

Bloodlines

Chapters 1 – 3 Excerpt

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Chapter One

Easy Prey

Someone was following me.

I'd known about him for half a dozen blocks. It wasn't hard; as his sneakers hit the cement, they made three times the noise my black boots did. A shallow heartbeat and heavy breaths, though not noticeable to a mortal, pounded in my ears and through my skull. If I'm not focused on tuning it out, the sound of human breathing is near unbearable to me.

I guess that's why I'm so often the cause of it permanently ceasing.

In all fairness, I *gave* him the chance to continue on his merry way; I wove through the deserted streets, cutting around corners and doubling back the odd time. But he still followed. After spending over three centuries of undead life looking like a woman in her late teens, I've grown accustomed to men stalking me in the night.

That doesn't mean I don't still find it bothersome.

The streets in the lower east end of the city were always empty by this time of night. From dusk 'til dawn, the humans stayed in their homes. Those that ventured out wound up emptied of their blood and discarded in dumpsters. Or worse. Even the village idiot knows to stay in when the body count rises at night.

Not that *I* bothered much with feeding from the humans there, but it had been a popular haunt for the undead since the city was a little hamlet in the nineteenth century. It seemed that after almost a century and a half, the humans had finally grown wiser. Multiple gruesome murders often do that. Even as parents tell their children not to fear the monsters in their closets, they are sure to lock their windows, bolt their doors, and always sleep with some sort of weapon next to their beds.

But for whatever reason, my stalker decided not to heed the whispered warnings of the human residents, and was doing some street prowling of his own. Someone ought to have a talk with him about that.

I wasn't really in the mood for talking, though.

I pretended not to notice him as I walked with purpose along the sidewalk. I kept my stride casual while I made out his exact position. When we started this game, he was a block behind me, but the distance was closing at an exponential rate.

Impatience. It's done a lot of humans in. Non-humans, too, but then those like me could afford a little impatience now and then since we had mad skills to back us up.

Lust fills a human body with heat; I felt it radiate from him a couple yards away. It works like a fever, moving through the body, bleeding away thought and focus until there's only the hunter and prey. Sexual desire and need to control are a little like bloodlust that way.

I looked small to him, my five-feet-nine-inches-without-heels dwarfed by the apartment buildings that lined the streets. From his location, all he could see was some leggy chick with waist-length black hair—a fragile, little girl. Easy prey. For a moment I imagined myself whimpering, “Oh, please don't hurt me.”

That thought amused me.

The streets had a wet smell, like there'd be rain though the pavement was dry. Damp and moldy. Even if I didn't *need* to breathe, the habit stayed with me; part of being aware of your surroundings is knowing what things smell like. If jaded, broken dreams had a scent, this would be it. Old and unclean.

Only a quarter of the streetlamps worked, as no one from the city council thought this part of town warranted any repairs. Hookers and drug dealers and welfare cases weren't real people, right? The unflattering orange streetlight hit me and I watched my own shadow creep up. I moved casual, so he could keep an eye on me. I had to remain in his view...for now.

A soft click. My gaze shot to the store window across the street as a flash of light flickered across the glass. A few seconds later I saw it again, just as my stalker passed under a streetlight.

Either he opened a compact mirror to check his makeup or he brought a switchblade to play.

Total lack of logic—who would bring that thing here? In what world would a fucking *switchblade* even the odds against something that goes bump in the night?

A few feet ahead, an alley intersected the street. Perfect. With his eagerness growing, I could hardly expect him to wait much longer. I calmly rounded the corner.

The alley plunged me into darkness. A blink of my eyes and my pupils dilated, adjusting swiftly. Moonlight speared over the tops of buildings and stabbed the long, narrow alley, highlighting bags of trash overflowing from a dumpster. A closed pawnshop with a cracked wood sign lay to my left. No apartment above, it was only one story. Good height, for my purposes.

Tension rippled through my muscles and I pushed silently off the ground. I leap with such grace and ease, I know. Positively cinematic. I cleared the dozen odd feet and landed on the roof of the shop; I crouched there, hunched low and focused. Black hair whispered against my cheeks, still fluttering after the jump and the only sign I'd moved at all.

My pulse thrummed and electricity danced over my skin; I loved this part. The waiting, the watching, the hunting. A vicious smile turned my lips and my icy blue eyes watched the edge of the building across the street.

And he appeared. My smile widened.

He'd run to catch up; he was breathless now, chest rising and falling, lips parted. My stalker paused just three steps into the alley and looked around. His thought process bled through his actions: first he glanced ahead of him, thinking he just couldn't see me, then he stepped back to the corner in case I was still in the street. When I wasn't there, he stalked over to a trash bin and, with the knife poised in his hand, he checked to see if I was hiding behind it. Still, I was nowhere to be found. I smiled to myself. Poor guy. A rapist without a victim was *such* a sad sight to behold.

Really, my heart was breaking for him.

At some point this kid had toppled over into adulthood; he had the filled out body of a twenty-something, but his steps were unsure—a little unsteady. Ridiculously large jeans told me he didn't do this kind of thing very often; the hem dragged under his heel and when he tried running from me later, he would likely trip and not get very far. Most seasoned predators dress more sensibly.

He swung around, searching for me, and my focus zoomed in on the red cuff on his left wrist. Maybe it signified a group or a gang he belonged to. Mortal social politics didn't exactly interest me, though. Gangs came and went. I remained.

But that jacket, I liked. A black, knee-length number. Surprisingly quiet—it was some sort of canvas. Snug on him, too. It would definitely go with my black boot-cut jeans and scoop necked top. Perhaps I'd get more out of our encounter than just dinner.

I love clothes. It's a fault, probably, but clothes are like a billboard to everyone you meet; easy to manipulate people if you know how to dress. Clothes tell people whether you're a wimpy little girl, a sultry vixen, or a bad-ass chick they shouldn't fuck with. I always waver between the latter two...except for that time I posed as someone peddling *The Watchtower* to get into my target's house and make the kill. Surprisingly, no one opens the door for a Jehovah's Witness in a satin bustier.

My fingers flexed, bloodlust roaring through my veins like a tidal wave. Muscles readied to leap down, to grab him, to take this life that so carelessly would take mine.

Movement at the other end of the alley paused me. Chills rolled down my back like ice water tossed on me—someone was there. And my stalker? He knew it too; he glanced down there and lifted his shoulders in a shrugging gesture.

And how many others were there? I picked through the din—through my stalker’s heart beating and lungs breathing, through rats in the streets and dull music throbbing against apartment building walls... Pushing noises aside, filtering through and...I had nothing. Couldn’t determine how many were there. But he probably had...what was it humans called them? A gang? A posse? Whatever it was, he probably had a few of those. So I couldn’t just kill this one—I had to make it a show.

And who doesn’t love a good show?

Seconds ticked by and turned into a minute. He shuffled, stepping heavily on first his right foot then his left, and then started down the alley again.

I could have let him go; I didn’t need to play. *I’m late, I’m late, I’m late for an important date.* I had places to go, people to kill, money to make.

I’m no avenging angel, not someone looking to spare others from this attack that very well would have taken my life if I were a mortal. That game bored me now. But this little waste of time, this distraction, was an indulgence on my part—something I engaged in not because I needed to but because I *could*. Because I liked taking the time to make someone rue the day they fucked with me.

Even if his death would cut the ruing down to just two or three minutes.

I followed, edging along the roof, one hand touching down to steady me and head kept low. Wind kicked up, sending shivers over my skin and rustling my hair. It was fresh, clean, sweeping from the south where the harbor and lake sat a few miles off.

My would-be stalker halted once more, his head turning and neck craned to check the corners I could be hiding in. Now he was really confused.

And I was ready.

Soundlessly, my rested crouch shifted into a braced one until I was poised, ready for a leap. I launched into the air, hair whipping back, then a second later my boots touched down on grimy concrete. Hair settled again, long waves wrapping around my shoulders like the shadows did.

Good predators are silent. Another lesson my new friend had never learned.

I stood but inches behind him in a slice of moonlight. Waiting. Watching that familiar reaction as awareness crackled around him, instinct telling him I was there an instant before his brain processed it.

Ever have that feeling you're being watched? I was the thing doing the watching.

He turned, eyes doubling in size. "Fuck!" left his lips as he stumbled back, running shoe treads scraping on the pavement.

I smiled brightly with feigned innocence. "Hi there! Looking for me?"

His lips parted and a jumble of unintelligible sounds spilled out. I know a couple different languages—pretty sure he wasn't speaking any of them.

"Okay, confession time: I really like your jacket." I took a step forward. "Would you mind taking it off? I'd hate to get blood on it. Despite some product commercials to the contrary, it's damn hard to get that stuff out."

Shock wore off and his eyes changed, like a blanket of confusion drawn aside. He straightened his back and thrust the knife toward me. "D-Do what I tell you and you won't die, bitch! On the ground! Now!"

Such drama. I rolled my eyes. In what passed for only a second to mortal eyes, I grabbed him by the throat and slammed him against the pawn shop wall, holding him two feet in the air.

He blinked a few times, then looked down at me. Another smile crept over my lips as I watched his gaze track over me and to the ground. His skin paled, blood draining away, and beneath my fingertips I felt his pulse double its beat.

This part never gets old.

"I don't think we've been introduced," I said. "My name's Zara. I'm strong, I'm fast, and I totally kick ass. It's great to be me...but that means right now it sucks to be you."

Terror has a taste for a predator; for me, it's savory and hot, like spices slow roasted. It sparked against my tongue now as my victim panicked and struggled against my grip.

The switchblade flashed in the moonlight as he slashed at me. The blade grazed my inner arm, then slid between my ribs.

Shit. Stupid knife—I forgot about that. Pain swiped at me, biting and stinging. But it was bearable.

I dropped the guy to inspect my wound, an exaggerated sigh blowing past my lips. I hauled the knife out and the wound spit blood, but I didn't

stress it. I'd been stabbed, like, *a lot* over the years and I knew the healing process had started. Pity I couldn't say the same about my shirt.

"Goddamn it." My gaze snapped back up to him. "You damn well better have some money to cover a replacement or I'm going to be rather unhappy with you. I just bought this."

I released the knife and he winced as it struck the ground, a decisive *click* that echoed in the alley.

I'm terrible with empathy, but I tried to imagine it from his perspective when I didn't fall down mortally wounded. Somewhere in his head he must have remembered all the stories of strong, healthy men being found dead in the streets, and, despite how absurd it seemed, he was cowering before a girl who didn't die when he stabbed her.

My empathy is still a work in progress; I didn't feel pity. Just...glee.

He screamed, a burst of fear that reeked of cigarette smoke and rancid tequila. He scrambled for the knife at my feet, twisted, and ran, feet thumping down the alley. Dirt and stones crunched underfoot, scraping between his shoes and the concrete. He smelled of fear. My stomach rumbled.

The air shifted as I moved and then I was there, in front of him, and he skidded to a halt.

Before he could take another swipe at me with the knife, my fingers wrapped around his hand and squeezed. The weapon fell, but I tightened, tightened, feeling the grind of bone against bone.

A shriek started in the back of his throat, a little high pitched sound that grated my nerves; my other hand snapped out to clamp over his mouth.

"You were following me, presumably with the intent to violate me. I suppose you were going to kill me too."

He vehemently shook his head in response.

I tightened the death grip on his hand. "I don't like people who lie to me."

Tears sparked in his eyes, building, welling, then spilling down his cheeks. He made some sort of moan of protest against me breaking his bones.

"I know it's wacky, but I really have a problem with people who try to rape and murder me," I continued. "Do you have any idea how rude that is? Here we are, in the twenty-first century, and despite the progress women have made, men still think they can dominate them. That makes me *so* angry. Doesn't that make you angry?"

Weakly, he nodded.

“I mean, what is humanity coming to when in this day and age a woman can’t even walk down a deserted alley, all alone, in the middle of the night, without fearing being attacked?”

Another whimper, a weak little broken sound.

“Tell me, are you at all aware of how this has affected me? How am I ever going to walk freely at night after what you’ve done to me? Did you even think of my feelings when you started stalking me?”

He mumbled something. *Ah, so you finally decided to join the conversation.* I removed my hand from his mouth so he could speak freely.

“Yes?” I said. “You were saying?”

He parted his lips and his high-pitched scream filled the air, like the female victim in a horror film. The sound drove spikes into my brain—I hate it when they scream this far into the act.

His neck twisted to look behind him, at the mouth of the alley where we both knew others waited. “Help me!”

I leaned toward him as he looked back, my voice taking on a soft whisper. “Something tells me they aren’t coming.”

That thought settled in his brain and his face changed, twisting into something ugly and frightened, then he yelped as I flung him by his broken hand across the alley. He hit the bricks hard and crumpled to the ground, a broken puddle that used to be a tough guy.

My heels clicked on the concreted as I strolled over. He stirred, cradling his broken hand, eyes coming to settle on the toes of my boots.

I’m not all bad; I reached down to offer my hand. Not surprisingly, he stared back, agape and fearful.

So little trust. I hauled him to his feet by the collar of his shirt. “Do you now see the error of your ways?”

He nodded, cowering in my grip.

“Do you promise not to try to rape any more girls?”

Again, he nodded.

“Good.” I grinned. “Now go my child, and sin no more.”

He didn’t move.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Of course you aren’t getting off that easy. Brace yourself ’cause this will hurt...quite a lot, actually.”

A throb started in my gums. They make it look so easy in the movies, but even after a few centuries of it, the growth of my teeth into fangs hurt. The throb sharpened into pinpricks dancing on my gums and then my canines grew longer, sharper. Saliva formed, swelling through my mouth as I reached out and yanked my would-be-killer toward me. His body went limp in my arms, then contorted and shook as my teeth pierced his skin.

The hot blood swirled past my lips, but rather than satiate my thirst, it made me want more.

I held him there in the moonlight as I drank, ensuring his friends would see. With any luck, that would serve as a warning to them. If they came after me, I'd be forced to kill them, which—though enjoyable—was a waste of perfectly good blood. I couldn't very well feed from all of them, as one human was enough to fill me for a week, and overfeeding would leave me feeling ill for a few days afterward. Besides, I was already late for a very important meeting.

Generally, I don't take enough blood to kill. It doesn't make sense in the grand scheme of things—if the human lives, he can always produce more blood, so there's no danger of ever having to go without a meal. I rarely ever drain a human.

But sometimes I just can't stop myself.

Chapter Two

Business Opportunities

Not fifteen minutes after my meal, I stood in front of my destination. Or, rather, on top of it. After my unexpected dinner, I opted for the rooftops for the rest of my walk. It's faster than stopping to kill every loser who decides to follow you.

Plus I probably looked killer with that knee-length jacket flapping in the wind as I ran.

Mishka's window lay wide open without a screen, a big happy mouth ready to let me dive inside. How nice of her.

I dropped noiselessly onto the fire escape and stole down two levels to her floor. White sheer curtains fluttered, cutting across the open window. Beyond them was the living room, and beyond that the kitchen; Mishka Thiering sat with her back to me at the chrome dinette table. Blonde hair was coiled in a bun at the nape of her neck, not a strand out of place even at three in the morning. I swear that witch never slept.

A blue ceramic mug touched down on the table, then she moved her hand back in front of her; the flipping of pages followed. Her flowery peasant skirt trembled as she shifted in her seat.

I failed to see why she'd have all the damn lights on so anyone could see into her place. Despite living in what could only be described as "the slums," all her furniture was either new and stylish or antique and priceless. That chrome dinette set wasn't there the last time I dropped by for a visit, nor was the 1930's lounge chair tucked near the window. Maybe she didn't think anyone would bother carting off furniture in this neighborhood. Or maybe local thieves were scared of the witch next door.

I'd both steal good furniture and risk the wrath of a witch...good thing we're still friends, Mish.

I bent and slipped through the window. Two lights were on either side of me and I stole through the living room on an angle, dodging the light where I could as to not cast a shadow in her line of vision. My boots moved soundlessly on the plush gray carpet and soon I stood directly behind her.

Her attention stayed on the book as I leaned over her shoulder to peer at the discolored pages.

“*Invocation of the Summer God*,” I read aloud.

Her shoulders lifted in a start and her body jumped in her chair. “Goddess damn you, Zara!”

“Hmm.” I took the seat opposite her and dropped down to sit, draped one long leg over the other, and tapped my scarlet painted fingernails on the tabletop. “Is it possible to damn someone already damned?”

“Funny,” she said without smiling. “Why can’t you just use the door like a normal person?”

Because I’m not a person, dumbass. “I like to make an entrance. Besides, you shouldn’t leave the windows open.”

“The air conditioner doesn’t work—that’s the only way to get any fresh air in here since the landlord won’t replace it.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s why I moved out. Maybe you should buy one yourself or at least invest in a spell to keep out unwanted visitors, rather than...” I snatched the leather bound book from her hands to look at the cover. “*Raven’s Grimoire of Dark Magick?*”

“Gimme that.”

I let her grab the book back. She was way too smart for that trashy kid magic they sold in occult stores—why bother with something wannabes read? But I didn’t ask, because I had trouble taking interest in something that wasn’t directly related to *me*. “So, the invoking thing...how’s that working out for you?”

She ignored me. “Nice jacket.” An exaggerated inhale through her nose and her face scrunched up. “Ugh, when did you start smoking?”

“I didn’t—the charming gentleman I killed and stole it from did.” I reached into one of the pockets, pulled out a small pack of cigarettes, and tossed them on the table. “You’re welcome to what he had left.”

“No thanks.” Her chair scraped on the kitchen tile floor as she rose, hardcover book in hand. A tall, dark walnut bookcase with a heavy bottom sat next to the couch, and she moved to set the book at eyelevel. I had long suspected she kept all the good magic stuff hidden away in her fireproof safe—which she didn’t think I knew about—and leaving ol’ Raven’s Grimoire up there confirmed my suspicion it was filled with shit spells. She paused there, skirt swirling around her feet as the wind kicked up and blew through the open window, and eyed the books for a moment. “I didn’t think you fed in this area anymore.”

“I don’t, not since Dustin got that little heroin problem after feeding on too many addicts. I think that was a valuable lesson for us all—you are, indeed, what you eat. But someone follows me, he doesn’t live to tell about it.”

Her green eyes glanced back at me, sharp and alert. “Was it random?”

“Probably. He seemed surprised when he realized I wasn’t human.”

A smirk lifted the corners of her lips. “Imagine that—someone who hasn’t heard of you.”

“Fucking tragedy of biblical proportions, I’m telling you.”

She moved to the tall cabinet next to the shelf, a four drawer number in white that looked out of place between the antique pieces. But then she was a shitty decorator. Hadn’t even painted in the couple of years she had the place to herself. Of course, neither had I before her, but I was going for grungy apartment at the time and the discolored walls kept up that theme.

Not locked, I thought as she went for the top drawer of the filing cabinet. No key, no magical barrier keeping it closed that required her witchy words to open. The well-oiled wheels hummed as she hauled it open, then again when she found what she searched for and closed the cabinet.

Mishka turned to face me, large manila envelope clutched in both hands. For a fraction of an instant, she paused there. Then perhaps overcorrecting after the intermission, she sped forward and her bare feet carried her back to the table. I waited, nails still going *click click click* on the table until she slid the envelope to me and took her seat.

My last name, *Lain*, was written on the front in big fat Sharpie letters. So formal. “This is my shiny new contract?” I slid my fingernail along the sealed flap to open it.

“Yeah.”

An eight-and-a-half by eleven, black and white photo waited inside along with a single sheet of typed information.

The photo was snapped from far away, I guessed; a zoom in and everything but the target had a touch of blur. A man stepped out of a car and I saw him from the chest up; dark business suit with crisp creases and a no-nonsense tie, thinning hair, and one of those faces that conjured images of a beaten leather catcher’s mitt. Behind him, a limo—dark, probably black—and three broad-shouldered bodyguards surrounded him.

A light over the dinette table cast shadows over the brief synopsis of info on my target. I might have guessed him to be fifty or so, but...Jesus, age *seventy-four*?

“Who is he?” My gaze flickered to Mish, briefly, taking in the fidgeting of her hands, before dropping back to the photo again.

“Sean Charles O’Connor...the Fourth.”

“I can see his name right here—I meant *what* is he?”

“Warlock.”

Huh. Don’t play with them too often. Modern covens, typically, have money and they’re total fucking snobs—I didn’t deal a whole lot with

those types these days. The odd rogue, like Mishka, was a different story. Her type wasn't backed up by the cash and monarch-like organization.

So some warlock, probably with a coven, with a contract on his head...and no details on the info sheet regarding why. *Or* payment... “That’s some great anti-aging magic he’s got. What—is he threatening to sell his secrets to Hollywood’s richest, and some plastic surgeons have hired me?”

“He’s the leader of a rivaling coven.”

“Exactly whose is it rivaling?” I looked at her and raised a brow. “Mommy and Daddy’s?”

Her face tightened into a scowl. Mishka had virtually disowned her family during her teenage rebellion, and left one of the more prominent covens in the northern hemisphere. Became a rogue. I supposed I was partly to blame; late one night when the kid caught me stealing from her wealthy parents, Jeffrey and Heaven Thiering, she not only showed me to her father’s safe, but tracked me down the next day and camped out on my doorstep until I agreed to let her stay with me.

The unlikely friendship we struck up when she was sixteen had blossomed into a business relationship as well. Proving herself useful in my transition from high class thief to full-blown hitwoman, four of the past seven contracts I’d been given came through her. And Mr. Sean Charles O’Connor the Fourth would be number five. The witch had great contacts.

Her chair creaked as she shifted and arranged her hands on the table. “Heaven contacted me. This is just your basic blood feud five centuries in the making, and they think it’s time to deliver a major setback to the O’Connors. Take out the head of the coven and it will cause chaos. You in?”

“What are they paying?”

“Five hundred.”

“There had better be more than three zeros attached to that number.”

“No—they said five hundred G’s.”

I stared at her for a moment. That wasn’t funny. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Plus any expenses—”

“No.”

“—and whatever you can grab on the way.”

Now that got me thinking. In the sheet of information, the Thierings specified that they wanted it done at his home, which meant if I was quick about it, I could probably find and crack open his safe while I was there. But doing the job at a heavily guarded mansion was going to be tough,

even for a vampire. Important people rarely had mortal guards...and since the number of undead assassins and thieves was on the rise, they could quite possibly be prepared to take me out.

And I'm not just a thief anymore, damn it. Sure, I subscribed to the want, take, have philosophy, but that wasn't how I made my living now. How fucking embarrassing to be expected to make up the rest of the money just *stealing*?

"No deal." I leaned back in my chair. A whiff of smoke drifted up from the jacket, tickling my sensitive nose. "You can call them back and tell them I said there's no way in hell I'm doing anything for less than a mil."

"As disgustingly rich as they may be, you know damn well my family doesn't have that kind of money lying around. Jeffrey's got that gambling habit, and I don't think his spell-casting skills are getting any stronger, 'cause he still sucks at roulette. And now, if we get O'Connor out of the way, it's going to get ugly, and almost everything they've got will be going into protection."

I can't believe she's playing this goddamn game with me. Mish knew how I felt about money—I liked it even better than I liked boys. And I really like boys. "Then it seems they can't really afford to be doing business. One murder seems rather pointless if it's going to leave them bankrupt."

"I don't even expect a cut of this," Mishka said. "No commission. Personally, I'm not sure I want to be in this business anymore. But this isn't just about money—if you're the one to take out the leader of the O'Connor coven, you've got it made. No more petty theft—"

"Hey, when I thieve, it certainly isn't petty—"

"It *is* compared to this." She leaned forward, arms sliding across the table and green eyes focused on mine. "Zara, this is big. Bigger, I think, than you know." Her words were heavy, an unseen weight tipping them toward ominous.

My skin went prickly, itchy, all creepy crawly with annoyance. I didn't like ominous and I didn't like her implication. "And *I* think I've got more perspective, Mish—I do have a few centuries on you, remember."

The corner of her lips twitched and a little line between her brows deepened. "But you don't know how we work."

Of course I knew. I couldn't *not* know—I was over three hundred goddamn years old. Covens were filled with hereditary witches and warlocks. The covens were in a constant struggle to have better, stronger magic than one another, and the most powerful ones had been around for centuries. I knew that if I was the one to take out a major player, I would

be highly respected...but I also knew that he was worth a lot more than what I was being offered.

“I only do charity if you’re registered with the government. Gotta think of my taxes, honey.”

“You’ve killed for less.”

“Yeah—humans. Anything supernatural that might cause me problems, I want six figures. Rich guy like this? Seven. You know that.”

“Kill O’Connor and you’ve hit the big time.” Her voice took on a higher pitch and she shifted in her seat. I was missing *something*, but suspected she wouldn’t let me in on the secret. “Several covens have been after him for awhile. He needs to go.”

“I’m sure at least a couple of these covens would be willing to pay more than,” I said. “Perhaps I’ll go to them.”

“The word is they already have someone. Someone good. If you don’t act quickly, someone else will, and you’ll be left with nothing.”

Damn, and I thought I had her there. I couldn’t even let myself consider doing it, though—as respected as I would be in my field for this hit, if it got out I did it for mere pennies I’d never get a decent contract again. Self respect: no matter your profession, you’ve gotta have it.

“Then someone else will have to do it.”

Mishka’s pale green eyes darkened, and she chewed at her bottom lip. *Keep debating, witch. I don’t say yes ’til you start talking.*

Slowly, silently, she stood. Back to the living room she went, stepping softly and skipping the cabinet.

In the far corner, a lamp sat on a square table with a long burgundy cloth draped over it. Mish kneeled in front of it, cast the cloth aside—goddamn, I *knew* she had a safe!—and angled her petite self so I couldn’t see her twirl the combination dial. A click and it opened, then slammed shut again before I could glimpse the contents. Sneaky witch—it was like she didn’t trust me or something.

Another manila envelope, this time with no one’s name printed on it. Her throat worked as she swallowed nervously and walked back to me, skin going almost as pale as mine. She sat once more only when the envelope was in my hands, and even then she poised on the edge of her seat.

I sat back casually. It never pays to look rattled even if you’re wondering what the fuck is going on.

Tension thickened the air, palpable and weighted. The envelope tore open easily, a rough sound in an otherwise silent room. Inside was another photo, headshot taken from somewhere high. Young man in his twenties, dark hair to his chin. His cheekbones were high and sculpted, nose

straight. Full lips—the mushy kind girls love to kiss—were pulled into a frown that did nothing to spoil an otherwise incredibly pleasant face. I might like money more than boys, but my heart went pitter patter nonetheless when appreciating such a fine specimen.

No accompanying information. I glanced up at Mishka.

Her face was starkly pale, eyes grave, and she spoke next in a chilling low voice. “Ten million if you take out his son too.”

This was getting interesting.

Chapter Three

Preparations

Someone throws ten million bucks at you, you accept. Even in Canadian dollars.

But I'd lucked out on the genetic lottery: I was both pretty *and* smart. If someone throws ten million bucks at you and *every molecule in your supernatural body is thrumming with worry*, you at least pause.

"The son?"

Mishka didn't reply. She'd stopped even looking at me; gaze was locked on the chrome tabletop, as if she glimpsed something in its depths beyond her own reflection.

"The son's worth nine-point-five million dollars?"

The silence dragged on.

"Do you mind telling me what in your Heavenly Goddess's name is going on?"

"Will you do it?" Her whisper held an edge, a rasp—a sharp, broken thing that didn't sound like the rogue witch I knew and sometimes liked.

So I chewed. Dragged that silence on and on, 'cause hey, she wasn't being too forthcoming with the detes and I'm a bit of a sadist at heart. My long nails drummed on the table, emphasizing the quiet and—I hoped—pulling her nerves taut.

"Do I still get my expenses covered?"

A relieved sigh passed her lips and her eyes dropped closed. Color touched her cheeks once more, a blush spilling over her face and down her neck.

"I'd still like to know a bit more about what's going on," I said.

She sighed again, this time weakly. Maybe the late hour *was* getting to her. "Like what?"

Age is an ugly, ugly thing. There's a nice moment in time, usually your late teens, when you're flawless; you're past gawky teen but show no signs of aging. Lucky me was stuck that way. But even Mishka, now twenty-four, had the *tick tock* of death's clock all over her. My sharp vision narrowed in on the fine creases around her eyes, the skin that lost a bit of its firmness, its glow.

Being aware of the mortality of those around you is something you can never quite be prepared for. Even if you've seen it happen for centuries. Even if you don't keep friends for long. Undead like me—the immortals—live in the moment. The now. What else is there? Feeling frozen there in time while everyone else moves on is just unsettling, and left a twisting in my gut and dryness in my throat.

Mishka brushed a few curly tendrils from her brow. Swept her fingers over her eyes and across her face, smoothing the skin as she went. When she glanced up at me again, the clouds in her eyes spoiled her attempt at looking renewed. “Well?”

“A name, to start.”

“Nate...Nathan Gregory O'Connor.”

“No numbers attached to that one?”

“Nope. But he's Sean's sole heir.”

Interesting. I knew how covens worked and “sole heir” wasn't usually in the cards; they planned better than that, like the royal family did. “Doesn't the power and title usually go to the surviving spouse first?”

“His wife, Delores, is dead. Seven years next spring.”

“And this Nathan is the eldest son?”

“He is now. Sean Charles O'Connor the Fifth died almost a year ago in a car accident. There are no other children, which only leaves Nate's aunts and uncles, all soft in their old age.”

The proverbial light went off in my head. *Now* I understood why this was so important. A weak coven and now the sharks were swimming, ready to take out anything left.

“With the oldest son dead,” Mishka continued, “Sean knows he's in trouble. He's strong, but he can't hold out for long. Besides bringing Nate into the fold again, he's been shopping for a new wife and to potentially produce a couple more heirs.”

A mental *eww* went through my head—that guy was wicked old. I pitied whatever bimbo he picked up to be a vessel for the continuation of his coven. It would make more sense to encourage grandchildren, at least in my mind, but then I wasn't some wealthy, powerful old guy. They had their own logic.

“And Nate's only twenty-seven,” she said, oblivious to where my mind had drifted. “He's not nearly as powerful as he could be one day, so it's best to strike now.”

“So why didn't you just tell me about the son before?”

“I wasn't sure...that is, it wasn't completely necessary...”

I watched her closely. With my cold gaze boring into her, she began to twitch, and was soon shifting around in her chair again, face on fire.

“Whose money is paying for this, Mish?” I asked.

“Jeffrey and Heaven are—”

“Oh, I don’t doubt they contacted you about the old guy. I mean the son. Who’s covering that one?”

After a long pause, she relented. “I am.”

It hit me. She had said she didn’t want to be in the assassin business any longer...

“You finally dipped into your trust fund, I take it. This Nate is a little gift for Mom and Dad so they let you back in the country club?”

“Go to hell.”

I grinned. “I don’t blame you. It’s not like this is high living, and rebellion hardly looks good on someone your age.”

She sent a glare in my direction, sharp like razors, and might have muttered a few words of a curse at me if she hadn’t known I’d rip her in two before she got the spell out.

“So you’ll do it?”

“I already said I would. But regarding my expenses, I want an extra five grand per guard I have to kill.”

“Zar—”

“They might not be mortals, and if they are, they could be Hunters, so they’ll be a bitch to kill. Should the need arise. I won’t go out of my way to kill them. Promise.”

“Fine. But you’re capped off at fifty thousand—any more and you’ll have to suck it up.”

Bitch. “And of the guaranteed ten mil, I want half now.”

“You know damn well that I’ll pay—”

“Half now.”

She eased back into her chair, shoulders slumping and arms coming to cross over her chest. “I’ll have it wired to your account.”

I nodded my agreement. “Good. Now I want details. Schedules, blueprints, security information, and everything else you have on them. What you don’t have, you’ll point me toward someone who can find it for me.”

I returned to my studio apartment around five in the morning, just before dawn. Sunrise has a scent, like a particular brand of accelerant I couldn’t place. And didn’t want to. So I ducked inside just as the stink

tinged the air, and ensured the curtains were pinned in place and I wouldn't burst into flames when the sun rose. Not that I would literally catch on fire, but my skin blistered in direct sunlight, leaving me looking like a burn victim. And that look doesn't work for me.

I hung my lovely new jacket outside on the fire escape to air out the smell of cigarette smoke that clung to the fabric. In one of the pockets I found a small wad of cash, which would cover the cost of purchasing a new shirt. I wasn't hurting for money or anything, but I'm all about principles.

A night prowling around the city was great and all, but I loved my apartment. It sat in one of many old warehouses in the industrial district that had been turned into apartment complexes. While it lacked a loft, which I had originally been looking for, I fell in love with the place the moment I saw it. Being so damn old, you'd think a girl would learn not to become too attached to material things. Nothing lasts forever. But I tried not to think of that when surrounded by the dark brown brick of the warehouse walls, huge windows that stretched nearly to the ceiling, and dark hardwood floors.

I'd had hundreds of homes over the years, but I never got tired of decorating them. In this apartment, I'd kept nearly everything the way it was, including the steel support beams throughout the space. The only paint was a rich splash of violet in the kitchen, and a single light blue wall amongst three white ones in the bathroom. Furniture was sparse, though I didn't get a lot of company, so I didn't require much seating. Mishka occasionally dropped by, and for her visits there was the lime green couch and white armchair in the living room space.

Anyone else I invited over was usually confined to my bed, and not encouraged to hang around much afterward.

After changing, I paused in front of the full-length mirror next to the bathroom to check my wound. Contrary to the ridiculous myth, I had a reflection, so I was able to clearly see the two inch, bloody gash in the side of stomach. It healed over at the usual fast rate. Within a couple of days there wouldn't even be a scar to flaw my smooth, pale skin. Lucky me.

I wouldn't be able to sleep yet, and I had at least fifteen hours before nightfall, so I rolled up the Persian area rug in my living room, took everything Mishka had faxed over to my place, and spread the sheets across the floor.

I was to hit the O'Connor's mansion on Friday, which only gave me three days to prepare. Mishka had provided me with all the information she and her parents had, and I knew right away the job wasn't going to be easy.

Luckily, the younger O'Connor was staying with his father, which meant less running around for me to do. Mish and I had decided on the Friday because Sean was holding a social gathering, and about three hundred guests were expected to attend. That meant easy access. Not in that security wouldn't be tight—it would be, and far more so than usual—but with that many people, I could probably get in unnoticed. Mish figured he wouldn't know all of the guests; the covens O'Connor played nice with had lots of extended family he'd never met. During the party, I'd take note of the guards and security, then slip away to steal what I could and wait in hiding for everyone to leave. After that it was just a matter of taking out my targets, grabbing my stuff, and I was home free.

Mishka had a contact taking care of getting me an invitation to the party and a fake ID, so all I had to do was perfectly learn the layout of the mansion. As strong, fast, and kick-ass as I was, the one thing I didn't have was a photographic memory. That part would take some time.

Shortly after noon, someone buzzed my apartment. I wasn't expecting anyone, and even if I was hungry, I was careful about where I ordered take-out. One too many pizza delivery boys returning to their employers looking a little peaked—with bite marks on their necks—starts to make people wonder. I had exactly one I trusted and he didn't work afternoons.

“Miss Lain,” a guy's voice crackled over the intercom. “Mishka Thiering sent me.”

Unless I'd blinked and missed a couple of days, he was kinda early. I let him in and a few minutes later hauled up the industrial elevator door as he arrived.

He was young—barely seventeen or eighteen—and was very tall, very skinny, and almost as pale as me. I doubted it had anything to do with an aversion to sunlight, though—he probably just spent most of his time forging documents in his parents' basement.

“You finished those quickly,” I said as he handed me my papers.

His eyes darted around the apartment, then shot back to me. “Huh?”

“Ah—Mish probably got you started a few days ago, didn't she?”

“A week ago yesterday.”

Clever girl. Still, if she was so sure I'd say yes, it would have been nice if she'd informed me sooner. I didn't like having to prepare on such short notice.

I flipped through the envelope that contained my new driver's license, social insurance number, health card, birth certificate, Visa, bank card, local library card—all in the name “Helene Walker.”

“Oooh, a video store membership too. You certainly go above and beyond, don't you?”

A blush rolled from his face down his neck at the compliment and he cast his gaze to the side. Even though I had eaten the night before, the rush of blood to his face made me hunger.

Humans are kinda like potato chips in that you can't just eat one sometimes.

I looked down at my new ID again to avoid thinking about food. "Wait—you made me twenty-five? I'm not trying to buy a carton of smokes, I just want to get into a party."

"Well...but-but Mishka said—"

"Never mind, it's all right." *Twenty-five*. Once upon a time, all I dreamed of was reaching eighteen...but I was just under two weeks shy of that. Ten days before my birthday, I was turned. My unlife was suspended at seventeen years, three hundred and fifty-five days. Waiting centuries didn't change things; those ten days never passed.

"A passport too." I flipped open the little book. "Wow, I get around."

"You're an heiress and you spend most of your time in Europe. There's a Walker Coven in New Jersey, but there's also a well-known one in South Africa. No one from either is said to be attending the party, so if you just say the name 'Walker,' Mishka said they probably won't question you further."

"Because they wouldn't want to seem stupid and not know me?"

"Right. I'll hack into a few networks and fake some files so, in the unlikely event someone does a background check, they'll find enough to think you're legit. You even have a Facebook account."

I just hope no one compares it with Zara Lain's Facebook profile. "All my bases covered," I said with an approving smile. "I like you. You're quite helpful."

Just as his usual lack of color was returning, his face flushed again. "There is one problem, though."

My gaze narrowed on him and he went back to pasty.

"I-It's just a-a minor one—"

"What is it?"

"The invitation I-It's better than an exact replica—it's perfect. The same paper, the same ink—all of it."

"But?"

"There's a problem with the seal."

I looked over the invitation. The vanilla parchment was folded and sealed with a dark red circle of wax, the O'Connor crest imprinted into it. A gryphon. Probably a symbol of strength but it always made me think of myths, which equaled *untrue*. Not a way to inspire confidence.

"It looks good to me."

“The problem is that it’s supposed to be a magic seal. An incantation—and O’Connor blessing—was said as it was pressed into the wax...every one of the invitations was done individually.”

“This is crucial to my job *how*?” This was really turning into a hassle. I should just kill Mish—bet someone would pay me for it.

“Magic is a lot harder to forge than a simple invitation.”

“So there’s no magic here?” *Bloody hell, why didn’t I just decide to break in?*

“There is, but I had to send it to Mishka to do, so it’s Thiering. No one will probably sense the difference, but—”

“But as magic is built right into a witch’s genes, it has a family genetic imprint to it...I get it.” *Stupid witches.* “Will this get me in the door or not?”

“It will. So you really need it? You need to be invited inside?”

Yet another stupid superstition. Christ, was I ever sick of hearing those. “No, it’s just rude to show up at a party without one.”

“I’m sure there won’t be any problems, Miss Lain.”

“Good. I’ve decided I won’t eat you.”

His eyes doubled in size. “You were going to—”

I laughed. “No, not really. Well, probably not.”

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