarely went over well. Then again, neither did "Vampire hunter." And how did I get into that? "I was born with a bunch of psychic powers, and it was my destiny or whatever you want to call it." The truth was complicated, bordering on embarrassing, and in most cases it was just plain crazy talk so it was best avoided.

My waitress accepted my slightly bullshit answers, let me get back to work without interrupting me, and kept my coffee cup full. She was going to get an excellent tip.

I focused on the work in front of me, and, like many of my cases, this one was looking like the work of a vampire having a psychotic episode resulting that resulted in the deaths of humans. Murder was against supernatural law and punishable by death. There wasn't a lot of room for technicalities either. Vampires didn't go to jail for all eternity, and there was no coming back for the ones that snapped. Unlike most hunters, I investigated my cases thoroughly and

usually offered [the perpetrators](#) a trip to the Lower Council of North America to be dealt with. Some went the easy way, but most wanted to start a fight and I was forced to end it, which meant I did most of the executing in my cases too. Killing people for a living was a fucked up thing but it was a necessary one in the supernatural world, and I never took it lightly.

The information provided to me by the vampires was fairly standard and helpful. Someone inside local law enforcement had made copies of a case file and sent them along with other pertinent details of the supernatural variety. Venator's file wasn't nearly as helpful, and full of pointless and annoying prejudice.

I put my fingers on the papers and let my powers do their thing. Psychometry didn't give me much on copies, but occasionally my clairvoyance would pick up on something from the future. I wasn't paying much attention to telepathy and empathy. I was paranoid enough to sense danger if it came, but my focus was on work, which was actually my second mistake. My first was being in a diner.

I realized the error of my ways when a man slid into the chair across from me. My mind caught on first and immediately recoiled at this new presence. My body tried to do the same before I checked the action and covered it by sitting up with a frosty glare.

He was six one with a lean build and a face on the narrow side of the average cute guy. His soulful blue eyes were behind wire-rimmed glasses, and his dark hair was long enough to threaten the tips of his ears. He was dressed in a black T-shirt under a black canvas jacket. Under the table, he wore black cargo pants and combat boots. I also knew he was armed the same as I was.

The verdict was still out on Travis Simms's friend-or-foe status, but he was definitely unwelcome. In typical Travis fashion, he ignored my glare in favor of flagging the waitress down for another cup of coffee with a shy smile and a friendly tone of his vaguely New England-accented voice. The waitress was charmed, but I couldn't blame her. I had been once as well. Or maybe I still was. The verdict was still out on that one too.

The waitress left to fetch his coffee, and he turned that damn smile on me like a weapon. I kept glaring back at him. He had chosen his timing well. I wasn't going to make a scene in a public venue. More importantly, he knew he was the reason I avoided diners in the first place.

After the waitress came and went, he toned the smile down but didn't turn it off. "Hello, Blue Jay."

I kept my glare intact even though the familiar nickname was like a stab in the chest. "Why are you here?"

"I have a job for you," he replied, sipping his coffee.

Unfortunately, the man in front of me was very good at disguising his thoughts in unrelated details and cryptic bullshit. He was also technically my boss because he was second-in-command of Venator. I didn't care much for respecting my superiors and following orders like a good little hunter.

"No."

"Yes."

I gestured to the table. "I'm already on an assignment."

"Tell the Kovaks to be at the University Inn on Virginia between one and three a.m.," he said, and he added a room number for good measure.

I closed my eyes as I sighed. Travis was one of the strongest clairvoyants in the world. He could not only see the future in multiple outcomes, he could control it. He shared that he knew when and where the Magistrates of Nevada needed to be strictly to make my excuse irrelevant. "Do I even want to know how long you've known that?"

"Probably not. You usually don't."

"Why are you here?" I asked again.

He reached into his jacket pocket and removed the dog tag that came from my locked Suburban, placing it on the table in front of me. "I left you a message."

As in a psychometric one. "And I didn't retrieve it for a reason."

"There's a serial on the West Coast."

"That's nice."

"It's going to be a problem."

“Bummer.”

He gave me a look that said I was being a brat. “A serial is bad for everyone, and this one’s hunting on the San Andreas.”

The San Andreas fault line was the place where tectonic plates met, and the most noticeable effect of them grinding on each other was an earthquake. Like any disaster, supernatural or otherwise, an earthquake created psychic energy, and the San Andreas produced a lot of earthquakes in varying degrees of severity. The future quakes, including the next “Big One,” produced a large amount of clairvoyant energy that attached itself to the area, creating what was known as a psychic hot zone.

There were hot zones all over the world, and some were easier to be in than others. The most notable in North America was Yellowstone National Park and its super volcano that was scheduled to wipe the park off the map along with large parts of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, cover two-thirds of America in ash, obliterate whole species of plants and animals, change the global climate, and kill hundreds of millions directly and indirectly. There was a lot of death and destruction centered around that one hundred fifteen square mile spot and that was best avoided by any clairvoyant. It hadn’t been a pleasant experience for me the one time I went, but it was potentially lethal to a strong clairvoyant like Travis.

The San Andreas wasn’t quite that bad because it was a multitude of events spread out over time and roughly eight hundred miles, from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The energy fluctuated with some predictability, but it was still a hot zone and best avoided by clairvoyants. More importantly, Travis had history there, and that was best avoided by me.

“Nope,” I said as I sat back and folded my arms over my chest. “You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m going to a hot zone with you. I might be tempted to kill you.”

He drank his coffee while looking thoroughly unimpressed. “I can’t see how this thing goes, and you’re the only one I trust to have my six.”

“Jackass is your partner. Not me,” I said, and there was no stopping the bitterness that leaked into my voice.

“I left him at home.”

“Because he’s a walking clusterfuck? Or because I’d be more than tempted to kill him?”

He sipped and didn’t answer because it didn’t really matter why he hadn’t brought Jackass with him.

“Still not doing it.”

He set his cup down with a sigh. “I was really hoping you’d be reasonable.”

I narrowed my eyes. “When you lost your marbles, did you forget that I hate you? I’m not interested in getting pulled into yet another conspiracy that ends badly for me. I’m not doing this. End of discussion.”

“I’m the bait, so I need you, ok?”

“You’re an idiot,” I said as I gathered up my now-useless paperwork and left the dog tag. I slapped cash down on the table, stood up, and made a swift exit.

“Jayde,” Travis called after me in exasperation.

I ignored him and stormed out into the sunny afternoon. I made a beeline for my Suburban, only to find that my escape route was blocked by a strikingly similar Suburban. I stopped and fumed. Travis caught up to me at a leisurely pace and easily dodged the fist I threw at him, which only pissed me off more.

“Don’t do it,” he said before I could throw any more punches he would just dodge.

“I hate you,” I growled.

“Not enough.”

“I’m leaving, and I suggest you let me,” I said coldly.

He sighed but unlocked his vehicle to get in it and get out of my way. I got in my own ride and sped off as soon as I was able. He didn’t follow, but I knew this wasn’t the end of it. That would be much too easy.

Three

After ensuring the information given to me by the clairvoyant asshole was passed along to the Magistrates of Nevada, I stopped in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and treated myself to a hotel room with tasteful decor, real wood furniture, and an in-room hot tub while I waited for confirmation of what I already knew. Unfortunately, a soak in the tub and a few hours of sleep didn't make me feel any better when the call came.

Usually when I had nothing to do I found another case or requested another assignment. I had a feeling that was only going to end up being a moot point. Travis wasn't so easily deterred, and he was merely humoring me until he came back to be twice as annoying. And if that didn't work, and I didn't go willingly, he would just break out the zip ties and make me. He had done it more than once, after all.

To say my relationship with Travis was complicated was an understatement of epic proportions. He was more than just my boss and a frustrating know-it-all.

Way back in the dark ages, a prophecy was made, which was probably some clairvoyant's vision turned into cryptic bullshit. What this prophecy actually said was unknown to me, but the gist of it was that an überpsychic would be born and save the world or something equally as cliché. Low and behold, I was born about three hundred years later.

Being the überpsychic they call the Seer sucked about as much as you would think and then some. Like most psychics, I was born with my powers. That had led to a diagnosis of schizophrenia and a ten-year stay in the loony bin, where I was given a bunch of psychiatric drugs I didn't need, put through therapy that wasn't going to help me, and raped when I was twelve. I might have been more bitter about the bin, but the copious amounts of drugs wiped out most of my memory of that life and managed to give me a bonus power in the process, which I kept a closely guarded secret. Not even Travis knew about the impossible thing I could do.

The worst part about being the Seer wasn't my past. The day-to-day of living with all the psychic crap I was subjected to was definitely up there on the list of ways it sucked to be me, and suicide was an appealing option, but obviously I could live with it. Just how long I actually would was debatable, and being a vampire hunter was a good

way to get killed while still using my powers for the greater good or whatever. No, the worst thing about being me was that my future was controlled by clairvoyants like Travis. I liked to cling to the illusion that I had a choice, but I knew that it *was* just an illusion, and I had Travis to thank for that.

On the day I was sent to the bin, Travis had his first vision of the Seer. I was five, and he was fifteen. Ten years and a complex conspiracy later, I was rescued from the bin and recruited to Venator.

Travis's influence on me was vast and annoying because we spent about eighteen hours a day together for three years of training plus a year in the field that was comprised of living out of a vehicle and hotel rooms. He trained me, shaped me, and made me the person I was today. I knew him better than anyone else did, but that didn't mean I knew him completely, and even I had trouble separating what was real or not with him. Despite that, I had still been naive enough to believe he loved me more than the Seer. I was wrong, and I had the scars to prove it.

Since the worst mistake I ever made, Travis hadn't gone away, but he had kept his distance and only showed up for "work." It was always unavoidable, and I was never happy about it, but there were times it was easier to go along with it. I had a feeling this was not going to be one of those times.

Rather than surrender, I checked myself out of my hotel room and hit the road with no destination in mind. I exited the parking lot, readied my phone, and once again weighed my options. I stopped at a red light and was just about to call my life manager when the futility of escape made itself known.

Travis slim-jimmed the passenger door open and hopped in like it was no big deal. I glared at him. He nodded forward. "Light's green."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I practically screamed in outrage.

"No. The light's really green."

"I don't care. This is not ok, Travis. You can't just break in here."

He wasn't impressed by my tantrum. "Can you stop drawing attention to us and drive?"

I reached for a gun, pointed it in his direction, and lost the weapon as he easily took it from me. I growled angrily in response.

“Are you done?”

“No.”

He sighed. “I said I need you. I’ll beg if you want, but it won’t make you happy. There’s nothing I can say that will, and that’s my fault. I wish things were different but they aren’t. You’re the best at what you do, and I need you to make sure the serial stops with me. I trust you to do it before he kills me because if anyone gets to kill me it’s you, right?”

“Really Travis? That’s what you’re going to go with?”

“Pretty please with sugar on top?”

With a resigned sigh, I put my hand out because I was a sucker apparently. He placed the gun in my hand without hesitation, and I put it away against my better judgement and then drove through the next green light.

“Thank you,” he said.

I made a noncommittal noise. “Tell me what you know.”

“Not much. I can’t see in, so everything I know is from what I’ve seen after he moves off the San Andreas and there’s an FBI-led manhunt,” he explained. “The victims are male, thirties, average, closeted, and usually married. The serial picks them up in bars and takes them to hotel rooms where he tortures them with surgical tools and drains them with needles to take the blood with him. He dumps them at their homes for their families to find and outs them by carving ‘fag’ into their foreheads. He did two in Portland and two in Seattle. And he’s going to start again in San Francisco this week. He’ll do six on the San Andreas before he moves to Vegas, but the manhunt gets going by the time he’s done in San Fran, so we have less than a week.”

“And you’re the bait,” I said.

“I’m his physical type.”

Travis was definitely straight, but he was one of the best liars I knew so he could probably pull off the rest. “Is he psychic?”

“Don’t know.”

I frowned. “That’s not helpful.”

“I know what he looks like.” He flashed mental images at me of an attractive Caucasian male in his early forties with dark hair and eyes. “And I know approximately when and where to be to end up his next victim.”

“I don’t like it, Travis.”

“I don’t either, but this is the best chance we’re going to get to stop him before he kills anyone else.”

I pointed. “And how long has that ring been on your finger?”

He glanced at his left hand. “Long enough. I’ve got rings for you too.”

“But I’m not going to wear them so you wasted your time, and you’re missing my point.”

“So ask me if I let the serial kill then.”

“Have you?”

“No. I saw the aftermath and set things in motion six months ago. He was finished with Seattle and somewhere on the San Andreas by then.”

“Fine. Where am I going?”

“Penny’s.”

I sighed. “Why am I not surprised that you want to go to a diner?”

“It’s one in the morning and you want steak and eggs,” he said as if that were reason enough.

I changed directions on the road but stayed on track with Travis. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He surprised me by answering, but in typical Travis form, it was cryptic. “Something I can’t see is going to change things that aren’t supposed to.”

“Must be about the Seer.”

He said nothing and turned away to look out the window, chewing his thumbnail. That was my cue to use my phone and get answers from my life manager, Ricky, even though I probably shouldn't with Travis just inches away. I exercised discretion and made sure my ass was covered at all times, but Travis already knew just about everything I did anyway.

Esteban Ricardo Vasquez was the Magistrate of Florida, and we met because I was supposed to kill him. Much to Viktor's disappointment, Ricky had been innocent, and I hadn't shot first and asked questions never. As it turned out, Ricky had been framed, and after an undercover job we got the real bad guy. Since then, Ricky had taken over micromanaging my entire life, and I let him because it was easier that way.

Whether it was unfortunate or not was debatable, but Ricky was a notorious gossip, and the Seer working with the vampires was the worst-kept secret in the supernatural world, but Ricky's endless knowledge and many contacts had come in handy plenty of times. I was hoping he would be helpful but prepared myself for him to be a pain in my ass.

Ricky answered on the third ring and told me to hold on in his accented tenor. With the loud music in the background, I could picture him at any one of the establishments in his Miami-based empire of dance clubs and fine adult entertainment.

Originally from the Incan Empire, or present-day Ecuador, Ricky had a permanent accent and dark hair, skin, and eyes. He was all of five six and lean like a swimmer, and he dressed like a South American drug lord in linen suits and Panama hats. A Bloody Mary was never far away. His personality was animated, flamboyant, and good-natured, but few made the mistake of underestimating him twice, which was why he was in charge of a busy territory like the tourist destination of Florida.

The music dimmed and Ricky got on the line again. "*Hola, chica.* Lana says you didn't even need to go to Reno but case closed. Vision?"

I glanced at Travis, but he was pretending to ignore me. "Yeah. It was."

Ricky sighed. "Just not yours?"

“Nope.”

“And what does that *cabrón* want with you this time? Is he going to let something else really awful happen to you?”

It was my turn to sigh as I parked in front of the train-car styled Penny’s Diner. Travis didn’t wait for me to come to a complete stop before he was out of the vehicle and headed inside. I didn’t follow.

“Aw. Is the big bad hunter pouting now?”

I sighed again. Ricky knew enough about my history with “that asshole” well enough to be justifiably angry on my behalf, which was sweet but annoying at the moment. Rather than answer Ricky’s question, I ignored it. “He told me there’s a serial dirtbag on the West Coast.”

“I don’t know anything about a serial dirtbag anywhere.”

“He’s not lying to me about it, even if he is manipulating me,” I said. “There are two victims in Portland and two in Seattle. The last one was six months ago, and the dirtbag is using surgical tools and needles to torture and drain them. He also carves the word ‘fag’ into their foreheads.”

“And that *cabrón* needs you for this why?”

“The dirtbag is going to do six along the San Andreas, and he wants to stop it by using himself as bait.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Travis Simms we all love to hate,” he said, and he was right.

Travis was good at playing God and making enemies, but he wasn’t much for selfless acts. He had a reason for everything he did, kept those reasons to himself, and it wasn’t always for the greater good.

“I don’t know what he’s up to, but he didn’t bring Jackass with him, and I get the impressions he feels obligated to stop the dirtbag. I don’t think it’s because Viktor ordered him to either.”

“The Seer?”

“I’m not thinking no, but I’m not sure it matters,” I said. “I might as well stop a serial killer, right?”

“I don’t like it, *chica*.”

“Welcome to the club.”

He sighed wearily. “What do you need?”

“Let’s start with case files from the Pacific Northwest and get California on board with the idiot’s plan of being serial killer bait,” I replied.

“I’ll see what I can do, but you be careful, and consider letting something really awful happen to him while you’re on the San Andreas.”

I rolled my eyes. “Bye, Ricky.”

He never got a chance to reply because I hung up on him.

I sat in the Suburban and made no move to join Travis in the diner. I couldn’t physically see him sitting in a booth with his head down, reading a newspaper, but I didn’t need to. I didn’t need to guess why he was reading said newspaper either. It was the same reason I wasn’t in any hurry to join him.

The really awful thing that Travis had let happen to me was an old wound that refused to heal for either of us. It just kept bleeding, and every time he came around, he found a way to cut us both deeper. I hated him almost as much as he hated himself, which would have been fine if I could have stopped loving him, but I couldn’t, and that sucked for me.

I already knew nothing good was going to come from this, but my overblown sense of responsibility outweighed my sense of self-preservation, and I was in whether I liked it or not. All I could really do was go along with it and hope things might be different this time even though they wouldn’t be. Telling myself they would be was the only way I was going to get my ass out of the vehicle though. It was just one more illusion to cling to.

Four

I entered the super-retro diner and cringed inwardly as all eyes landed on me. It wasn't a big place, but it was surprisingly busy, and I was me. I tuned it out and headed in Travis's direction, crossing black-and-white checkerboard tiles and passing black-and-white vinyl seating. I deposited a black messenger bag in the booth before sliding in across from him where a plate of steak and eggs and a glass of orange juice were waiting for me.

While I ate Travis kept using the paper to evade any annoying psychics. I continued letting him even after I was done eating and the dishes were whisked away. Removing a pen and a legal pad from my bag, I started making notes more for myself than for Travis. He didn't bother to help.

After a while, I slapped a hand down on his paper. "Quit acting like I can't read between the lines for a minute and be helpful."

He sighed and leaned back in his seat. "There are more polite ways to get someone's attention, you know."

I dropped the legal pad on his paper. "Be helpful."

He looked down at the pad but made no move to touch it. If he did, he would have a vision, and he could feel it. When he started to slide the paper out from under the pad, I took it back. Obviously, Travis wasn't going to have his vision in front of me. That kind of thing was beneath him.

"You didn't have to write that. I can see it just fine on your face."

I ignored that. "Would you like to add anything, or am I on my own as usual?"

With an exasperated sigh, he reached over and snatched the pad from me. The instant his fingers connected, he was seeing another time and place. And he was kissing me in that time and place, which was not something I planned on doing.

He let the pad fall and looked away from me. "That won't end well."

I wasn't going anywhere near that one. I stuffed my crap in my bag and stood up. "Time to go."

He didn't argue as he left cash on the table and followed me out to my Suburban. I tossed my bag in the back and slid in behind the wheel. Before I could ask where we were going, he put an address that was still in Cheyenne into the GPS.

The location was a residential area off of I-80, and Travis's thoughts weren't particularly helpful as to why we were going there. I didn't bother asking, and he didn't bother to explain. The destination turned out to be an unnaturally occurring split-level with Travis's Suburban parked in the driveway. I parked on the street, and Travis was out before I stopped again.

I rolled my eyes, finished parking, and joined him where he had already unloaded a black duffel bag and a black case for a sniper rifle. I could guess which particular rifle he had brought along from his impressive collection. He favored a TAC-338 rifle with fancy upgrades, but Travis could use anything and never miss with or without his power to help him. And yes, those glasses were just for show because he had his vision corrected before joining the marines to be a sniper.

He nodded for me to follow him to the front of his vehicle and upended a thick manila envelope onto the hood. He then gave me the gift of a new alias, complete with an ID, a California-issued concealed-carry permit, credit cards, cash, a house key, and every other piece of paperwork I could possibly need. Travis was nothing if not prepared for all scenarios, but I was not amused by the ring box that was included.

I ignored the box and exchanged the items in my jacket for the new ones, dropping the old into the envelope. I then turned to walk away. Travis sighed but wisely kept his mouth shut and pocketed the box for a later argument.

I climbed back into my vehicle while Travis took the liberty of swapping license plates on my Suburban and loading up.

The back end of my vehicle was full because I practically lived out of it and modified it accordingly. There was a large weapons locker in the cargo area and a particleboard cabinet system I wasn't completely happy with that held my clothes and supplies. Fortunately the Suburban was a big-ass ride with lots of room, and I made it work. Apparently, so did Travis because he put his stuff in the rear seats and himself in the front.

“Now where?”

“Pleasanton.”

I got us pointed toward I-80 and prepared myself for the long drive to California. There were few things about being psychic I actually liked, but the ability to go well above posted speed limits and weave dangerously through traffic was one of them. When I hit the interstate, I floored it, and the Suburban’s gas-guzzling engine responded like the beast she was.

Travis shook his head at me and removed an MP3 player from his jacket to connect to the stereo system I never used. The playlist he started was one full of rock music from the 1990s and early 2000s because Travis was, in fact, a victim of that era. He knew every word of every song from repeated plays. Unfortunately so did I. Despite wanting to shut the soundtrack of our relationship off in a fit of anger, I let it play just so I didn’t have to hear his thoughts in my head.

I tuned him and the music out and drove. Ricky called me somewhere in Utah to set up a courier pickup for the case files and let me know California was a little too eager to let this be my problem but would back me up if necessary. We grabbed breakfast from a gas station when I had to fill the beast up. I met with the courier in the ironic location of Reno and had lunch with Travis at yet another damn diner. I allowed him to drive the rest of the way while I sat in the back with the files.

The Pacific Northwest, like most territories, had people in human law enforcement, and one of those people had caught the first murder by chance but mistakenly assumed it was a human dirtbag. Vampires weren’t above torture or taking blood without using their fangs, and even to me these murders didn’t look like a vampire was responsible.

True serial killers were rare in vampires, but the line of psychological distinction was a thin one. All vampires were weird about blood, and the necessity of it for survival was part of it. Approximately one in five turned vampires would suffer a permanent psychotic break and turn into a mass murderer, but they rarely committed ritualistic murders with almost nothing of evidentiary value left behind. Older born vampires were more likely to exhibit sociopathic tendencies and treat humans as beneath them, but again, this kind of thing wasn’t their style.

That said, there were a few famous serial killers that were vampires. Jack the Ripper, for example, was a born vampire and clairvoyant that managed to elude execution before Travis got to him in his first year as a member of Venator. Jeffery Dahmer had been a human serial killer until he ate parts of one of his last victims and accidentally turned himself. The vampires set up his murder in jail to keep that one from getting out. As for our new serial dirtbag, it was possible he would go down in history, exposing the supernatural world in the process.

To make up for not identifying this killer as supernatural, the detective risked her job to loan me the original case files, her notes, and some psychometric insight into the task force headed by the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit. Their best agent looked fresh from Quantico and clearly didn't know shit about vampires, but he did know his serial killer psychology, and that was somewhat helpful to me.

The "unsub," or unknown subject, as the FBI liked to call dirtbags, picked up his victims in gay bars just like Travis had said. They also looked similar to Travis. Tall but lean. No square jaw lines or round faces. Good looking but not exceptionally so. Dark hair. Blue or light hazel eyes. All four were in relationships with women. Three were married. And one had children. None of the victims were openly gay, and none of the wedding rings were recovered.

After luring his victims, the dirtbag took them to "an unknown location," according to the files. Psychic crap confirmed Travis was right again. The dirtbag had used high-end hotel rooms with big bathtubs for the kill sites.

The dirtbag had bound the victims with duct tape, which left residue on their wrists and ankles. Bruising and muscle damage showed that their arms had been behind their backs, and the finding of a solitary splinter suggested that their legs had been held apart with something wooden during the torture.

The victims had been injected with a sedative and painkillers not easily obtained by regular people. For a minimum of twenty-four hours per victim, the dirtbag had used various tools to probe the inside of his victims and surgically remove their genitalia, which was also unrecovered, as well as drain of them of blood. The hateful word had been done postmortem, and then the victims were literally dropped off at their front door with their clothes and other personal effects in a paper bag.

The first kill was made three years ago. The second was nine months later. The third was eleven months from the second and ten months elapsed before the fourth. The feds had been called in after kill four, but that had been six

months ago, and the case had gone cold, so there was only one fed left still checking up on it. I was beginning to think this was Preston Howard's first case. It was definitely one he could let go of at the very least.

Our dirtbag unsub was very good at not getting caught. He didn't leave much in the way of physical evidence. No fingerprints. No DNA. The drugs had been a dead end. The fuzz hadn't found the kill sites, but even if they had, the dirtbag had used some kind of supercleaner to get rid of the messes in the bathtubs, according to the psychic crap, but I had a feeling that would be a dead end too.

The fuzz and the BAU believed the dirtbag to be a doctor or some other medical professional with anatomical know-how. I agreed. The BAU believed the dirtbag to be a sexual sadist, as in he got off on the pain of others, and was probably homosexual himself with some self-loathing issues. Again, I agreed. The BAU believed the dirtbag had a history of this kind of thing on a smaller scale. I did not agree. If I had to guess, the dirtbag was a turned vamp and something went wrong, which led to a brand-new serial killer with no history of violent behavior.

The dirtbag was smart, in control, and organized. He made mistakes though. He had picked his victims up in bars, and he was seen. The witness sketches were a decent match for him too. He didn't kill more than two in a city, which was a good way to stay ahead of the fuzz, but he screwed up by killing in the same supernatural territory, which made the murders easy to connect and gave my theory of a newbie some more weight. And his biggest mistake of all? He caught the attention of Travis Simms.

Travis was helpful enough to give me more details about what he saw in the future. The dirtbag was currently in the San Francisco area and would grab his next victim at a bar called Trax. After that, the dirtbag would immediately go to the Castro neighborhood and find another victim in a bar called the Moby Dick. The two bars were drastically different, not only in location but in clientele and environment. The Moby Dick was as much of a flamboyant dive as its name suggested while Trax was more like a regular bar that could be found anywhere in America, which the dirtbag preferred.

That kind of change in behavior was a sign the dirtbag wasn't going to find satisfaction in the first kill and would need a quick replacement that would easily be found in the country's most famously gay neighborhood, which was full of bars and clubs catering to the LBGT community and tourists alike.

That theory was given further credence as Travis detailed the downward spiral of a serial killer. In a matter of weeks, six victims would turn up in three California cities. One more would appear in Las Vegas before a standoff with the fuzz that would lead to two more deaths, including the dirtbag's.

I put my notes and the file away when the San Andreas made itself apparent to me, and I climbed into the front seat. Travis had felt it back in Sacramento, but I hadn't until we hit Vallejo. The energy was a tangible thing and felt like being close to a very large source of electricity. It hummed in the air and flickered with small surges as we pattered through a traffic jam.

We didn't talk and the soundtrack kept playing. I closed my eyes behind my sunglasses. My fingers itched to get the knife from my jacket pocket and busy themselves. I managed to refrain and counted vehicles around us instead.

We arrived in Pleasanton, California, and the hell otherwise known as suburbia at around six p.m. on a Thursday. The house Travis had procured was identical to five others on the block except for the color, and it looked like a sad, miniature version of Ricky's hacienda on steroids in Miami. That house was a beautiful Spanish villa-styled monstrosity surrounded by a tropical jungle, with arched windows, stucco walls, and a red-tiled roof. This house was a squat, single-story track home built in the 1980s with vinyl siding, a total of two arched windows, and the requisite red-tiled roof. I was not impressed. The newer-model lime green Camaro in the driveway was slightly more impressive but not really. Travis produced a garage door opener and finally managed to impress me.

"That's a Ducati Diavel," I said as he parked in the garage next to the flat black beauty with a four-valve liquid-cooled twin engine that pushed 162 horsepower and a top speed of nearly 170 miles per hour.

"You can drive it, but..." He didn't finish the sentence and produced the ring box.

"You're resorting to bribery?"

He opened the box and shook it at me, "Ten carats is bribery. *That* is positive reinforcement."

"I'm not going to be pretend-married to you, of all people."

"You already are. There's paperwork that says so."

I narrowed my eyes. "Not doing it."

He sighed. “All you have to do is wear the rings in case I get stalked and watch my six so I don’t get killed. I got you a Ducati to make you feel better while you’re doing it. So pretty please, wear the rings.”

“Do I get to keep the Ducati?”

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll consider it,” he said and shook the box at me again.

I took the stupid box, shoved the rings on, and put my hand out for the keys.

He fished them out of his jacket and held them out. I reached for them only to have them snatched away. “You can’t just take off.”

I rolled my eyes. “I gathered that when I saw you parked it in the garage where I can’t get it out real easy.”

He let me have the keys, and I got out to geek out over my new toy. Travis grabbed his gear and brought it in the house via the door leading to a mediocre oak-and-white kitchen. I didn’t follow until he telepathically bitched at me to.

I wandered through the house until I found Travis in a bedroom, but I stayed in the hallway. He was pulling clothes out that weren’t hunter black, like he was going to take a shower.

“Will you cut my hair?” he asked without looking over at me.

“Sure,” I said with no enthusiasm.

He stepped around me to get a chair from the kitchen, then put it in the bathroom across the hall. He came back for the appropriate tools, which he handed to me with the expectation that I would follow him. I turned to do just that, but then I hesitated.

I had an unobstructed view of Travis as he dropped his glasses on the counter and reached behind him to detach his shoulder harness from his belt. He shed it and placed it on the back of the toilet. He pulled at his shirt next, and off it went, right to the floor.

One hundred and ninety pounds of pure muscle, quite a bit of it on display, was not what I needed to see. He knew it when he looked in my direction and I turned a lovely shade of red to match my hair. He frowned but didn't comment and sat down.

I forced myself forward, set the bag I was holding on the counter, and ditched my jacket after putting on a pair of gloves. I stood behind him and looked down at his medium-brown hair, but I ended up getting stuck again. This time I was staring at the tattoos on his skin.

There was a sizable grim reaper on the right side of his chest with USMC identifiers. His nickname as a marine scout sniper was, in fact, Reaper, which would have been worthy of an eye roll if it were anyone else.

On his back there was a series of Egyptian symbols. The Eye of Ra at the top of his spine below his shirt line. A scarab beetle at the base. In the center was an Ouroboros with a symbol on either side. One was the Feather of Ma'at, and the other was the crook and flail.

I knew what each symbol was supposed to mean but not what they meant to Travis or why he got them tattooed on himself. The Eye of Ra was a symbol of protection for both the living and the dead. The scarab ensured the dead would be fearless in the afterlife when the heart was weighed against the feather of truth. The Ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, was all about renewal and cycles. The Feather of Ma'at was the feather of truth. The crook and flail were the representation of the Pharaohs' power. The crook was for guiding the people like a shepherd, and the flail was for asserting control and power over said people.

“Jayde.”

I met his eyes in the mirror. A silent question was all over his face, and I clearly needed to pull my shit together. I took a deep breath and got to work.

Psychometrics were rarely functioning people because the power was the most brutal to live with. It didn't help that the kinds of things a psychometric learned about a person or an object were usually overwhelming or just plain gross. More importantly, the brain could only take so much input before it shut down one way or another, and being psychometric for the long term often led to things worse than death, like a vegetative state or the inability to decipher what was psychic or not.

What made me special as a psychometric was not that I was the strongest anyone had heard of. It was that I could ignore it or focus on something else. That had both positive and negative consequences. I often ignored too much or simply forgot things to make room for new crap, psychic and otherwise. On the plus side, I could learn any skill I needed by touching the right person or thing.

Cutting hair was one of those skills, and Travis made sure it stayed fresh in my mind by making me use it. In fact, I was pretty sure I was the only one that had cut his hair besides himself in more than five years. That probably had something to do with the fact that I could give him exactly what he wanted. At least, that's what I was telling myself.

In this case, he let me do whatever I wanted to it, which wasn't uncommon when he needed to look different. He trusted me to do something that he was comfortable with that was appropriate for the situation. I left the front long and shortened it in the back for an angled cut. His hair was naturally straight and flat, but all he needed to do was throw some stuff in it to make it fluffy and he would be good to go.

I let Travis handle cleanup and went to my Suburban to lock myself inside. The blade from my jacket found my fingers and started spinning in a familiar and comforting pattern. Its history was my own and no one else's, but it wasn't a very pretty one.

In Venator, a hunter's throwing knives were symbolic. Hunters learned to craft their own and maintain the silver coating as well as to keep them balanced. It was a rite of passage, and every hunter had a set even though almost none of them actually used them.

I didn't make mine. They were gifted to me—and not by Travis. My batshit crazy boss gave them to me in an uncharacteristic display of what was possibly affection. I didn't really know since Viktor was one of the few exceptions to my powers because he was like a psychic black hole that energy was sucked into, never to be seen again.

The knives were as beautiful as they were lethal, and I had put them to use. The habit of spinning one in particular hadn't begun until after the worst mistake I ever made. The infinite playback of its history had become my go-to distraction and served as a reminder of what it meant to be me. The good, the bad, and the bloody. I never went anywhere without it if I could help it, and my habit had worn a path through the silver coating but I kept it perfectly

balanced should I need to use it. I didn't like Travis to see this habit of mine though. It was as good as admitting things that I wasn't even admitting to myself very well.

When Travis was almost finished with his shower, I got into the back seat to fill a small duffel bag with a fresh outfit and supplies for a shower of my own. I grabbed the messenger bag as well, then headed back inside.

I wandered past the kitchen and the living room. Travis had found some decent furniture from a thrift store, and the boxes scattered throughout were labeled with a passable forgery of my curling handwriting, but they were all empty. I found that the other bedroom, which Travis had left to me, had a bathroom attached to it, but the only furniture was a bed with a black metal frame that was great for hanging my shoulder harness on but a headache just waiting to happen. I dropped my stuff on the bed and flopped onto it.

I bent to unlace my boots, then pulled them off and left them on the floor in a heap. Travis knocked on the door.

“What?”

He opened it a crack. “I'm going to get food.”

“And you needed to tell me this instead of thinking it why?”

“We should talk about that vision.”

“No we shouldn't because it's not going to happen.”

“One possibility means that it will, Jayde,” he said like I didn't already know this.

The only visions I had were of the only outcome that I couldn't do a damn thing to change because I wasn't a strong clairvoyant. I was unwilling to accept that at the moment though. “No. It won't. End of discussion.”

He sighed. “I made you a promise and I don't plan on breaking it. That's the one thing I can never do.”

He shut the door but his point lingered long after he was gone. The promise in question was made after he broke my heart, and it was to never touch me again. He hadn't wanted to make that promise because touching me strengthened our connection and made it easier for him to see the future, but having to see our history from his

perspective on repeat as long as there was contact was not something I could handle. He knew that and grudgingly gave me his word.

Travis wasn't known to be trustworthy, but he had never made me a promise to me he wouldn't keep. It was the only thing I could trust where he was concerned, and almost three years after making the promise to never touch me again, he hadn't even touched me accidentally. He was humoring me, of course. I couldn't stop him from doing whatever he wanted, and he pushed the absolute limit of what was considered "touching" on a regular basis. I liked to cling to my illusions though.

If I were being honest with myself, and I almost was, I could admit that the kiss was going to happen, and there was an irrationally large part of me that wanted it to. Travis's prediction of it not ending well was an understatement of epic proportions, and I didn't even want to think about how much it was going to hurt.

To get my mind off it, I locked myself in the bathroom to take a shower, change clothes, and generally avoid Travis for as long as possible. When I couldn't hold out anymore, I left the bathroom. I grabbed my jacket and messenger bag before heading to the kitchen and parking my ass at the card table masquerading as a dining table.

I got out my work and started making more notes. Travis joined me with food and water bottles. I kept my focus on my work while occasionally pausing to fork enchilada into my mouth. Eventually I pushed the legal pad at Travis and actually ate my dinner. When I was finished, I took the disposable dishes to the kitchen and dropped them in a trash bag.

I sat back down. "You do have an actual plan, don't you?"

He nodded absently as he wrote something down.

"And that plan is?"

He didn't look up to answer. "Scout. Sleep. Maybe scout again. Go to Trax tomorrow night. Get the serial. Should be a cakewalk."

"Any other famous last words you want to utter?"

He finally looked at me. "Let the good times roll?"

“Cute.”

He flashed a smile, then went back to the notes. “Your OCD is getting worse.”

“Bite me.”

“Say it again and I might. You seemed to like it if I remember correctly.”

I fought a furious blush unsuccessfully. “How about I just shoot you instead?”

“It won’t make you feel better,” he said, reaching over for the case files. “Take the bike and do some recon. Don’t get arrested, and be back here at a reasonable hour because you need sleep.”

“Yes sir,” I said with a touch of sarcasm, but I stood up. “These files need to go back before someone notices they’re gone.”

“Call your life manager to set up a drop. I’ll make copies while you’re out.”

“Ok. I’ll let you know.”

He grunted, but I had been dismissed, so I went. After some maneuvering, I got the bike out and strapped on the accompanying helmet, which was less about safety and more about not getting bugs in my teeth. It also had a tinted visor for the sun. Plus, it made me look like an anonymous badass on a sweet motorcycle, and that was the only thing I wanted to be for a while.

I spent my time driving through the streets of San Francisco faster than I should have been. My ability to drive like a maniac was impaired by the hot zone’s interference, as it made it more difficult to sense the immediate future. I was still the überpsyhic with a death wish who liked to go fast, so I did.

I went through Oakland and took I-80 across the water into San Francisco proper. The Ducati didn’t have a GPS, and my familiarity with the city was iffy at best. I didn’t do much work for California because of the San Andreas, and the Magistrate wasn’t a fan of Venator. Or me for that matter. Regardless of that, I still had to learn the city because the last thing I needed was to get lost while chasing a serial killer.

After a few hours of driving around, I headed for the Castro neighborhood. It wasn't hard to find the cluster of bars and clubs where the Moby Dick was located, but I avoided going down the main thoroughfares. There was a lot going on, of course. People of all types and sexual orientations walked the streets or enjoyed the nightlife, which was lively and interesting but nothing I hadn't seen before. Drag queens and debauchery weren't what I was looking for anyway.

I scanned for the dirtbag in the minds of others, but my main focus was on the lay of the land. I learned what kinds of businesses were around, what types of people lived nearby, and where potential hiding places were located. I then moved on to do the same thing around Trax.

Around last call, I decided to pack it in and head back to basecamp. Travis was gone, doing who knew what. The files were also gone, and the drop had been made hours ago. I decided I didn't care where he was and went to my room.

I ditched the jacket, hung my weapons within easy reach, and laid down without bothering to change or even take my boots off. I had a justifiable case of rampant paranoia and liked to be ready for anything, so I often fell face-first on a bed and went to sleep just like this. Too bad sleep rarely came easily for me.

Five

I woke up when my ass hit the floor because I was thrown out of bed by a vision of the next "Big One." Waking up violently was a normal occurrence for many clairvoyants due to the fact that clairvoyants had visions instead of dreams, and they were usually unpleasant. I was just grateful I hadn't hit my head on the way down this time.

After a quick mental scan, I found Travis asleep in his room. I got off the floor and left mine, intending to go to my Suburban for supplies, but I didn't get that far. I got stuck at his open door.

Travis was wearing blue jeans and a well-fitting dark blue T-shirt for some mediocre band he liked in high school. With one arm over his head, the shirt was riding up, and his jeans were low on his hips, so there was a significant strip of skin showing. That wasn't what made me step inside and move closer to the bed though.

There were many versions of Travis Simms, and almost all of them wore hunter black. There was only one that ever wore his heart of his sleeve, and that was the one he kept buried deep under layers of apathy, sarcasm, and lies. It was the version he never wanted anyone to see because it was the one that was vulnerable and human and possibly the real Travis. It was that version I fell in love with, and it was the one that was lying there looking like it hurt just to exist.

As much as I wanted to do something for him, there was no point. He had already proved he was willing to rip my heart out for the sake of a plan, and putting myself in a position to let him do it again wasn't on my to-do list. And yet, I sat there until his vision of disaster began.

I got up and resumed my mission for supplies, then spent some time working out before getting a shower, making it quick. When I was dressed and armed once again, I went to the kitchen. Apparently Travis had been shopping because the fridge and a couple of cabinets were full. My cooking skills were limited, but I could successfully manage scrambled eggs, bacon, and frosted flakes, which was what I did.

Travis rolled himself off the floor when he smelled coffee beneath the awesome scent of bacon and came to investigate. He went to the coffee pot and greeted me with, "That apron is ridiculous you know."

I glanced down at Ricky's most recent Christmas gift and smiled to myself. It was black with a cartoony cheeseburger and speech bubble that read "Bite me." I loved it *because* it was ridiculous. "I don't care what you think because it's not only funny, but practical. It's my dry cleaning bills that are ridiculous."

He rolled his eyes. "You're the one that wanted to wear leather."

"Because it works," I said as I turned the stove off and started filling plates.

"Sure it does."

"We can't all be guys and wear clothes that are too big, Travis." I dropped a plate on the counter for him. "Some of us are women."

He parked himself on the counter and picked up the plate. "Uh huh."

I gave him a look. “I’m not a small woman either. I’m five eight and a hundred and fifty pounds. T-shirts and cargoes are not a good look for me.”

He popped a piece of bacon into his mouth. “But they are more practical.”

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth, and no they aren’t,” I said. “My ass is wide and my boobs are big.”

“Oh, I know Jayde. I’ve had my hands—”

“Do not finish that sentence.”

“Well I have. And we’ve had this conversation before.”

I took the apron off and folded it neatly on the counter. “And you’ve never had to run with boobs so you don’t know about how a sports bra doesn’t cut it, so you can fuck off.”

I picked up my plate and grabbed a water on my way to the table. He followed. “You know that isn’t why you dress like a walking cliché.”

“No?”

“You do it because it’s what you think people want to see. To quote you on this, you’re a vampire hunter so you might as well look like one, right?”

“It’s more like most things in my life are controlled by a certain clairvoyant asshat, and the way I look isn’t one of them so I wear what I want,” I said, adding a saccharine smile.

He conceded the point with a nod. “Ask me what the clairvoyant asshat did last night.”

I raised my eyebrows but continued using my mouth for eating.

“I made copies, and they’re in your bag.”

I gave him a snarky thumbs-up.

“I met with the courier too.”

“Super.”

“And I left the hot zone after.”

“Because you’re a clairvoyant asshat?”

“We’re still a go for tonight, but more things are changing that aren’t supposed to.”

I put my attitude away. “What things are we talking about?”

He hesitated as if he wasn’t going to answer, but then he did. “It’s not the Seer. Just you. And me.”

I frowned at him. “Can you be more specific, or am I about to hear my favorite words ever?”

He smiled faintly. “You’re not going to like the answer no matter what I say next.”

“No surprise there.”

“Something’s going to happen to make me sink low. I don’t know what it is, but it won’t be pretty when it happens.”

“How low?”

Another faint smile. “You don’t really want to know, Blue Jay.”

Translation: very low. “Awesome.”

“And that kiss? It’s going to hurt. Bad.”

“Good thing it’s not happening then.”

He ignored that. “I haven’t seen why, but I won’t do it unless you let me.”

“Which I won’t be doing.”

“I can’t say I won’t enjoy it because I’ve enjoyed every kiss I’ve given you, but this one is going to hurt more than all the others combined.”

“Because I’m going to shoot you if you do it. Or if you even think about doing it.”

He swiped a piece of bacon off my plate. “You’ve seen where it happens, and odds are that the San Andreas gives you all the power to stop me. But you don’t. That means you *let* me.”

“Why are we even talking about this? You’re not kissing me.”

“Not even to maintain our cover?”

I stood up. “Not ever. For any reason.”

I took my dishes to the trash. He followed. “Do you think I like hurting you?”

“I know you don’t but you do it anyway, don’t you?”

He sighed. “We both know I’m a monster, Jayde. That doesn’t mean I want to hurt you. And this kiss is going to happen. The question is why. The sooner we figure that out, the better, but we can’t do that if you won’t admit it.”

“You’re the clairvoyant asshole that can change things, and you’re going to make sure it doesn’t happen, k?”

I didn’t wait for an answer and left the kitchen to go to my room. He followed. “You know it doesn’t work like that. There are just some things that can’t be changed, and this is one of them.”

“Don’t care. It’s not happening.”

I shut the door in his face and then leaned back against it to make sure it stayed that way. He sighed and rested his head on the door. “This is important, Blue Jay. I can’t tell if it’s before or after I sink. If it’s before, then that’s probably the reason why I sink. But if it’s after, then it’s something else on both counts.”

Travis wasn’t above a major meltdown, but there weren’t a lot of ways to trigger one. “Why are you really after this serial dirtbag?”

“Can’t tell you.”

I closed my eyes at my least favorite words in the world.

“I can tell you it’s not because of the Seer.”

“Personal?”

“No.”

“Coincidence?”

“There’s no such thing.”

That was definitely true. “You have history around here. And it’s the kind that can make you sink.”

“That case is closed.”

I wasn’t the only one in denial, but I didn’t call him on it. “How definite is your meltdown?”

“The same as the kiss.”

I sighed. There were only so many reasons I would allow the kiss. Keeping our cover intact was one of them, and it would hurt but not to the level that Travis had implied. All the other reasons hurt too much to even consider. “I don’t have an answer for you, Travis.”

“Yeah. Neither do I.”

“Can we stop talking about it now?”

“How’d recon go?”

“I took a look, but I want to do more.”

“So go. But be careful. We don’t have time for you to get arrested.”

“Because Dean doesn’t like me.”

“He’s afraid of you,” he corrected. “If you fuck up, no one’s going to execute you.”

“Because I can’t be the Seer if I’m dead.”

He sighed. “You have powerful allies, Jayde. You do work for more than half of the Magistrates on this continent, and most of them owe you their lives. The Lower Council of North America considers your word gospel, and the

North American weres made you, a hunter, an honorary member—and they don't like anyone. Louis Marquette, the most powerful man in the supernatural world, gave you an all-access pass to his high-traffic territory. And let's not forget you're Ricky's *chica*. Even Viktor lets you do whatever you want. You're too important to kill even if you weren't the Seer."

He had me there. "He still doesn't like me."

"Don't get arrested, and it won't be a problem."

I rolled my eyes. "Any more unnecessary advice?"

"Let the good times roll."

Six

It took me a while to get back out there, largely because it took me a while to force myself out of my room to face Travis. Even then, I waited until he was busy to make my escape so that I wouldn't actually have to face him.

I grabbed lunch from a fast-food joint on the way back to the Castro and took my time getting there. I drove around a little but parked the bike near the multistory building that housed the Moby Dick.

The architecture of it and the buildings around it was all very San Francisco with a Victorian flair and lots of bay windows. The outside of the bar was blues and grays with only hints of the expected nautical theme. The inside was much more nautical. A sizable fish tank sat above the bar, the obligatory whale was mounted on the wall, and the bar's questionable logo of a whale tail sticking out of water was everywhere.

When I walked in, heads turned and quickly dismissed me as uninteresting, and that was just fine by me. I asked the bartender an asinine question as an excuse to be in there and left right after he answered it.

I took a quick tour of the surrounding businesses and then got back on the bike to head over to Haight-Ashbury. The neighborhood was much quieter, but it was still busy with foot traffic because of a strip of stores, food, and nightlife that ran down Haight Street. I didn't go into the bar or even walk by it in case my scent lingered for the dirtbag to pick up on. He would smell it on Travis and even be lured to it because being the Seer attracted vampires in the worst way. Rather than mess that up, I did some recon and found a place to keep a metaphorical eye on Travis later.

I met up with Travis so that he could take me to dinner. I parked the bike and rode in the bitchin' Camaro for the express purpose of making it smell like me more effectively than the bag of my clothes Travis had put in the back without asking did. Shockingly enough, he didn't take me to a diner. Then again, he was trying to build our cover just in case anyone was watching, and for my part, I humored him.

He drove us back to the bike and gave me a fancy wireless radio. It was only during the radio check that I let myself notice his disguise and how good he looked in it.

A gray V-neck sweater really brought out the blue of his eyes and fit him perfectly. Designer blue jeans sat low on his hips. Expensive gray high-tops covered his feet. His hair was done, his glasses were gone, and his demeanor was changed. He looked the part and then some, but I couldn't help feeling a sense of dread.

It must have shown on my face because he said, "It's going to be a cakewalk, Jayde."

"You're an idiot," I said, and surprised him by leaning over to give him an awkward hug. "Don't get yourself killed."

Before he could do more than close his eyes, I got out and the hell away from him. I put my helmet on, mounted the black beauty, and raced away. He left in the opposite direction.

I took the long way around to my hiding spot and drove slowly to avoid attracting attention to myself. I was also using a significant portion of focus to watch for vampires. I didn't sense any, but I was still exercising caution.

I stashed the bike down a residential road and doubled back to the block the bar was on. Travis was already inside, and I didn't need the sound of a dozen conversations and glasses clinking in my ear to tell me that as I crossed the street. I paused to look around, then scaled a brick wall and quickly slipped between buildings. I stood in the center of the block and a series of what could be considered backyards. I was in the clear so far, but I still had to get my ass onto a roof without being seen. Or heard.

I went to a big tree near enough to one of the buildings and jumped up to grab a branch. I pulled myself up on to it, and kept going until I was even with the third-story roof. I walked out as far as the branch would allow me to, then bent my knees, and sprang off, rolling into the fall to land silently.

I picked a spot, laid down flat on my back, and rested my hands over my chest with my eyes closed. I listened and watched. Travis nursed a beer while making himself look appropriately uncomfortable but available. Men and women alike approached him. Some had cheesy lines, while others took the route of friendly banter. None of them were the dirtbag nor were they vampires or anything else supernatural, so he let them down easy and kept waiting.

Would-be victim number five was also there and looking to get lucky. I kept an eye on him too.

I relayed pertinent details over the radio but was otherwise bored out of my mind. To make matters worse, I was beginning to think we were wasting our time, and the dirtbag wasn't going to show. That meant that something had changed without our knowing about it, and that was very bad.

Would-be victim number five got picked up, and Travis approved a side mission to make sure he would be alive tomorrow. I shimmied off the roof and got back to the street. The two men were headed for a vehicle in my general direction, so I started moving to intercept at a quick jog. I arranged an accident by running, tripping, and falling into them, which earned me a psychometric read and a chance to swipe objects from both of them in my clumsiness. An expensive lighter from one and a wristwatch from the other.

Travis could use the objects later to be sure, but I felt that our would-be victim wouldn't become a victim of anything more than a case of the clap and a messy divorce like any other adulterer.

I let them get on with it with a phony apology and jogged away in the direction of the bike. It was still in range of Travis and the bar, and I wanted to take a quick lap to be sure our killer wasn't lurking somewhere else. Travis approved and suggested a wider circle despite it putting him temporarily out of my range. My instincts told me our dirtbag simply wasn't there, and Travis's instincts agreed, so I took the wider circle. I wasn't surprised when I came up with nothing. Neither was Travis.

When last call was announced, Travis paid his tab and left. He walked to his bitchin' Camaro safely, and we met up in the parking lot of a church not far away. I stayed on the bike and lifted the visor to talk to him through the window.

I gave him the pilfered objects, and he took them but didn't get a vision, so it was unlikely that either man was going to die in the immediate future. "What now?"

He returned the objects to me to get back to their owners later. "I don't know."

"I could drive by hotels and see if—"

"Go. I'll meet you back at the house."

“Yes sir,” I said, dropping the visor.

I hightailed it out of there and spent a few more hours driving around San Francisco. I checked in via cell phone with Travis, and he told me to pack it in when the sun started coming up lest I pass out from exhaustion, which I was known to do. I took his advice.

I went straight back, entered the house, found my bed, and fell face-first onto it. Travis followed me as far as the doorway and stayed there. Thoughts and emotions surged like the energy of the San Andreas as he searched for a way to express any of it properly without starting a fight. He didn't find one until I was asleep, but kept it to himself and went to bed.

Seven

The next day started out like shit for me and just kept on getting worse.

I managed to hit my head on the bed frame on the way out of bed and gave myself a headache. Travis was still asleep, and I left him to it in favor of doing something more productive. I ran out to my Suburban and called Ricky.

“Is it over?” he asked upon answering.

“No. The dirtbag didn’t show,” I said as I sat in the back and filled my duffel bag. “Travis didn’t say it, but something changed and he has no idea what or why. He’s going to be a fun guy today, I’m sure.”

“And where is that *cabrón* now?”

“Sleeping.”

“Mhm.”

“First, I need you to update California that we have a problem, but we’ll handle it.”

“And the second?”

“Find out whatever you can about an FBI agent. Preston Howard of the BAU.”

“Why?”

“He’s on this case and I’m curious. I’ve seen enough in the psychic crap to know he’s young. Like too young to be a fed. But he’s smart. Knows his shit well enough to impress me. That could be bad if he gets too close to the truth or good if he’s a potential resource. Whatever the case may be, I’d like to know more.”

“I’ll see what I can do, *chica*.”

“Super.”

“Anything else?”

I was about to answer with a “no” and get my ass out, but I caught a glimmer from the corner of my eye. Hanging from the rearview mirror was a necklace. The diamond teardrop pendant on a gold chain seemed familiar to me, but I couldn’t place it. I leaned into the front and put my hand out, but I hesitated to touch it.

“You there, *chica*?”

“Yeah. I gotta go. I’ll call you later.”

I ended the call despite Ricky’s voice still coming through the line and dropped my phone in the front seat. I knew this necklace. I just couldn’t remember why.

I wrapped my fingers around the chain and...nothing. I moved my fingers to the pendant and...still nothing. It was just a necklace with no psychic history whatsoever. I put my fingers to the mirror, hoping to see who left it, but that part was missing. It turned out to be missing from my entire Suburban. And the bike next to it. And the whole garage.

Travis found me touching everything I could get my hands on for a second time. “What are you doing?”

I ran one hand over the garage door and held up the necklace in the other. “Someone left—” I stopped and turned to look at him standing in the doorway. He was as white as a sheet and staring at the necklace with wide eyes. “It’s your mother’s?”

He said nothing. His thoughts were ones of panic and his emotions were on high. That was a new one for Travis because he kept his emotions on a tight leash and he didn’t panic. Ever.

“Travis.”

He blinked, shut down his emotions, and reigned in his thoughts. “Where did you get it?”

“That’s a good question. I found it hanging from the rearview in the beast but I have no idea where it came from.”

“What?”

I brought the necklace over and held it out for him. “I can’t see this at all. Past, present, and probably future. And the culprit is missing in the crap.”

He frowned at the necklace and eventually took it from me. “It’s hers.”

Which was why it was familiar to me, but believe it or not, I knew very little about Belinda Simms except that she was dead. So was Travis’s father. And Travis was very young when it happened. She was also exceptionally clairvoyant.

“Lyla wiped it.”

Lyla was the Vampire Queen, and she was Queen for a reason. Not only was she another exceptional clairvoyant, she could erase or block or whatever it was she did to delete psychic energy. It was quite common to find gaps in people’s histories, and most were because of Lyla’s ability. Travis was a fantastic example of this, since there were significant holes in his past, including almost everything pertaining to the Seer, his parents, and who raised him after the fact. Say what you wanted about her, but the Queen protected her people even if they were the “enemy.”

That Lyla could erase an object’s psychic energy from the past, present, and probably future was impressive and a little bit disconcerting but not really surprising.

“Do *you* know where it came from?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “It’s been missing since my parents died.”

“Is it possible Lyla or one of her minions left it?”

He shrugged. “Sure. It’s possible. But you’d know better than me if she can make a person disappear.”

He had me there, but I had never encountered it before, which definitely wasn’t proof of anything. There weren’t a lot of ways to be unseen by psychics though. It required an ability and not mental strength. Lyla was one of those ways. So were Viktor and his black hole. There were also people with shields, even if I didn’t know them personally. It was possible that there was another source of invisibility, but I didn’t know of one. As a matter of fact, I didn’t know much of anything at the moment.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Travis said before I could start asking questions.

“I’m pretty sure that whatever happened to your parents just became relevant.”

“We have a serial killer to catch.”

“We’re stuck waiting around for him to do something, so try again.”

“No. We’re in a hot zone and I can’t see. We are *not* following up on this. It’s too dangerous.”

I rolled my eyes. “When these things find you, they don’t give you a choice. You of all people know this because you don’t give me one when you come around, do you?”

He frowned at me but let me walk away while he stayed. That was fine by me. I was curious, but I knew I wanted nothing to do with that particular conspiracy. I knew I wasn’t going to have a choice though. I usually didn’t.

Eight

Travis and I managed to avoid each other for most of the day. I worked my phone and got pretty much nowhere on the dirtbag. My contacts in other territories hadn't seen or heard of any cases like this one, and no bodies had turned up yet in California.

Ricky also forwarded what little he found on the fed, and nothing in it surprised me. Agent Howard was apparently some sort of brainiac and got a PhD in head-shrinking from a prestigious university by the age of twenty-two. He spent two more years working in his field of criminal psychology before the feds recruited him despite being barely old enough to be an agent. He hadn't been one long either. I wasn't a fan of shrinks, but he spent a lot of time in the heads of serial killers, mass murderers, and other nasty criminals. That was something I could relate to, but the verdict was still out on whether he was a problem or not.

Travis didn't fare any better in his pursuit of a vision. Every time he tried, the San Andreas insisted he see something else. He had given up around one o'clock and had left to get lunch. It was almost three, and he still wasn't back.

Fifteen minutes later, I was on the bike searching for Travis. His cell went straight to voice mail and he left the radio behind so I was relying on telepathy and experience to locate him. I checked Pleasanton thoroughly, but he wasn't there. Neither was the bitchin' Camaro.

I was tempted to try other towns, but something told me that would be a colossal waste of time. It was unlikely that the dirtbag had Travis, and my instincts were telling me this was the result of the necklace and its mysterious appearance. It was obviously a conspiracy he wanted to keep me out of, but he had left me with no choice once he decided to go missing. It was very Travis of him.

If anyone could say they knew Travis, it was me, but that didn't really mean much, and his swiss cheese history was just the tip of that particular iceberg. On top of being a practiced liar and a master manipulator, he played everything close to the vest and rarely opened up about anything. It never mattered how much I pried, dug, or searched for answers. I didn't get them unless he wanted me to.

The facts were that he almost never talked about his past or the future, and what little he did say was light on details unless absolutely necessary. That left me with problems more often than not, and this was definitely a problem as I sat on my bike in a parking lot with no idea where Travis could have gone.

What I needed was to find out more about his past. I needed to know more about Belinda Simms.

I could have called Ricky for help, but that was probably more trouble than I needed right now. My options were limited though.

Belinda had been an exceptional clairvoyant from a family of exceptional clairvoyants. Since most psychic families went to one doctor, it wasn't a leap to think Belinda had gone to see supernatural icon and supreme brainiac of supernatural science, Louis Marquette. I didn't know Louis personally, but even if I had, I doubted my boss wanted me to call him up to ask about the mother of Venator's second-in-command.

There was a set of psychic twins in Venator, and they were recently assigned to the surveillance detail of Louis as well as having been to see the good doctor as kids and as adults. Andy and James Larkin were the only hunters I trusted in Venator and as good as family to me, but they knew even more about my history with Travis than Ricky, and this was not a conversation I wanted to have with them. They knew less than I did about Travis anyway. But their mother might be a different story.

Grace Larkin was a strong telepath and about the same age as Belinda would have been. I was almost positive they had known each other, and if they hadn't, she might still be able to help me, which was good enough for me. I dialed.

She answered in her syrupy sweet Southern accent borne from Georgia, "Hello?"

"Hi Grace. It's Jayde."

"Oh hey, sugar. How are you?"

I evaded that one by not answering. "I have an odd question for you, and I'm hoping you can help me."

"All right. Ask away."

"What can you tell me about Belinda Simms?"

There was a beat of silence. "May I ask why you want to know about her?"

Her request wasn't without merit. Travis was a force to be reckoned with, and pissing him off could be bad for her sons. "My clairvoyant boss picked me up for a serial case on the San Andreas and she came up, but I don't know as much about her as you'd think."

"I can try, sugar, but she wasn't easy to know," she said.

"Anything you can tell me is more than her son will," I said.

"Well let's see here. We were just little bitty things when we met. There just ain't that many psychic families and we all go to Louis."

Not all. If mine had gone to Louis, things would have been drastically different for me. I wasn't going to say that to Grace though. She continued her story without me anyway.

"When we grew up, we kept in touch but she was in California and I was down in Georgia. I guess you could say we were friends, but I don't think I knew her that good. Clairvoyants that powerful keep a lot of secrets. But you know that."

I hummed in agreement. "Where in California?"

"You don't know?"

"Travis's past is swiss cheese, and it's a common enough occurrence with us supernatural types that I'm used to it," I said.

"Huh. Learn something new every day," she said. "Bell moved to Palo Alto after she got married. She told me it was because Hank was offered a job at Stanford as a researcher, but you know how the San Andreas is for a clairvoyant. I think she might've been using it to hide."

"Why would she need to?"

"Venator wanted her."

I frowned at that. "They tried to recruit her?"

"Oh yes. I was approached too, but I was doing office work for the vamps, and I'm just a lowly telepath. Bell was on her own and wanted nothing to do with any of it. She was real adamant about it too. Can't say as I blame her though. Hank was a natural. Didn't know a lick about the monsters being real. And then Travis was born and she wasn't seen or heard from much until she was found dead with Hank at their house. Apparent murder-suicide. And poor Travis just disappeared until he turned up in Venator."

I was tempted to ask who did the murdering in that equation, but there were only two possibilities, and I was pretty sure Travis didn't want me to know. "What was her relationship like with Lyla?"

"As far as I know the Queen let her be, and Bell never said anything to make me think otherwise."

"So no issues then?"

"Honey we all have issues with the Queen, but nothing like I get the feeling you're wondering about. Bell kept to herself and didn't care much for other supernaturals. She was so serious but a real sweetheart. Not a mean bone in her body. She must be turning over in her grave because of the kind of man her son grew up to be. Especially after all those years of telling Venator to stick it where the sun don't shine."

I wasn't going to defend Travis or make excuses for him. I wasn't going to explain that joining Venator was all part of the plan for the Seer, and I wasn't going to crush Grace's memory of her friend either. And I definitely wasn't going to bring up the fact that all strong clairvoyants were capable of some fucked-up shit. Even James Larkin, a genuinely good guy with strong Christian beliefs, was capable of it. Grace was a telepath and not stupid, but she liked to think the best of people, and I liked that about her. There was no need to be a shitty realist so I moved on.

"Thanks Grace. I appreciate you talking to me, but I better get going."

"No problem, sugar. But you be careful. My boys told me what Travis let happen to you, and I can't say as I blame either one of 'em for wanting to gut him like a fish. I was ready to help 'em. It pains me to wonder what Bell would think of her boy, but I'll tell you right now, he's a man you're better off steering clear of."

"If only it were that simple."

"I'm sure it ain't, but if he hurts you like that again, my boys'll just have to get in line because Travis'll have me to answer to, ya hear?"

I smiled faintly. "Yes ma'am."

Grace was five three and maybe a hundred pounds with long blond hair and brown eyes. She wore broom skirts and breezy tops, and resembled one of those new age psychics that weren't really psychic. Imagining her taking on Travis was impossible, but I appreciated the thought.

"Good. Now I'll let you go, sugar."

"Give the twins my love since I know you're going to call them as soon as we hang up," I said.

She laughed. "I will."

We said goodbye and I immediately pocketed the phone and got the bike in motion. Half an hour later, I found the bitchin' Camaro in Palo Alto with Travis in it.

He was parked on a residential street in a suburban neighborhood that felt familiar to me in a way that had nothing to do with everything looking the same, and it was likely the one that Travis had lived in when he was young. This theory was given further credence by the fact that he was drinking in the middle of the damn day.

All psychics had issues, and substance abuse was one of them. I had too many powers for that kind of thing to work on me because it just made things worse, if it worked at all. Travis didn't have that problem. More importantly, getting fucked-up helped clairvoyants more easily reach a meditative state and produce visions.

I wouldn't say Travis had a problem, but he definitely wasn't above abusing. It didn't help that his partner, Jack Bennet, was the worst kind of alcoholic either. Travis got himself into significantly less trouble than Jackass did, but he had tried hard to compete a couple of times.

I parked the bike and went through the hassle of sneaking up on him, and it was almost worth it to see him jump when I opened the passenger door and got in.

He got as far as pointing a gun at me before I relieved him of it. "Shit. It's you."

I racked the bullet out of the chamber into the street, then ejected the magazine into my lap before tossing the gun into the back seat. I took the bottle he nearly found the bottom of next.

"Hey." He tried reaching past me for it and got shoved back into his seat. "Don't do it. Please."

I ignored him and poured the remaining alcohol into the street.

"I wasn't done with that."

I dropped the empty bottle in the back and slammed the door shut.

"Oh. You're mad."

Mad wasn't a strong enough word. Neither was furious. Not even irate was going to cut it.

"I should've checked in with you."

Failing to mention that he wasn't getting dead by a serial dirtbag was the least of it.

He sighed. "You're really mad."

I counted to ten. Then to twenty. I gave up after thirty. "Tell me, Jackass junior, why are you getting drunk in broad daylight like you want to get arrested?"

"I decided to sink low."

“This isn’t low, Travis. This is stupid.”

He shrugged. “Same diff.”

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. “I’m very tempted to kill you right now.”

“That’d be ironic. Or maybe poetic justice? Whatever.” He turned to look out the window at a house that didn’t look like any of the others around it. “This is where she did it.”

As in his mother. As in she did the murdering.

“One shotgun blast to the chest and buh-bye dad.”

The bravado wasn’t very convincing, but I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“She used her toe on the trigger and blew her head clean off. Buh-bye mom.” He sniffed, tried to cover it with a laugh, and failed. “Can’t sell a house after that kind of thing, you know. It got leveled and buh-bye home. Like it just goes away that easy, right?”

“Why’d she do it?”

He shrugged again. “What’d Grace say?”

I wasn’t surprised he came to the conclusion that I would call Grace. He knew me well. “I didn’t ask.”

He grunted. “Venator doesn’t like taking no for an answer and probably told her to join or die. She chose door number two.”

“And your dad?”

“He couldn’t protect me, so he had to go too.”

“Is that what you would do?” I asked before could stop myself.

He turned to look at me. “I joined willing for you. And I’d do it again.”

“You didn’t have to.”

He laughed at that. “Who else was going to look out for you in Venator? Viktor couldn’t handle you. Still can’t. And Jack? Ha. You’d have killed him in the first week.”

“You didn’t exactly look out for me though, did you?”

He conceded the point with a nod. “It would’ve been fine if I could’ve said no and meant it. But I couldn’t. My bad.”

“You know what Travis? Go fuck yourself,” I said, then reached over for the keys in the ignition, and promptly got out.

I slammed the door on his protests and started walking. He practically fell out of the car and stumbled after me until he caught up. He made a grab for my elbow only to be dodged. "I'm sorry, ok?"

I ignored him.

"Jayde, please. Just stop."

I didn't.

He did. "I left the hot zone."

"Good for you."

"He went to the Castro last night."

I stopped.

"Got one out of the Moby Dick."

"Why?"

"Don't know. But you're going to think it's your fault for walking in there."

He was right. I tossed the keys at him. "I'm leaving."

They bounced off him despite his valiant effort to catch them and hit the sidewalk. He bent to pick them up and came after me again. "Leaving? Or *leaving*?"

"I'm going to fix this my way, Travis. So go back to basecamp when you're sober. Or get a cab. Or whatever. I'm going to call you in one hour, and you better fucking answer it."

"Wait. What are you going to do?"

"My fucking job."

Nine

I rode the bike back to the Castro and parked near the Moby Dick. I hesitated to get closer though. It was happy hour on a Saturday, and the bar was jammed with people, which was both good and bad for me. I would go relatively unnoticed, but there were a lot of potential psychometric detours, and I really needed to focus on finding the serial dirtbag. The more pressing concern was that I wasn't the only one looking.

The cops were there officially to look into a missing bartender, while the fed was there unofficially and unbeknownst to the fuzz. Upon further dissection of their thoughts, I decided to hang back and learn things from a safe distance.

Chad Ross was reported missing by his wife when he didn't call or come home last night. According to her, this was extremely out of character, and everyone that knew him agreed. Apparently Mr. Ross was hopelessly devoted to his wife and straight as an arrow even though he worked at a gay bar without his wedding ring on. When questioned, coworkers said he had been headed home when he was last seen after work. Having checked the area myself, I could think of a few places someone could be easily snatched from.

None other than Agent Howard was mingling while eavesdropping on the cops, and he did an impressive job of it. He was tall with a large build, and he handsome enough to be a poster boy for the FBI. Or maybe a model for one of those snobby chain stores that don't cater to vampire hunters. He was dressed in street clothes. A polo shirt in a daring shade of salmon with khaki pants and a pair of wraparound sunglasses on the top of his head. His dark hair was cut short, and his eyes were a distinct blue with very expressive eyebrows above them. I still thought he looked like a fed, but others around him, including the fuzz, thought he was a charming patron and nothing more. It helped that he looked as young as I did, but I had to give the guy kudos for his ability to sell it.

I wasn't sure how exactly Agent Howard came to be at the right place at the right time, but I had a pretty good guess. His thoughts kept referring to a woman that was in law enforcement, so it wasn't a stretch to believe the Pacific Northwest detective who loaned me her files had been the one to alert the fed. That sucked for me, but I couldn't be mad about it.

Preston Howard was young, smart, and determined, and this case had gotten to him for whatever reason. It was only obvious that he wasn't going to let it go unless he found some sort of closure, and the supernatural world's

standard operating procedure of a cover-up wouldn't give him that. It would only make him dig deeper until he found a world he was better off not knowing about.

With that in mind, I stayed out of sight and debated whether I should continue with my plan at all. The fastest way to track the dirtbag was to follow the psychometric trail, but going into the bar had been a major mistake already for more than one reason. It was equipped with a working camera and recording system that the cops were taking footage from, and I was definitely on it. I didn't need to compound that problem by being seen again. But a man's life was at stake, probably because of me, and I had to do something.

I started walking, my fingers running along walls, windows, and anything else that was present the night before. The trick was doing it without looking like a crazy person and raising eyebrows. Fortunately, I had some experience, and I managed to stay under the radar by appearing to be just another face in the crowd.

I walked around the block the bar was on and the one next to it, successfully avoiding both the cops and the fed in the process. Unfortunately the psychometric trail wasn't anywhere near as helpful as I was hoping it would be.

The dirtbag had dragged Mr. Ross into an alley, injected him with something, and stuffed him into the backseat of a white Mercedes sedan with license plates that had been covered with mud to make the numbers unreadable. Chad Ross would have had trouble getting out of that even if he weren't up against a vampire. He was about the same size as Travis, but that was where the similarities ended and the deviation in the victim became noticeable. Mr. Ross's hair was dark blond, his features leaning toward pretty, and his physical fitness level was set to looking good instead of kicking ass. The dirtbag was bigger and had used the element of surprise. Mr. Ross never stood a chance, and I only had myself to blame for this one.

With nothing else to go on, I sent the info about the car to the Pacific Northwest detective on my way back to the bike. I went back to driving around in a futile search. A few hours later, a body turned up, and I got a phone call to meet with a detective from San Francisco PD in an area dubbed Excelsior.

I didn't have any trouble finding the circus of flashing lights, media, and gawkers in a residential neighborhood. A uniform gave me a funny look as I approached, but held up the crime scene tape for me without asking questions because I was expected. The detective I was meeting spotted me and headed my way. He was an aging and overweight human with thinning blond hair and hard brown eyes, but he was in the know and supposedly a good cop.

“You Matthews?”

I nodded as I moved to his side. “Call me Jayde. Please.”

He stuck his hand out despite knowing I was psychometric. “Caleb Franco.”

I took his hand, got confirmation that he was a good cop, and let go. “Nice to meet you.”

He gestured for me to follow and I did. He took me to a tent that had been hastily erected by crime scene techs around the body to preserve the scene. It was definitely Mr. Ross, and the serial dirtbag was definitely the murderer. Franco gave me the pertinent details while I donned a pair of gloves and crouched down next to the body. Ross had been found in the last forty-five minutes, and the medical examiner was still en route.

“Have you talked to the Portland or Seattle PD yet?” I asked.

“I talked to Detective Bright on the way over,” he answered, referring to the very same Pacific Northwest detective who I had been quietly working with.

“She told you about the feds?”

“Yup. Agent Howard ought to show up in the next thirty.”

I planned to be gone before that. I picked up a hand as if to examine the fingernails and brushed my wrist against the corpse’s skin. I now knew which hotel Mr. Ross had been killed in and how terrible his death had been for him.

I stood up and stepped back while taking off the gloves. “Can I talk to the wife?”

Franco nodded and led me into the house. The wife and Franco’s partner were in a cramped kitchen. The partner was a young-looking Asian man, recently promoted to homicide from vice and not quite sure what my deal was. Rather than explain, Franco introduced me to the wife, Tera, and backed off.

I sat at the table with the distraught young woman, who had a blotchy and swollen but pretty face. Her bottle-blond hair was up in a hastily tied knot and she was dressed in pajama pants and a camisole under a baggy sweatshirt.

“I’m very sorry for your loss Mrs. Ross, and I’ll try not to take up too much of your time.”

She sniffed and nodded at the already-tired expression of condolences.

“Your husband was a bartender, correct?”

She nodded and rasped out a reply. “At the Moby Dick.”

“How long has he worked there?”

“Six months maybe.”

“And he wasn’t homosexual, correct?”

She shook her head. “Chad got laid off a couple years ago from his IT job and started bartending until something better came along. But he’s hot, you know? Down in the Castro, he makes twice what he used to, and all he has to do

is pour drinks and flirt with whoever. He always comes home to me every night though. Until last night. And now he'll never come home again.”

She proceeded to break down and I reached across the table to squeeze her hands in mine. “Just one more question, ok?”

She tried to pull it together and succeeded enough to nod.

“Do you have anyone you can stay with tonight?”

“My sister,” she whispered.

“Let’s give her a call, ok?”

I helped the wife get set up with her sister and packed a sizable suitcase for her, which was the least I could do. I also texted Travis and informed him that I needed my Suburban immediately. His reply informed me he was at a diner with it in San Francisco and sober. I finished up with the wife and Franco, then left to meet Travis.

I found Travis waiting for me in the passenger seat of the beast, so I parked the bike and got behind the wheel of the Suburban.

“You ok?” Travis asked as I pulled out onto the street.

“No.”

He thought about trying to talk me out of blaming myself but wisely let it go. “Where are we going?”

“San Jose.”

“We should try—”

“No. We’re going to the hotel where Chad Ross was tortured and murdered just because I walked into his bar. You can sit there and be quiet like a good boy or get the fuck out. End of discussion.”

“You’re still mad.”

I looked over at him. “I swear I will push you out of my moving vehicle if you can’t shut the fuck up, Travis.”

He sighed but let that go too.

I drove. Fast. I made it to San Jose in record time. Before we got to the hotel, I had Travis climb into the back to get out what I needed for a little B and E. I hit the valet and handed the beast and a couple of large bills off to a guy to keep it close.

We stood outside a big-ass hotel building of Americanized Spanish architecture while I scanned the building’s occupants. When I felt it was safe enough, I went in, and Travis followed with my messenger bag. We headed across

the lobby and straight for the elevators as if we belonged there. Up we went. At the appropriate floor, we navigated the hallway to the room while I ran my fingers along the walls.

At the door, I nodded, and Travis retrieved the tool to bypass the electronic lock. Then we were in. Travis stayed by the door while I did my thing. The whirlpool tub was the site of the torture and murder of Chad Ross, but our dirtbag hadn't gotten any satisfaction out of it, which was why Mr. Ross had been dumped early. The victim was prepped and the mess cleaned away. A cart that had been stolen from housekeeping had been used to get the body out of the building undetected.

We promptly left the room and I led us to an emergency exit that just happened to be broken so that the alarm didn't work. In the stairwell, I parked it and retrieved a laptop from the messenger bag to dig into the hotel's network. Travis sat close, but I needed him to so my clairvoyance would work better and I could psychic-dial the appropriate passwords. I grabbed the records pertaining to the dirtbag's stay, copied them to the laptop, and then closed it all down and returned the laptop to the bag.

Ten minutes later, we were back in the Suburban with Travis behind the wheel. I pulled out my notes and wanted to sigh. Travis had added more of his own notes, but he wasn't capable of thinking linearly, so he made perfect geometric shapes in his tiny printed letters in arrays of patterns that took some time to figure out. It used to drive me bonkers, but I suddenly missed it, and that was not a good thing.

"Where are we going?" he asked, breaking through my wave of nostalgia.

I debated my options and made a decision. "We can check bars and hotels until I come up with something better. Or pass out. Whichever comes first."

"Yes ma'am."

I ignored him in favor of updating my notes and getting someone to run down the credit card information for me. I would pass it along to Franco or whoever when I could offer an explanation as to how I got it that wasn't based purely on psychic crap. Law enforcement had rules to follow, and I preferred to give them everything they needed to look like they were following those rules. There was no evidence pointing to the hotel as the kill site beyond the word of a crazy girl, but I would follow the leads regardless and hope I could find a reason to hand it over.

When we got back into San Francisco, I reclined my seat and closed my eyes to search with my full attention. For hours Travis drove around the city until he mistakenly assumed I fell asleep and parked us back at the bike.

He left it running, leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and let himself feel everything he was trying to keep stuffed down deep and away from the empath.

Love.

Hate.

Self-loathing.

Remorse.

Regret.

So much pain.

A tear slipped free, falling from my eye. He was tempted to brush it away as punishment for being a nosy psychic, but he didn't. He just stuffed his emotions back down and waited for me to get out.

I brushed a hand across my cheek and did just that. He was gone before I was, and I didn't have the energy to do anything about it. I went back to basecamp and mistakenly assumed Travis would be better when I woke up.

Ten

Disaster threw me out of bed and I hit my head on the only piece of furniture in the room on the way down.

“Bet that hurt.”

I rolled onto my back and looked up at Travis. He was sitting against the wall, his thoughts like goop and his emotions like a tsunami. His cheeks were flushed, eyes bright, and lips vaguely turned up. Obviously, he was shit-faced drunk and looking to get his ass kicked.

I got up from the floor and grabbed the empty bottle from him.

“Please don’t throw it.”

It was tempting, but I dropped it on the bed and put my hands on my hips instead. “I’m not even going to ask why because I really don’t want to care enough to know.”

“I know.”

I turned to make an exit, grabbed my jacket to put on, and made it as far as the door.

“You’re hating me for the wrong reason.”

I closed my eyes. “Don’t start.”

“I tried not to fall in love with you. It wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Stop talking.”

He didn’t. “I thought I was prepared for you. Like I could handle a force of nature. So stupid. And arrogant.”

“Stop. Talking.”

“First time I saw you, I woke up thinking you were the most beautiful woman in the world. I still think that every time I see you. It just hurts more now.”

“Shut up.”

“I would do anything for you, Blue Jay. Even make you hate me for your own good.”

I shook my head and looked up at the ceiling. “Just shut the fuck up, Travis.”

“You’re not going to ask why?”

I said nothing.

“I know you want to know.”

I still said nothing.

He sighed. “Just ask.”

I turned around to face him. “No, Travis. I’m sick of doing this with you. I’m sick of fighting with you. I’m sick of losing my mind every time you come around. And I’m sick of hating you. Most of all, I’m sick of loving you when all you ever do is hurt me. You make me play these games in the dark, but I just want you to leave me alone.”

“I know you do, Blue Jay.”

“Stop calling me that. You lost that privilege when you made me hate you.”

He smiled at that. “Wish I could.”

“That’s such bullshit.”

He shook his head.

“I’m leaving, and I suggest you let me.”

I made it as far as the hallway before he caught me by my shoulder harness. I turned, swung a fist, and missed because he dodged it but fell on his ass, almost taking me with him. I caught my balance and kicked his leg out of spite. “I hate you.”

He pushed himself into a sitting position. “You can’t go, Jayde.”

I kicked him again. “Let me leave.”

“Can’t. I still have to kiss you.”

I growled angrily. “You’re not kissing me. Ever.”

“But—”

“Stop talking,” I interrupted in a very loud voice.

“I know I’m not supposed to touch you ever again, but—”

“And why is that, Travis?” I asked with all the bitterness swirling in my gut in my voice.

He sighed. “Because I let Jackass touch you.”

I went from angry to outrage with that one. “Touch me? He drugged me. Then took a knife to my pants from one ankle to the other, and did he give a fuck if my legs were in the way? No. He was going to *rape* me, Travis. I guess I’m just lucky that drugs don’t work right on me.”

“I never would’ve let that happen.”

“Do you even hear yourself? You *let* him scar me permanently. And then you show up just in time to keep me from killing him. I was this close to doing the world a favor, but no. You stopped me, zip-tied me, and stuffed me in the back of a vehicle so you could drop me off at the ER. You didn’t even stay. You just walked away like you didn’t destroy me. And for what? To get me off your team? For the Seer’s destiny you won’t tell me shit about?”

“So you’d hate me.”

“What?”

“You have to hate me. That’s why I did it.”

I stared at him. I was so fucking mad I couldn’t even think.

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

Very calmly, I asked, “Why do I have to hate you, Travis?”

“Can’t tell you.”

I took two steps back as I aimed a gun at him. “You have been saying that load of shit as long as I can remember, but you are going to answer me now. You’re drunk in a hot zone, and you won’t dodge a bullet at this range so try again.”

He frowned at me while determining how serious I was, and I took a half step forward to answer that unasked question. With a sigh, he answered. “If you’re with me, things don’t happen like they’re supposed to. The only way you and I could have ended was if you finally stopped denying that I’m a monster and killed yourself. No Jayde. No Seer. No destiny.”

And there it was. A confession from the master manipulator that choice was an illusion for me, and it always would be. Rage burned in my veins while tears burned my eyes.

“I tried, Jayde. I tried not to fall for you. I tried to keep it from you when I did. I tried to make you hate me early on, five different ways. And I tried to say no to you. Like a million times. But I didn’t mean it, and you knew it.”

My finger twitched on the trigger, and the gun trembled. “Shut up. Just shut up.”

“I wanted to give you what you wanted. An experience that was real. One that wasn’t being raped or second-hand. But you had to hate me no matter what I did. There was a better way though. One you could move on from and I could live with.”

The gun shook harder. “Please just stop.”

He pushed himself up on to his knees then reached up to steady the barrel against his forehead. “You came out in that damn towel that didn’t stay on, and I just couldn’t say no anymore. I was weak, and I’ve always been weak when it comes to you. I probably always will be too. I knew what would have to happen, and I did it anyway. That’s what you should hate me for.”

My lip wobbled as I pressed the gun harder against his skin. “One hundred and twelve, Travis. One hundred and fucking twelve stitches.”

“I know.”

I sniffed hard and steadied my hand. “You need to die. Not just for what you’ve done to me either.”

“Then kill me. I deserve it and so much more,” he said, and he meant it. “You’ll be doing us both a favor.”

I really wanted to. He did deserve it. And no one should have the kind of power that he did. He was a monster. And an idiot. But I just couldn’t do it. And it pissed me off. I growled in frustration and lowered the gun. “I’m leaving. You need to go back to Venator and stay the fuck away from me.”

“I can’t.”

“Not my problem,” I said and turned to make my exit.

“I can’t leave, Jayde.”

I ignored that and kept on going until I was on the back of the bike and far from Travis effing Simms.

Eleven

At 2:22 on a Sunday afternoon, my search for the serial dirtbag became completely and totally irrelevant. I got a message from Travis's phone, and my first thought upon seeing it was that I should have saved myself the hassle and killed him when I had the chance.

In the picture, Travis was facedown on what looked like the floor of a utility van with his arms behind his back, presumably unconscious. A busted lip and the makings of a black eye were signs that he hadn't gone down easy, but he definitely went down.

The next messages were very specific instructions to come alone to an address in Palo Alto if I wanted to save my husband. Obviously this dirtbag had no idea who he was dealing with if he thought Travis was actually my husband, or that I was an average human.

Under normal circumstances, going alone wasn't a problem. Even with my clairvoyance on the fritz, I still had the rest of my powers to give me the advantage. I was also a highly trained vampire hunter and could hold my own without any of my powers if I had to. This was a serial killer though. The FBI and three states' worth of cops wanted him, which complicated things.

The humans couldn't have the dirtbag alive to stand trial. A live vampire wasn't going to pass for human, but a dead one would. Their fangs naturally dissolved after death, and human science wouldn't detect the anomalous blood when it ceased to be active. That was one of the reasons the supernatural world had been able to stay underground so long. I wasn't about to risk going up against the Law of Exposure, so killing this dirtbag was nonnegotiable. Clearly I had a problem.

It was going to be hard to explain this if I charged in there, put the dirtbag down, and saved the day. Even an overzealous PI didn't do something that stupid and got away with it. If that was the way it was going to have to be, then that was the way it would be. I couldn't do nothing. I respected law enforcement and everything they did, but they weren't vampire hunters, and I was. This was on me from the moment I agreed to help Travis with his stupid plan and got a good man murdered in the process.

Once that was decided, I hauled ass back to basecamp in the hope that my Suburban might be there. It was. I parked the bike in the garage next to it and opened up the cargo area to dig into my weapons locker.

It was the middle of the day on a Sunday, and having a gunfight in a residential area was out of the question. That made sharp objects the primary weaponry, and I geared up accordingly. I shed my jacket, added elastic armbands for more throwing knives, stuffed a dagger in my boot, and attached a ten-inch serrated blade to my hip before putting my jacket back on and closing up.

The Suburban was infinitely less conspicuous than the bike so that was what I took. I attempted to break land-speed records to get to Palo Alto and the address the dirtbag gave me. It turned out to be in yet another neighborhood of houses that all looked the same. I parked on the street two blocks away in front of a house that didn't have anyone present.

Instead of getting out, I whipped out my phone and waited for the dirtbag to answer Travis's number.

"Yes?" the dirtbag answered in a rolling tenor.

"First thing's first, dirtbag, the idiot otherwise known as my husband better be alive and in one piece."

"He is."

"I want proof so put him on."

The dirtbag laughed. "It's adorable that you think you have any power over me."

"Uh huh. I want my proof of life, dirtbag."

"Ooh. You must watch a lot of TV to use that one."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. Let's go with that. Now put him on before I come over there and kill you, k? Thanks."

"Feisty. I like it."

I said nothing.

The dirtbag put the phone to Travis's ear. "It's you he wants, Blue Jay."

“I figured that out, Jackass junior. And nice job getting kidnapped, by the way.”

“My bad.”

“One-four-one-zero-seven.”

“That’s enough. I don’t know what you’re doing, but you have ten minutes before your husband dies,” the dirtbag said and promptly hung up on me.

I pocketed my phone and went out into the sunny afternoon. I crossed the street and headed for a backyard to cut through. Up and over a fence. Slither through a side yard. Across another street. Down two houses and in the back gate. Up and over another fence. I landed silently in the backyard of the dirtbag’s lair, which was a two-story vacant home that was on the market.

I scanned my surroundings as I cautiously approached the back door. The house itself was devoid of furniture except for the sturdy wooden chair with arms that Travis was duct-taped to in the center of the house on the first floor. The dirtbag was pacing behind Travis nervously.

“She’s probably going to kill you,” Travis told the dirtbag as per my instructions. The number 14107 was code for idiot, and idiots taunted serial killers.

“Be quiet.”

I hunted up my lock-pick set and got to work on the door.

“If I know her, she’s got a shiny blade with your name on it, Seymour.”

With a name like that, I was suddenly more empathetic of the serial killer.

“I said be quiet. She’s just a girl,” the dirtbag said as he stopped pacing. “And I’m going to drain her dry while you watch.”

I finished with the door but didn’t go through it. I went for a tree instead.

“She’s never been ‘just a girl.’ Trust me on this. I’ve known her as long as she can remember.”

I landed hard on the roof to make a racket.

The dirtbag grabbed Travis by the hair, yanked his head back, and put a surgical scalpel against his carotid artery.

“What is she doing?”

“Messing with your head.”

The dirtbag looked up at the ceiling and yelled, “You’re running out of time, girl.”

I backed myself off of the side of the roof, then swung my legs toward the window. It broke with a loud crash, and I landed in the whirlpool bathtub.

The dirtbag did exactly what I expected him to do and went tearing up the stairs to get to me, but I was already gone by the time he threw the door open. With the layout of the house and the stairs slowing him down, I had time to go right back out the window, roll to the ground, and sprint for the back door.

The dirtbag jumped out after me as I dashed in, locked the door, and went for Travis. I slipped a blade from my pocket under his hand and took off for the front door. As the dirtbag broke down the back door, I dropped my jacket there and kept going, vaulting up the stairs.

He stopped at the front door and picked up my jacket, lifting it to his nose for a long sniff. I went out the window again and hoisted myself back up onto the roof to crouch and wait.

Marching angrily back to Travis, the dirtbag threw the jacket at his feet. He grabbed Travis by the hair again and put the scalpel under his chin. “She gave you something, didn’t she?”

“I told you. She’s messing with your head.”

“I’m just going to hurt you until she comes to me then.”

Travis tilted his head just right and cut himself. “Go ahead, Seymour.”

The dirtbag snarled and pressed the scalpel to Travis’s chest to start slicing. Travis grit his teeth but smiled like he having a good time.

After a few minutes of the torture, I jumped off the roof and caught a tree branch on the way down. I swung down to the ground and went for the front door. I knocked. Seymour didn't stop. I rang the doorbell on repeat until he finally came to the door. I waved with a saccharine smile on my face as he looked through the peephole.

He unlocked the door, turned the handle, and I kicked it hard back at him. I pushed inside, threw a few quick punches at his nose, and landed a kick to his knee. He didn't go down as I skipped away, but he didn't go on the offensive either.

I plucked two knives from my arms and felt my clairvoyance flicker out of usefulness as he crouched defensively across the room. I let the blades fly, causing him to duck and giving me time to back up further. I plucked another blade and gave it a hard throw. It whistled past his ear as he dodged it with a surprised expression because Travis was right—I wasn't just a girl.

I drew the hunting knife as I tossed another blade that sliced his cheek. I ran at him, ducked the swing of his scalpel, and rolled away into a back handspring that landed me in the hallway. The serial went on the offensive, and like a bull charging a matador, he missed the mark as I neatly sidestepped him. He kept on going into the next room, turned, and readied to make another charge. It was already too late.

Travis jumped onto his back with the garrote wire that had been hidden in my jacket wire in his hands. He rode the vampire down to the floor like someone who had done this kind of nastiness before. I didn't stick around to watch. I dug my knives out of the walls instead. I took a very long time to do it too.

“Jayde.”

I turned around to see Travis sliding down the wall in the hallway. His chest was in ribbons, and he was bleeding more than was healthy. I went to him, kneeling down next to him.

“I'm ok,” he said.

“No, you're not.”

He pushed my hands away before I could start putting pressure on his wounds, making physical contact. I winced and snatched my hands back. “I'll live, Blue Jay.”

I sighed. "You are such an idiot."

He nodded. "I fucked up pretty bad."

He really had. That brief touch had shown me that much.

"You gotta go. I'll deal with this."

"What?"

"Cops. They're coming. I've seen a possible future where you get arrested, so you have to go. Now."

"Fine. You'll be ok, right?"

He nodded. "Thanks for coming for me. You could have let him kill me, and I wouldn't have blamed you."

I didn't retort. I leaned over, kissed his cheek, and got up instead. I took a detour for my jacket on my way out and then proceeded directly to my Suburban. I threw my jacket in and got moving out of the area at an average pace so as not to draw attention to myself. I passed the fuzz and a fed mobile, paused to gawk for an appropriate amount of time, and then I was gone. Case closed. Mostly.

Twelve

Two days later, I was lying on the couch in the living room of basecamp. Travis was MIA, but I wasn't leaving until he got back.

I knew that he had been taken to a hospital when he was found with a dead serial killer, and that was it. I lost track of him for a day before he turned up again to send me a text message that he was fine. He hadn't come back to basecamp at all, but I had a feeling that was because he was giving me time to do the smart thing and get far away. Too bad the asshole still had possession of the one thing I wasn't going to let him keep.

A key slid into the lock, turned it, and the front door opened. Travis came in, sighing when he saw my red hair hanging over on one arm of the couch and black boots propped on the other. He shut the door, then forced himself to move toward me.

Standing behind the couch, he looked down at me. "Why aren't you gone?"

I met his eyes behind his glasses and lamented the return of the hunter black. "You have something of mine."

He sighed again but reached for his shoulder harness to pluck my blade free. "I would've given it back. I know how important it is to you."

I took it from his fingers and set it spinning, then got up from the couch. I picked up my repaired jacket, putting it on. "Rings are in the kitchen with the keys for the Ducati and the house."

"You don't want to keep the bike?"

I shrugged. "I spend months on the road living out of my vehicle and hotel rooms. A motorcycle isn't very practical."

"But you could store it with your life manager," he retorted.

"Then let's try this, I got a good man killed, and I don't want a reward for that."

"It wasn't your fault, Jayde," he said.

"Yes. It was. It was my scent that drew the serial killer into that bar and right to Chad Ross. It was what lured him to you too. Yes, you were the idiot that got more drunk instead of sober, but it was me he wanted. Why? Because vampires like the way I smell, and I've known this since I met my first one how many years ago?"

"There was no way for you to know that the serial was going to be at that bar in the first place," he said.

“Don’t. I don’t need you to help me justify my own stupidity. I knew better, and I’ll handle it. I always do. It’s not like this is the first innocent blood on my hands.”

He frowned at me but wisely let it go.

“Mess all cleaned up?”

“Mostly. No one knows you were there, and you’re free and clear.”

“And you?”

“I’ll be fine. You know that.”

As far as jail went, Travis was far better at avoiding it than me, and I wasn’t worried that he would end up there.

“How many stitches did you end up with?”

“A few. I deserved those and more though.”

I stepped closer, probably too close. “I’m just going to say it this one time. Find a better coping mechanism.”

He worked up a sad smile for me. “It only happens when you’re there to rescue me.”

“And this is the last time that happens, Travis. You finally managed to make me hate you more than I love you.”

“I know.”

“I’d tell you to stay away from me, but you won’t.”

“I can’t,” he corrected me.

I held up my hand, the blade moving between my fingers. “Do you know why this one is so important?”

“It’s *your* coping mechanism.”

“Yes, but no. It helps me remember who I am,” I said. “I’m the Seer because I don’t have a choice, but I’m Jayde Matthews because I want to be. Jayde is human. She has an overblown sense of responsibility and always tries to do the right thing. She kills dirtbags for a living, but she cares about people and their lives. She wears her heart on her sleeve and puts the crazy on display with her wardrobe, warped humor, and wondrously wild eccentricities. Every time you come around, you take that away from me because you bring out the worst in me. You take away my reason for living.”

“Jayde.”

I shook my head to cut him off. “You’re not the only monster in the room, Travis. We kill and get good people killed. We let bad things happen because we feel like we have to. I sat on that roof while a serial killer tortured you

because I was angry, and I wanted you to hurt. I wanted you to be hurt the way you hurt me, and that's not who I want to be. So all I'm going to ask you for is that you remember that the next time you come around."

He nodded once.

"Now kiss me so I can leave," I said as I pocketed the blade.

"What?"

I smiled weakly. "For a know-it-all, I'm surprised you haven't figured it out. The human in me is saying goodbye to the human in you. It's a one-time offer. Take it or leave—"

His lips cut me off, and it was the kind of kiss that all the emotions poured out of. His and mine. He held me tight, heedless of his injuries and the pain burning deep in his chest. He kissed me like it was the last time because it was. And I was right there with him. I clung to him like the hope I used to have that love could be anywhere near enough. I returned his kiss like I could find closure in it, and it was definitely the last one I had to give him, but it was killing me to do it.

He pulled himself away first but he didn't go far. He pressed his lips together and thumbed tears off my cheeks. "I will always love you, Jayde Matthews. You make me wish I was the man you see, but I'm not. I can't be. I'm a monster, and I can't change. You can never forget that."

"Even if I could, you'd be there to remind me."

A deeply sad smile appeared as he grudgingly took a step away from me. He reached in his pocket and pulled out his mother's necklace. Taking my hand, he placed it in my palm, and wrapped my fingers around it.

"Why?"

"Someone gave it to you for a reason. I don't know what it is because I can't see it, but I know the answers are yours to find."

"But," I started. I didn't know what else to say though.

He worked up another smile for me. "I'm not the investigator you are, Blue Jay. You don't let go of things. You dig and dig and dig until you find what you're looking for. I love and hate that about you, but it's the reason you're the best. If I was going to chase this one, I'd need you anyway. But I'm not going to. I'm not over what she did, and there won't be anybody to catch me if I sink low now."

I frowned. "And if I find something?"

He shrugged. "I don't need to know unless I do. I trust you to make the right choice if or when the time comes."

I didn't point out that he didn't trust me with my own destiny because I didn't want to fight. I pocketed the necklace instead. "I should go."

He didn't point that I should have been long gone already. "I have some things to finish up, but you don't have to stay."

I nodded and moved to make my exit. "I'll see you later, Simms."

"Not if I see you first, Blue Jay."

Epilogue

On the first of April and the day for fools, I was in a hotel room with my work to help me cope. Files were spread across the bed, and I was sitting cross-legged in the middle of it all while I made notes in a legal pad.

Travis was back where he belonged at Venator's main compound, which was in Iceland of all places, and our batshit crazy boss had given us both a proverbial head pat for a job well done. My reply to that was to tell Viktor I needed some time off before hanging up on him. I promptly received a text from Travis informing me that he would handle Viktor and to take all the time I needed.

I hadn't gone to Chad Ross's memorial service, but I sent his wife a letter of condolences and made a sizable donation to his favorite charity. It hadn't eased my guilt any but I hadn't expected it to. Being the cause of anyone's death was the kind of thing that stuck with a person. It didn't wash off or fade away. It became a part of you forever, and the changes were irreversible. I accepted that a long time ago, but I was never going to get past it.

Instead of wallowing in self-recriminations, I decided to use my time off to work on the kinds of cases that weren't deemed to be "high priority." As the Seer, I received a lot of requests to look at things that were usually cold cases or solved ones for the sake of closure. Sometimes people just wanted me to find a long-lost relative, friend, or lover just to know they were ok. In all cases, people just needed to know that someone cared enough to look, and it was important to me to be that someone whether I had a stupid title or not. It wasn't going to make up for my failings, but I didn't expect it to.

I got up from my work around three in the afternoon in search of food and found it at Penny's Diner in Cheyenne. I sat at the bar and ordered a cheeseburger and a strawberry shake. I left. I found that someone had broken into my Suburban, but nothing had been taken. A box had been left on the passenger seat, and I didn't have a clue how it got there. I did have a pretty good clue who sent it though.

I got in the beast, went back to the hotel, and sat in the parking lot while I eyed the box warily for a long time.

It was wrapped in brown paper and twine with a card that my name was written on. Each letter was a work of art, easily recognizable as being penned by the Queen of Vampires herself. Her seal was stamped on the card to be sure I knew who the box was from, or so I assumed since the whole thing was invisible like Belinda's necklace.

Despite my paranoia and desire not to get sucked into a conspiracy, I grabbed the heavy box and brought it to my room. I put it on the bed, untied the string, and pushed the paper away. I took my blade to the tape holding the cardboard box closed and peeked inside.

Nothing but black leather-bound books.

I picked one up, saw nothing, and opened it. The pages were all blank, and as I flipped through them, a piece of folded paper fell out to land back in the box. I traded the journal for the paper and unfolded it.

Jayde,

I send you these so that you may prepare for what is to come. I beg for your trust when I have done nothing to earn it and will only cause you pain in the future. Your destiny and not the Seer's depends upon your trust in me. I offer you truth in the hope you will believe that I am your ally for all time.

It matters not what the prophecy of the Seer says. It is a lie told to protect a truth that has not come to pass. There is darkness lurking in the shadows that must believe the lie or all will be lost. I did not choose this path for you nor is it the one I wish to force you onto. Your journey is now a perilous one and I cannot undo what has been done in order to stop what is to come.

I must prepare you the only way I am able. To know where you are going, you must know where you have been. Leave your memories on the pages that cannot be seen, and hide them in a place the seers cannot see nor go. Do this so you may find your way home when the darkness takes you. Begin neither where your memories do nor your solitary endeavors. Begin with the changes that cannot be explained, and prepare for more. The darkness is coming.

I refolded the letter and pocketed it to deal with it later and then picked up one of the books. Did I trust Lyla? Not really. Did I trust this letter on April Fool's Day, of all days? Absolutely.

I couldn't explain why I believed it, and it didn't make sense to take her word for it, but my instincts were screaming at me that I needed to. I was certain that every word in her letter was the truth, even if I didn't understand it.

I had lost enough memories to know how important they were, and her blank journals that couldn't be seen were a damn good place to leave them. As for hiding them, I instantly thought of Yellowstone, which I wasn't far from.

The ominous “darkness” and the prophecy being a lie were just another day in the supernatural world and easy enough to swallow.

I accepted the letter, but I didn’t want to think about what it meant either. I liked my illusions after all. I did know this though. This was just the opening act of something much bigger, and I was the star of the show.

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