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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND PROPER NOUNS

*abstrux nobtrum* (n.) Private guard with license to kill who is granted his or her position by the King.

*abvvenge* (v.) Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one.

**Black Dagger Brotherhood** (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, Brothers possess immense physical and mental strength, as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the Brotherhood upon nomination by the Brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they are the subjects of legend and objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

**blood slave** (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has been outlawed.

**the Chosen** (pr. n.) Female vampires who had been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. In the past, they were spiritually rather than temporally

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focused, but that changed with the ascendance of the final Primale, who freed them from the Sanctuary. With the Scribe Virgin removing herself from her role, they are completely autonomous and learning to live on earth. They do continue to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood, as well as Brothers who cannot feed from their *shellans* or injured fighters.

***chrih*** (n.) Symbol of honorable death in the Old Language.

***cohntehst*** (n.) Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a female's mate.

***Dhunhd*** (pr. n.) Hell.

***doggen*** (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

***ehros*** (n.) A Chosen trained in the matter of sexual arts.

***exhile dhoble*** (n.) The evil or cursed twin, the one born second.

**the Fade** (pr. n.) Non-temporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

**First Family** (pr. n.) The King and Queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

***ghardian*** (n.) Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of *ghardians*, with the most powerful being that of a *sehcluded* female.

***glymera*** (n.) The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's *ton*.

***hellren*** (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

***hyslop*** (n. or v.) Term referring to a lapse in judgment, typically resulting in the compromise of the mechanical operations of a vehicle or otherwise motorized conveyance of some kind. For example, leaving one's keys in one's car as it is parked outside the family home overnight, whereupon said vehicle is stolen.

***leahdyre*** (n.) A person of power and influence.

*leelan* (adj. or n.) A term of endearment loosely translated as “dearest one.”

**Lessening Society** (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species, and led by his son, Lash.

*lesser* (n.) De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, bluishless, and pale eyed. They smell like baby powder. Now inducted into the society by the Omega’s son, they no longer keep jars for their hearts, as they did in the past. Women now may be inducted.

*lewlben* (n.) Gift.

*lheage* (n.) A term of respect used by a sexual submissive to refer to their dominant.

*Lheniban* (pr. n.) A mythic beast renowned for its sexual prowess. In modern slang, refers to a male of preternatural size and sexual stamina.

*lys* (n.) Torture tool used to remove the eyes.

*mahmen* (n.) Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection.

*mbis* (n.) The masking of a given physical environment; the creation of a field of illusion.

*nalla* (n., f.) or *nallum* (n., m.) Beloved.

**needing period** (n.) Female vampire’s time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female’s transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

*newling* (n.) A virgin.

**the Omega** (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Existed in a non-temporal realm and had extensive powers, though not the power of creation. Exterminated by the Brotherhood, and succeeded by his son, Lash.

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**pbearsom** (adj.) Term referring to the potency of a male's sexual organs.

Literal translation something close to "worthy of entering a female."

**Princeps** (pr. n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

**pyrocant** (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

**rablman** (n.) Savior.

**rythe** (n.) Ritual manner of asserting honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him- or herself without defenses.

**the Scribe Virgin** (pr. n.) Mystical force who previously was counselor to the King as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Existed in a non-temporal realm and had extensive powers, but stepped down and gave her station to the fallen angel, Lassiter. Was capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

**sehclusion** (n.) Status conferred by the King upon a female of the aristocracy as a result of a petition by the female's family. Places the female under the sole direction of her *ghardian*, typically the eldest male in her household. Her *ghardian* then has the legal right to determine all manner of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world.

**shellan** (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

**sympbath** (n.) Subspecies within the vampire race characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and, during certain eras, hunted by vampires.

**talbman** (n.) The evil side of an individual. A dark stain on the soul that requires expression if it is not properly expunged.

**the Tomb** (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site and, previously, the storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against Brothers. No one may enter except for members of the Brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin's successor, or candidates for induction.

**trahyner** (n.) Word used between males of mutual respect and affection. Translated loosely as "beloved friend."

**transition** (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, he or she must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and is unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

**vampire** (n.) Member of a species separate from that of *Homo sapiens*. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases, even longer.

**wahlker** (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

**wbard** (n.) Equivalent of a godfather or godmother to an individual.





## PROLOGUE

*Thirty-one years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days ago . . .*

**E**xplain to me how it's your birthday and you're doing all the cooking?"

As the Black Dagger Brother Qhuinn, mated of Blaylock, son of Rocke, tossed that rhetorical across his in-laws' kitchen table, he reached to his blind side for his daughter. When a heavy, squirming bundle landed in his hands, he knew he'd gotten his mini-me, dark-haired son instead. Either was good with him, but man, you could tell the difference without looking.

Like expecting a can of soda and getting a bowling ball.

"I tried to help my *shellan*." Next to him, his father-in-law, Rocke, glanced over with his characteristic genial smile. "But she has her standards."

The older male shifted around toward the center island, his attention lingering on the female who was taking a pan of homemade lasagna out of the wall oven. Gone was the retired accountant's earnest seriousness; in its place, that even-featured face melted into something worthy of a fairy tale. Sure, Rocke, with his pocket protector, mild manner, and earnest affect, wasn't the Don Juan type—certainly not at this well-past-

middle-aged era in his life, and maybe not ever—but as his mate noticed him looking, the answering blush on her cheeks said she still liked his eyes on her.

“I do have standards, it’s true,” the elder Lyric said as she put the pan on the counter and smoothed her apron. “That’s why I mated you.”

Rocke’s button-down shirt stretched over his chest as he took a nice big inhale with masculine pride. “You did me such a favor when you agreed to be mine.”

“Hardly.” She started running a knife through the pan at right angles. “I was the lucky one.”

Shaking his head, Rocke smiled again. “No, *I* was the lucky one. Still am.”

The exchange was a reminder that HEA in real life didn’t require a perpetual setting sun and the couple from that ancient Cialis ad holding hands in their non sequitur outdoor bathtubs. What you actually needed were two people who still gave a shit about what the other guy had to say after the passage of time—and not just days and nights. Not months. Not even years.

Decades.

Or, in the case of vampires, centuries.

Qhuinn looked in the opposite direction. At the end of the table, his Blay was flanked by two high chairs, like he was the king of babies everywhere. In the crook of his arm, the young Lyric—the one who wasn’t cooking her own birthday dinner—was nestled in a pink blanket, happy as a clam after her bottle.

The male’s bright blue eyes lifted sure as if his name had been whispered, and Qhuinn’s body just stopped whatever it was doing—including the whole breathing thing.

At least he managed to keep hold of their son.

Even after all these years, his *hellren* had the ability to put the brakes on the world. Red-haired, broad-shouldered, and with a voice that was smooth as a good grenache, Blay was the sort of person who anchored a room. Never showy, always thoughtful, quick with a smile and a com-

pliment, the guy was not just a male of worth, he was the sun around which all things gravitated and by which they were warmed and sustained.

At least in Qhuinn's universe. And for everybody else at this table: His parents had always adored their son, something Qhuinn hadn't gotten and was so glad his mate had.

Hell, they loved him so much that when the kid had shown up on their doorstep with a scrawny pretrans who had an impeccable pedigree, but an untenable genetic defect, they'd welcomed Qhuinn and his mismatched eyes into their home and hearts, no questions asked.

"Here we are." Lyric swooped in. "Your favorite, dear."

The feast for the senses and the belly set down in front of him was indeed a thing of beauty: five layers of lasagna noodles, tuck-pointed with meat sauce, mozzarella, and cottage cheese—the latter instead of ricotta because he couldn't handle the ricotta.

He was a tough male, a fighter for the species, a killer who never backed down. But he had the taste buds of a four-year-old.

"This is . . . amazing." Except then he frowned at all the other platters and casserole dishes on the table. "Although we already have the roast and the mashed potatoes and the—"

"I made this just for you." She put her hand on his shoulder. "You missed family dinner last weekend because you were out in the field, and I heard you were disappointed."

Qhuinn put a hand over his heart. "You know, if I weren't happily mated to your son—"

"Now, wait a minute," Rocke spoke up. "She's mine—"

"—I'd marry this lasagna."

They all laughed. For sure it was a dad joke, but then again, he was a dad. And so was Blay. And so was Rocke. Funny how things had changed.

He still had all his piercings, though.

And he hadn't traded his Hummer for a minivan—

"I think someone wants you," Blay said with a smile.

Sure enough, Lyric was reaching for him, so they traded bundled young. Good timing. She was easier to do the one-arm, eating-hold with, and Rhamp was okay getting put in his high chair and given a teething ring to gnaw on. With that settled, the adults passed serving pieces around and filled plates, and between the bites and sips that followed, the conversation was heart-wrenchingly normal: No one's tragic death was ruminated upon. No new bad, Lash-related news for the Lessening Society was reported. No seismic shifts on the Other Side were dissected.

Instead, they chatted about the human Christmas season and the recent snowstorm. The ice dam upstairs in the guest bedroom that everybody told Rocke not to even *think* about getting the ladder out for. There was also a discussion about how pretty the full moon had been the night before, and then came the most important open question following the presentation of the sainted lasagna:

“What kind of cake is for dessert?” Blay asked.

“Carrot,” the elder Lyric said.

As a cheer went up, Quinn toasted her with his beer. “Your cream cheese icing is a food group as far as I’m concerned.”

More laughter. More chatter . . .

It was all very nice. Too nice, in a way.

He paused with his fork. He’d been to this house out in the countryside around Caldwell’s suburban necklace of developments countless times . . . had sat in this chair, always this chair, since the first meal he’d had right after they’d helped Blay’s parents get moved in.

There was an expectation—never spoken by him or anybody else—that Family Dinner, a.k.a. Sunday’s Last Meal, would continue forever.

But that wasn’t the way it worked for mortals, was it.

Wrath’s death two years ago had taught him that. Taught everybody that.

As he felt a familiar ache coming on, he stared down at his daughter’s face. She was so like her *mahmen*, Layla, with tiny, perfect features, big pale eyes, and a dusting of blond hair. He’d heard that human children grew

out of this proper baby/toddler stage after just twelve months, but he was glad vampires took much, much longer. He loved this bundle-of-joy shit, he really did, and given that it was impossible to imagine what their Lyric was going to be like when she was older, when she didn't need him or any of the other parents in her life, the fact that he could still cradle her against the bulk of his biceps like this made him feel as if time was frozen.

Sure, that was nothing but a delusion. It beat worrying that any one of them could be gone in an instant, though.

Maybe by a bomb, set by the enemy . . . at the door to a house, regularly visited.

He tried not to think about how Wrath had been murdered—

As he forced himself to focus on Lyric again, he had to tell himself to quit checking her irises. There were so many reasons not to worry about whether they were going to be mismatched like his own, but as with tracking his son's occasional dark moods, he couldn't help it. He'd had that vision, when he'd been at the door unto the Fade . . . a daughter with one blue eye and one green.

Right now, she was showing no signs of his heterochromatism, and he'd be lying if he said he didn't want it to stay that way.

But that was just his own PTSD talking, wasn't it.

"How's my girl?" he murmured.

She offered him a little stretch and a big gummy smile in return, and as that happiness wafted up at him like a warm breeze, it got hard to breathe. He couldn't imagine ever shaming her for whatever color her eyes ended up being, or hiding her from other people, or shutting her out of the family. He'd been just like her once, born into the world needing gentleness and love. And protection.

Not what he'd gotten, but that was aristocrats for you.

Fortunately, neither of his kids needed to worry about being cast out. Hell, if anybody *ever* tried to hurt either one of them, he would go bare-knuckled, bloodbath—

"You okay, son?" Rocke asked softly.

Quinn jerked his head up. The others had paused in various eat-

ing positions, the elder Lyric in the process of lifting her glass of water, Rocke in mid-bread-tear, Blay putting his fork into his mashed potatoes. They were staring at him with their eyebrows at full mast—

Oh. He was growling, his fangs tingling as they descended.

“Sorry,” he murmured as he forced a tight smile. And then he felt like he had to tack on some kind of explanation. “Do you sometimes wonder what you would do to protect your children?”

There was a heartbeat of silence.

After which all three adults answered grimly: “No.”

He glanced around at each of them, the *hellren* he’d bonded with, the father he’d never had, the *mahmen* he’d always wanted . . . and then also these kids who he now couldn’t live without. He thought also about the other two parents who were part of the deal, Layla, the twins’ *mahmen*, and her male, Xcor.

His life was so complete, so perfect, that it seemed as beautiful and unique as a snowflake falling from the sky.

And just as goddamned fragile.

Qhuinn looked back down at his daughter. Moving her closer to his heart, he stroked her soft cheek.

Shaking his head, he said in a low, nasty voice, “Neither do I.”



## CHAPTER ONE

*Present Day*

*Bathe Nightclub*

*Market Street, bet. Sixteenth & Seventeenth*

*Caldwell, New York*

**T**he statistical probability of being killed by a falling billboard on a city street is nearly incalculable. Something south of .00000071 percent, considering that math contemplated all objects going Sputnik on you, not just billboards.

But this was something Lyric, blooded daughter of the Black Dagger Brother Qhuinn and the Chosen Layla, adopted daughter of Blaylock, son of Roche, and Xcor, leader of the Band of Bastards, wouldn't think about until later on in the night. And even then, her one-in-a-million would just be a pebble on the shore of much, much more important things.

Fortunately, as with most stuff having to do with fate, she didn't know what was coming.

At the moment, she was standing in the grungy city snow in a pair of Louboutin stilettos—and she wasn't worried about crapping up her shoes, either. It was the shit coming through her cell phone she'd had enough of.

“Marcia.” She pronounced the name “MAR-see-ah,” as opposed to the Brady Bunch, normal way, under protest. “Can you just stop so I can get a word in—”

“This is a *huge* opportunity for you. She wants you to come for the *first* day of the conference, *free* of charge. There’s a backstage *photo op*, and an *interview* with her—this is going to level your brand up, I’m *telling* you.”

The emphasized words were like a strongman working his way through a bench press, and you had to wonder if there was a minimum set count and rep number. Like if the woman missed it, did she stand in front of her bathroom mirror and go at her grocery list just to finish the workout?

Lyric turned so her back was to the strong, shifting wind—and what do you know. Down the alley and across Market Street, there was a huge purple advertisement for the Resolve2Evolve conference.

Like Valentina Disserte was a stalker.

“Hello?” came through the phone.

Okay, fine, it was—*was*—a hot invite. R2E had real momentum as a self-actualization movement for women, and no one could argue that its leader wasn’t making the most of her fifteen minutes of fame. If the great Valentina kept stalking those stages and proselytizing about the priority of the personhood, the woman was going to be this generation’s love-yourself messiah.

The problem? It all just seemed a little too pretty-purple-bow’d to be real. Life through a filter of sound bites, rather than the real thing.

Closing her eyes, Lyric thought about what was happening in her grandparents’ house. Maybe even a month ago, she might have bought into the R2E message herself. Now?

Then again, maybe she needed the distraction.

“Fine.” As the wind came barreling down the alley with a big shove, she shivered and turned to the club’s fire door. “But can we get through tonight first before you ask me about anything else?”

“So *where* are you?”

“Out in the alley—”

The dented metal panel swung wide, and MAR-see-ah Rotterdam, social media manager to the stars, made her appearance with a stress-flourish. Clocking in at barely over five tall and fifty pounds if she’d just had another Diet Coke, the fact that the woman had two cell phones up to her ears made her look like she was ducking an explosion.

“No, *Ron*.” She motioned with the phone on the left as she hung it up. “You go to L.A. *tomorrow* for the *collab*. Look, I’m at an *exclusive* event and I have to go. I’ll call you in the *morning*—when you better be on that *fucking* jet.”

Marcia hung up phone #2. “Beautiful, but *dumb* as a box of rocks. Fortunately, he just has to *stand* there for *selfies*. Well, *look* at you.”

Lyric glanced down at herself and remembered that she did like her dress. Low-cut, strapless, and black, the thing was set with four-inch strings of iridescent beads so if you swung your hips back and forth, there was a halo around your body, the show both light and dark. Plus the sound was fantastic, a hush of applause.

Of course, Rhamp called it her car-wash getup—

“You know *what*?” Marcia announced.

Oh, God, no. Not another bright idea—

“I’m calling *Vogue*. You’re not *big* enough for the U.S. *channel*, but I think I can get us into one of the *European* ones. *Remember* when it was a *magazine*? Too bad we *can’t* do stills to show those *eyes* of yours. Blue and green, and not contacts. With the *blond* hair, come *on*. Are you just going to *stand* there? And you’ve *ruined* those shoes.”

As Lyric walked into the back of Bathe, she felt herself recede until she became nothing but a pinprick, only a tiny reflection of who she really was peeking through the velvety drape of what she looked like. Back in the beginning of all this influencer stuff, she had been incandescent.

Now she wasn’t even a spark.

The definition of burnout was not a complicated one. The tricky part was what you did about it when all that no-shit-Sherlock, *Merriam-Webster* came and found you. Successful careers, like all bright

ideas that by some miracle worked, assumed a velocity of their own, but unlike things such as cars, airplanes, or space shuttles, there was no safety equipment to buffer a sudden braking.

So here she was. Surrounded by people who thought they knew her, a paper idol who was the only one who seemed to know she wasn't actually hot as hell. She was flammable.

And there was a world of difference between the two—

Marcia stepped up, stepped in, stepped all over everything. “*You stand over there, and we bring the line through here—let’s get moving now so you know where you are before I bring your people in.*”

*Her people?* As if she’d written her name inside their clothes and was taking them to some kind of existential summer camp?

As Lyric let herself get positioned like a vase on a shelf, she glanced at the step and repeat. Set against a pink and pale green background, her Lyricaly Dressed logo, with its little music bars forming a dress, alternated with the Trash Panda makeup brand’s—which featured a panda and a trash bin, go figure.

Glancing out past the VIP room’s archway, she measured the crowd and was shocked by how many had come. It was a surprise she’d felt before, and at least that was one part of the job that still felt fresh. First it had been ten thousand subscribers to her Zideo account, then came a hundred thousand. When she’d crossed a million, she’d thrown herself a party, and felt like she’d had a purpose.

Now she was hovering at just under five million, and she had brand deals, an appearance schedule, and a manager—

“That *light* needs to be re-angled.” Marcia barked out a command and then went guided missile on some poor man in overalls. “Yes—you. I’m talking to *you*. That is *wrong!* She needs it *softer* on her face.”

Make that, *manager*.

As Lyric was left in the dust, she looked around. The VIP part of Bathe had been reserved for the event, and a snaking series of ropes had been set up to keep the line organized. Seeing the special-access lounge empty of its usual crowd of top-shelf-drinking highfliers made the setup

look like an egg carton for fancy shitfaced people: Twelve sunken seating areas were split in the middle and separated by an aisle you could strut down if you were so inclined. Lit by different shades of blue, from Tiffany's signature paler shade to sapphire to seafoam, the circular couches were comfortable, liquid-resistant, and the site of many a poor decision.

And even more empty wallets.

She knew the place well. She and her friend group were regulars, and over the last year and a half had staked a claim to the back sofa by the emergency exit. The blue-black light was great for keeping things low-key, and if you tended to dematerialize as opposed to Uber out at the end of the night, the alley access by way of that emergency fire door was convenient.

What would Marcia think if she found out she was managing a vampire—

Off to the side, the woman poked her forefinger up into the face of the overall guy like he'd insulted every mother in her bloodline.

Christ, if Marcia knew the truth, she'd probably sell the rights to a tell-all as soon as she got a podcast going.

Nosfer-chat-u.

On that note, Marcia dropped the bone of the lighting and brought over a very tall, very slender woman with very long black hair extensions. It was as if Chas Addams had tossed one of his drawings into the next century, and Lyric pinned a smile.

"Of course *you* remember *Svetlana*?" Marcia did a flourish thing. "She *is* Trash Panda. Svet, you look *amazing*—let's get the two *girls* of the *hour* together."

Marcia clapped her hands, like the world ran on her own personal lights-on-lights-off switch, and then it was cue the small talk as the photographer rushed over in a clear attempt to avoid what the lighting guy had had airmailed at him: Svet complimented Lyric's dress, and Lyric hit the blessings-ball back over the net with an honest appreciation for the other woman's shoes—because hey, even though they were the size of toasters and must have weighed ten pounds apiece, at least

they were dry. Then came the hair-compare and associated fluffing—at least on Svet’s side—followed by the obligatory what-mascara-is-that.

“Trash Panda all the way,” Lyric mumbled. Even though she was wearing Maybelline.

“Smile!”

Lyric front-and-centered at the lens, but her eyes returned to the VIP lounge’s entrance as the flash went off. The pair of suited sentries at the archway were looking above-it-all, and the faces on the far side were a tide they were holding back with a satisfaction that made Lyric want to spill wine on them.

As someone else was brought over, Lyric stared out from her private abyss, and talked about nothing, and smiled when she was supposed to.

This time, when the flash went off, she blinked hard.

And thought about what her brother, Rhamp, was doing right now. He and Shuli, and all the other fighters, were not standing around posing for pictures. When a bright light went off around them, it was because they’d stabbed one of the *lessers* who hunted and killed vampires, and sent the fucker(s) back to their maker.

Their brilliant flashes were a sign they’d won a battle, saved a civilian, made a difference.

Done something courageous and worthwhile—

“And *here*, Lyric, before we *start* things, you have to *meet*—”

Marcia shoved another person in for advance photos, an interviewer with some kind of podcast, who was followed by another influencer with “an *insane* amount of followers”—

And that was when Lyric caught sight of a familiar face. Over by the emergency exit.

A shy, reserved, familiar face attached to a lanky body garbed in just Levi’s and a t-shirt, in spite of the cold.

“Oh, Allhan!” Lyric broke out of a four-person lineup. “Hi!”

“Wait, *what?*” Marcia demanded. “*Where* are you *going*—”

“Hey!” As she rushed over to the male, her smile was an honest one.

That she hoped wasn't as desperate as she feared it might be. "What are you doing here?"

Allhan looked at the floor, and even in the dark blue light, she could see the flush race up his thin neck and bloom in his hollow face.

"I mean, I'm so glad you came." She touched his arm. "I'm just surprised, is all. This is not your usual kind of place."

As a pretrans, Allhan was about twenty-five years old according to the human calendar—no one was sure exactly when his birthday was, not even him—but he was as scrawny as a twelve-year-old human kid. And then there was the frizzy dark hair. No matter what the season, it was like he'd rubbed a balloon on the crown of his head in the middle of winter and done nothing about the static electricity.

Then again, the guy was live-wire smart. Maybe he actually had straight hair and the heat generated by all that IQ was what had permed up all his—

"*What are you doing?*" Marcia stepped in between them. "You *need* to be back there—"

"Oh, it's okay, I'm just saying hi. This is my friend."

Marcia's narrowed eyes did an up-and-down on the male, and somehow her wooden expression was more of an insult than if she'd said the words she was clearly thinking:

*Less than. Not worth the effort.*

*Forgettable.*

"That's just *great*." The woman linked arms with Lyric and started walking away. "That's *wonderful*. We *love* friends, just *not* right now."

As Lyric threw out her anchor, she wondered whether, if it had been her brother or, like, Shuli, for godsakes, things would be *different*. But of course they would.

"You need to give me a minute—"

"No, *now*. This is *work*."

"Let me at least say goodbye." She turned back around. "Listen, Allhan—"

He was gone, the emergency door just shutting.

Lyric put her hands to her face, and felt like screaming. “Hold on, Marcia. I have to go say—”

“You don’t need to worry about the likes of *that*.”

Later, much later, Lyric would know that it all really started at that moment, with that one syllable, spoken in that tone. Something just snapped.

“All of *this* is going to wait,” Lyric shot back. “While I go and make sure you didn’t offend my friend.”

Marcia hopped in front and put her arms wide like she was trying to stop a train. Speaking in a rushed hush, she said, “You have two hundred of your followers out there, who paid forty-nine dollars to stand next to you and get their pictures taken. The event is starting at seven. So no, you’re not going—”

“There are things more important than work.”

“Not tonight there aren’t.”

As the little woman stared up at her, that Botox-frozen face straining to reflect all kinds of inner horror, it dawned on Lyric that this thing with *Lyricaly Dressed*, which had started with all the casualness of a sneeze two years ago, had taken on a life of its own.

And it was like feeding a monster now.

“You’re *so* wrong about that,” Lyric muttered as she pushed the woman out of the way. “Life doesn’t last forever, you know.”

She hit that fire door like it was a solid obstacle.

And as she stepped out, the cold slapped her back just as hard.

“Allhan!” she cried out. “Wait!”



## CHAPTER TWO

*15 Windsor Lane  
Caldwell, New York*

If you were going to be a traitor against Wrath, son of Wrath, sire of Wrath, two things were guaranteed to happen. One, every worldly possession you had, whether it was stocks, bonds, or cold hard cash or the house you lived in or the clothes on your fucking back, was confiscated unto the King.

And two—

Quinn re-formed in a snowbank and looked up at a modern version of the kind of stately mansion he grew up in.

“We’re gonna hunt you until we find you,” he finished.

Fucking aristocrats. Always planning shit.

Taking out a copper key, he mounted the shoveled front steps and unlocked the heavy door. As he opened things up, the alarm that had been installed a week ago started to tick down, and while he traded that slip of rosy-colored metal for a big-ass block of Beretta, things were turned off back at headquarters.

He did not shut himself in as he stepped over the threshold.

While he flipped the safety off his gun and glanced around, all he

wanted to do was get his hands around Whestmorel's pencil neck and snap it off the spine at the ascot. The aristocrat had proven to be craftier than expected, however. He'd made his threat—and then done what most members of the *glymera* could not handle.

He'd gone underground and stayed there, quiet as a mouse.

Not the move of an amateur, and no doubt the snob wasn't just twiddling his thumbs.

"You'll have to come up for air sometime," Qhuinn muttered.

Sooner or later, there would be a tip-off. A financial flare sent up through the web that Vishous could trace. An associate who blabbed to somebody, a sighting at an event, a mistake that led to a crack in the conspiracy.

Or . . . an actual attempt made on the King's life.

That last one was the contingency everybody least wanted.

And the reason he felt like jumping out of his own skin.

Stalking forward into the drawing room, he looked at the vacant spot over the fireplace—and wondered what kind of oil painting had been boosted on Whestmorel's way to the exit. The guy had taken all computer components, cell phones, and security monitoring equipment with him. Safe was also empty—the Brotherhood'd figured that out when Zsadist had blown the door off. And there were all kinds of vacancies on the walls and the shelves that suggested some of the choice art had been taken on the evac, too.

What the hell were they going to do with the rest of Whestmorel's shit? The male's daughter had renounced her own bloodline—to the point that she'd even left her things behind in the house, in spite of the fact that she was totally innocent and had been offered the chance to take what she wanted.

So the rest of this was just high-class junk, really, all of which needed to be sold or donated so they could put the mansion on the open human market and cash the fuck out.

"Or we can just light this bitch on fire." He paused by a gilt-framed mirror and deliberately moved it off-kilter. "And get out the marshmallows—"

“Did someone say ‘Stay Puft?’”

He swung around with his weapon pointed at chest level—but was already lowering it before Rhage shoved a grape Tootsie Pop into his mouth and put his palms up.

“You can keep your s’mores,” Hollywood maintained. “Just don’t shoot me before I get my licks in.”

Qhuinn cursed. “You could have made a little noise—”

“I did. I asked you about the Stay and the Puft. Very important stuff.”

The Brotherhood’s golden boy lowered his hands and crunched down into the chocolate center. That he was eating was no surprise. And go figure, he was still resplendently handsome, big as a house, blond as a sunny day.

Then again, he’d been all that long before Qhuinn had even been on the planet.

“Entering,” a deep male voice announced.

“See?” Qhuinn pointed at Zsadist as the brother came in. “*That’s* how you do it.”

Rhage popped the lollipop stick out of his mouth and pointed with it. “You know what I like about you, kid?”

It seemed stupid to remind the male that he was mated and had two full-grown young of his own. “Tell me.”

“You always follow the rules.” Rhage clapped Qhuinn on the shoulder. “Which means you’re good backup.”

Qhuinn blinked. He’d been called a lot of things in his life. Rule follower . . . ?

As some of the other brothers filed in, he reassured himself that his piercings were all in place.

Even—discreetly—his Prince Albert.

“I’ll clear the first floor,” he announced, getting his second gun out.

Walking fast, he put both weapons up as he continued through the standard category of formal rooms, all of which had their drapes drawn. Even though the whole place had been camera’d and mic’d up ever since

they'd assumed ownership last week, no one could take any chances tonight.

They already knew shit was clear. But again, that didn't matter.

He wasn't about to trust a bunch of cameras with what was coming. None of them were.

Opening up his senses, he sent a healthy dose of paranoid out into the drawing room. The study. The library. The music room. As he went along, refreshing his memory of the silk-covered furniture and the museum quality antiques, the Persian rugs on the floors and the portraits on the walls, he heard the others walking around upstairs through the bedrooms, the closets, the laundry room. Another team went all the way to the attic, and a final one dove into the basement and the garage.

As he came to the kitchen, he tracked every shadow thrown by the bright ceiling lights. In contrast to the rest of the house, which was a showcase for *glymera* visitors, back here it was all business, the appliances stainless steel, the pans hanging on racks in descending size, the ladles and knives and utensils all organized and within reach of the cutting boards, the stoves and ovens, the service line.

Big-ticket setup for a house that catered to a big-ticket master.

After checking the walk-in refrigerator and then the freezer—because hey, aristocrats, like all snakes, were cold-blooded—he did a pass through the pantry, and came out into the dining room.

That was when he stopped.

The table was what pulled him up, that long, glossy run down the middle of the formal room with all those chairs tucked in tight like soldiers called for inspection: twenty-two chairs, the two at the ends sporting arms.

"Now is not the time," he said under his breath.

Nonetheless, his memory banks coughed up a hairball of the past, the room before him replaced by a what-once-was. Instead of this grand setup, he saw a downright imperial one, and instead of empty chairs, there were familiar faces in candlelight . . . the Brotherhood, their mates, and the fighters, along with the First Family. And all the young were there, too, everybody eating, drinking . . . being merry.

It was so clear, so painfully clear. Even though it had been thirty years and change since they'd gathered in that gargoyled royal house up on Great Bear Mountain, he could picture the amalgam of countless Last Meals vividly, like it was a dream he was in, rather than a memory that stalked him.

A lingering nostalgia registered as pain in the center of his chest. There had been problems back then for all of them, issues in life that ranged from the little annoyances to the big worries to the outright terrors. And the war, always the fucking war.

But things seemed simpler—

He went to rub his pounding head, then remembered he had a loaded gun in each hand with the safety off—and now was so not the time to shoot himself in the dome for a dumb reason.

And not just because it'd ruin all this pretentious gold-leafed wallpaper.

On that note, he thought of another table, a totally different one—and this time, it really was from memory, not some post-traumatic mental spasm that he couldn't seem to move past: A cozy family table now, in an open, casual kitchen that was ringed with windows overlooking a meadow and a pond. No butler and waitstaff. No sterling or crystal. No swooping drapes or heavy chandeliers.

No brothers, either.

Just his immediate family: Blay, and the male's parents, Lyric and Rocke, with the twins, Lyric and Rhamp, in high chairs. The Last Meal spread was served in mismatched dishes and steaming with warmth, but the plates were as yet empty because there was one more dish being brought over. Meanwhile, snow was falling outside, and the decor was red and green for Christmas, even though there were no humans in the house . . .

Rocke saying something about his *shellan* and looking her way. And Qhuinn also glanced over to the stove.

The elder Lyric was there, with her apron on and her hair pulled back sensibly. She was cutting up the lasagna she'd made just for Qhuinn,

the light fixtures over the island catching the planes of her lovely face.

Healthy. Whole. With life still in front of her—

“One minute out.”

Qhuinn jerked around to the archway. Rhage was standing there, filling the double doorjambs, and there were no more lollipops in sight. It was game time, so he had a gun in each hand.

Still, the guy asked, “You okay?”

No, he wasn’t. But Hollywood—just like everybody else—knew that already, and knew the reason. Some things you just didn’t want to say out loud, though.

*My beloved mahmen-in-law is dying* was still not a statement he was prepared to make. And the same was true about the inevitable add-on: *And it’s killing everybody.*

So he pivoted on his reply. Even though now was also not the time for him to get a hair across his ass because someone who lived off Fluffernutter sandwiches, chips, and ice cream suggested that maybe he was halfway following rules.

“Just so we’re clear.” He touched the silver hoop in his lower lip, even though his Beretta nearly poked him in the eyeball. “I’m still who I’ve always been.”

Rhage chuckled. “You mean a badass?”

“Yeah, exactly.” He cleared his throat. “But enough about me. How is this happening?”

“It was *not* my idea,” Hollywood muttered. Then he called out, “Basement and garage, clear.”

Qhuinn put volume into his voice as well: “First floor, clear.”

From out in the foyer, Z answered with, “Second floor, clear.”

And Phury chimed in, “Attic, clear.”

A vibration went off inside Qhuinn’s leather jacket, and when the text was answered—the countdown started. Exactly thirty Mississippi’s later, headlights washed across the front of the mansion, the hard beams penetrating a seam in the heavy, closed curtains like an adversary that’d found a weakness.

“Let’s get this over with,” he gritted as he headed for the foyer.

Joining the other brothers who were milling around beneath a crystal chandelier, he rolled his shoulders and then cracked his neck by cranking his head from side to side. Everybody was double-dipping into their holsters, but no daggers. Those vicious black blades had all stayed put.

A gun was better in this situation.

Two forties were even better.

Tohr was the one who opened things up, and the cold air came in before him, the dark night on the other side like a void he’d somehow managed to step out of. Vishous was next, the goateed brother looking like he was ready to fight, his hands up at chest level, the pair of Glocks in them the perfect accessory to all his black leather and fuck-off.

And behind him, the male of the hour.

Wrath, the great Blind King, was taller than everybody—or at least it felt that way. With those wraparounds hiding his eyes, his cruel, aristocratic face, and all his long black hair falling from that widow’s peak, he single-handedly validated the human bullshit mythology about vampires. He was the real deal, the last purebred of the species left on the planet, a force of nature, a stone-cold killer, and a shrewd leader.

Whose side hustle was rank impatience.

The second he was past the threshold, John Matthew and Xcor entered in his wake and shut the front door with a resounding *thud*. The two of them had twin sets of guns out as well, and both put their backs to the wood. There was a brief silence, as if everybody in the foyer was taking a moment.

“Relief” was the wrong word.

No, relief wasn’t going to come until they were back at the Audience House. Safely, with all of the King’s fingers and toes accounted for.

Instead, this pause was what happened when a group of males were determined to keep their yaps shut—and choking on the fucking effort.

As Wrath’s nostrils flared while he tested the air, Qhuinn leaned to the side and traced the blind corners in that drawing room he’d just gone

through. And then he glanced back at the front entrance, even though there was no reason to worry about the exterior. The Band of Bastards was covering the property lines, and they did not need primers on how to shoot to kill.

Still, he felt like his balls had crawled up into his lower abdomen—and turned into grenades.

Then again, the last time Wrath had left the house to go anywhere except for audiences with civilians, three decades of hell had ensued. Frankly, he was surprised that Beth had gotten on board with the plan, but that was none of Qhuinn's business—although he could imagine how the conversation had gone.

Good times, good times. J/k.

When Wrath finally stepped forward and Tohr fell in beside him, the latter holstered one of his guns and put his hand behind the King's elbow to subtly guide him. The brothers then fanned out, and Qhuinn went with the flow, the lot of them like a living organism with a single mind, a single body.

No components, only the whole.

It was an ancient tradition, the Black Dagger Brotherhood not only protectors of the race, but the private guard to the King . . . prepared to lay down their lives in service to the male who mattered most.

*Fucking hell, Qhuinn thought as he continued along. Let nothing go wrong tonight.*



## CHAPTER THREE

*The Otto Building  
Corner of Market Street and Sixteenth Avenue*

**T**he guy's down a quart. Look at him. Don't say nothin', don't talk to nobody. He's a goddamn—"

"*Stop.*" Bob Knolls, proud LiUNA member and foreman of this particular Wabash Construction Company site, shot a glare over his thermos of hot chocolate. "Just cut it with that language, okay. It's offensive."

"Oh, 'scuse me, word police." Petey McCord, resident shift-prick, bristled on the other side of the picnic table and spoke up even louder over the din of a jackhammer. "Didn't know you were so fucking sensitive—"

The winter wind barreling up from the river hung a left directly over the break area, the chain-link fence rattling, the mesh panels flapping against their ties. The only good news was that the shit cut Petey off, although one thing everybody had learned over the last month was that the asshole of this particular job wouldn't be down for long.

As the commentary started up again, Bob put his palm forward—and wondered why he couldn't be the type of foreman who ruled with an iron hammer. Fist. Whatever.

“What the *fuck* do you care so much about him, Petey? Clock your time, cash your check, live your fucking life —”

“—over there, workin’ through the break and makin’ us look bad—”

Bob curled up a fist and slammed it down. “Leave Big D alone.”

The other guys jerked to attention, even the ones at the neighboring tables, all kinds of would-ya-look-at-that faces lifting from lunch boxes and travel mugs. Hard to know whether they were surprised by the particularly nasty edge of Petey’s bitching or if it was that their go-with-the-flow foreman was actually doing something about it.

And meanwhile, that jackhammer droned on.

Bob got back to his hot chocolate because it was the only thing keeping him warm at this point. Goddamn, he hated eating out in the cold, and it was ridiculous that OSHA standards required them to be outdoors to protect their lungs. Yeah, ’cuz pneumonia was better than a little chemical exposure here and there. At least the arctic chill was an improvement over the hot months when you couldn’t drink enough to keep up with the sweat—

“Big D,” Petey mimicked as he tore into his sub like he was chewing off an animal leg. “Fucking Frankenstein motherfucker. Oh, *sorry*, am I allowed to use that f-word? Wouldn’t want to *offend* anybody. Or Dick himself, over there.”

“His name is Dev,” Bob muttered.

Instead of doing something else with a fist—like coldcocking the smartass and losing his own job and benefits—Bob set into his wife’s meatloaf sandwich and thought, *God bless that woman*. As he chewed, he couldn’t decide if the fact that opening his lunch box was the highlight of his work night was a good or bad commentary on his life.

Better to have the home thing going right, he decided. You could always find another job.

As the tone and volume of that asphalt assault got higher and even louder, Bob shifted his eyes over the field of dumpsters, construction equipment, and debris. In the noon-bright glare of the cage lights, real-name Devlin was bearing down on the jackhammer like the piece of

equipment better get him to the center of the earth or he was going to throw the hunk of crap into the Hudson. Steam rose off a set of weight-lifter-worthy bare arms, his reflective bib and t-shirt all that he was wearing—unlike the rest of them, who were so layered, they were basically human Gobstoppers.

And yeah, okay, fine. Big D's intensity was a little weird, and the never-taking-a-breather stuff on shift was pretty stupid. The collective bargaining agreement for the union guaranteed you two fifteen-minute breaks as well as a thirty-minute lunch, but if you didn't take them, it wasn't like you got overtime. Still, the guy rarely sat down, and not because he was some tweaking kind of drug user. He just seemed to want to work, and between that drive and all his strength, he could do in an hour what three regular guys took half a shift to get done.

Which was why motormouth with the slurs had a problem with him.

Not that Big D cared. He just ducked his head and—

The jackhammer's engine got cut, and Big D easily put it aside. Then he bent down and picked up a chunk of sidewalk the size of a car hood. As he walked off with the load, he might as well have been strolling through a park, and when he tossed the section over the lip of a dumpster, there was no grunting, no groaning—

"Hey, Dick! You know we got a lift for that shit!" Petey called out.

Bob went back to his sandwich with a grim fixation. The skyscraper they were renovating was a hundred years old and had last been updated about four decades ago—so they were in the total demo stage of things, ripping and tearing out every square inch of carpeting, all of the cubicle walls, and any fixture there was down to the faucets and toilets in the bathrooms and every goddamn fluorescent ceiling bar that had ever been made. Of course they were behind schedule, but he wasn't allowed to let Dev stay inside and keep cranking. The rule was, when it was break time, everyone had to vacate whatever level they were on and come out here into the open air as a group.

Big D had started working the jackhammer on the sidewalk just this week, and he'd already made it about a quarter of the way down the

building's block. After he was finished? Well, he could start on the front entrance's stone stairs if he wanted to—

“Yo, Big D!” Petey shouted over again. “How 'bout you bend over some more. You look like you want a fucking date!”

As the nitpick continued, a couple of the guys grumbled and looked over pointedly. At Bob.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said under his breath. “I got it.”

Except before he could figure out his next move, Petey shot to his feet and marched away from the break area, a greasy string bean on a bad-idea mission.

Toward Big D.

Bob polished off the last of his sandwich and extricated himself from the bench. As he jacked up his insulated work pants, he was reminded of why he hadn't really wanted to become foreman. Too bad the pay was so much better, and it looked like tonight he was going to be forced to earn the extra ten bucks an hour.

“Can we *not* do this—”

The wind whipped around again, caught a drywall bucket, and sent the damn thing right into his shin. As he cursed and hobbled, Petey stepped in front of Big D while the other man headed back for the jackhammer.

“Say somethin’,” Petey barked. “Fuck, speak wouldya!” Big D just stared down at the guy. Like all the noise at his feet was a walkie-talkie that had been dropped.

“That's it? You just gonna look at me? That's all you got, you motherfuckin'—”

As the slur was dropped for a second time, what happened next was something that Bob would replay for the rest of his life:

Big D still didn't respond, so Petey palmed up and punched the guy right on the pecs. The double strike was like a toddler tantruming a brick wall.

And that's when Big D, the strong, silent type, finally reacted.

That heavy right arm snapped out and he grabbed Petey's throat

like a rope. The lift that followed wasn't exactly a surprise, but when was the last time anybody'd seen a full-ass grown man dangling from a fist grip, with his work boots clapping together as if they approved of the find-out after all the fuckin' around?

Bob hurried his own Timberlands up, but he had to dodge another tumbleweed bucket, a flag of netting that had torn off one of the pedestrian barriers, and something that could have been a panel of particle board—or might have been a fantastical flying beast, because this shit was surely some kind of screwed-up fever dream.

By the time he got to the problem, Petey was clawing desperately at the hand around his neck, his jowls all basset-hound bunched up, his already ruddy face barn red and getting worse.

Bob tried to put some authority into his voice: "Hey, Big D, how about you put him down—"

His voice dried up as the guy's head cranked toward him. Those eyes . . . so unremarkable before . . . had a soulless gleam to them that made them unforgettable: There was nothing behind the ice-cold stare. Not a scrap of humanity, and no recognition, either.

And as the other dozen or so guys on shift came over from the picnic tables, Bob stopped them with a glare. A pile-on might be a good solution in another situation. In this one? He was worried that Big D might snap Petey's fucking neck and then get to work on the rest of them.

"Hey, D," he said in what he hoped was a reasonable tone, "let's put him down, 'kay? You don't want to go to jail over him. He's not worth it. Plus he's sorry, ain't you, Petey."

Petey did what he could do to nod as tears welled and started to fall from his bulging eyes. Whether that was emotion or the precursor to him going empty-socket, it was impossible to know.

"You hear me, Big D?" Bob took out his cell phone and waved it in the guy's general direction. "If you hurt him, I'ma have to call the police. So let's not escalate this—"

Petey's eyes rolled back in his head, only the whites showing, and his boots abruptly stopped kicking.

“Devlin, you gotta let him down!” The wind was so loud, Bob had to shout over it. And then there was the alarm that had started to scream in his own head. “Come on, man! You want to go to jail for the rest of your l—”

The metal-on-metal creaking was the kind of sound that, after twenty years working construction, you instantly knew meant two things: One, it was something big. And two, gravity had a helluva hold on whatever the hell it was.

So a different kind of danger had just shown up to the chat.

And it was on such a scale that everyone, even Big D, looked to the roof of the building next door.

It was that goddamn purple billboard, the one with that brunette’s face on it and some stupid logo. The vicious wind had caught the panels, turned them into a sail—and was in the process of peeling the bitch right off its support scaffolding.

Bob did a quick trajectory check. The gusts were going to take it away from the construction site and the bib’d-up, hard-hatted men who were standing around watching the show.

That was the good news. The bad news? Those people clustered around the glow of that club Bathé’s entrance were fucked.

Not his problem, though.

Bob went back to what *was* his issue: “Put him down, Dev. Or I’m calling the police.”



## CHAPTER FOUR

Allhan, stop!”  
Lyric tripped and flipped her way through the salted slush and frozen snow of the alley, knowing full well that it was going to be a miracle if she didn’t break all of her ankles—because surely she had more than two if she was still upright.

“Allhan, hold up—”

With a squeak, she went full modern dance, her rhythm chiropractic, her sense of balance far outstretching her coordination. The damn Louboutins were somehow backup, though, the spiky heels like stakes on a tent, anchoring her even as she blew all around. Meanwhile, Allhan spun to a halt at the head of the lane, the crazy wind billowing his baggy shirt out from his soda-straw body, his frizzy hair remaining utterly unaffected by the maelstrom.

“Are you okay?” he shouted as he ran back for her.

As soon as he was in range, she grabbed on to his arm and yanked her heel out of its hold in the slush. “Yes, sorry—”

“Here, lean on me.”

Grabbing on to his other shoulder, she went wisdom-tooth extraction on her stiletto, and then settled onto some salted pavement.

“Look, I’m sorry about my manager. She just is—”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

Allhan shrugged. “I’m used to people being like that with me. It really isn’t a problem.”

Lyric opened her mouth. Shut it. Then she cleared her throat. “Were you meeting someone here?”

His eyes drifted away. “No.”

“Then why did you come?” When he didn’t immediately answer . . . that was clearly the answer. Especially as his face tightened with a fragile composure. “Oh . . . it was for me?”

“I’ve got to go.” Allhan started stepping back. “Have to be at work. Very busy.”

The cold wind swirled around them, and she had a sudden thought that she had missed it. Somehow, she’d missed the crush he’d developed on her. Then again, though she’d never been cruel, she had certainly never *seen* the male properly.

And lately, she’d come to know what being invisible felt like.

Reaching out, she took his trembling, thin hand. “Allhan, thank you. For coming. I’ve been feeling alone.”

“But you have all those people.” He glanced at the tail end of the wait line in surprise. “Here to see you.”

“They’re not . . . real.”

*Neither am I anymore*, she thought.

Abruptly, he tugged his hand back and turned away. “Gotta go. See you later—”

“Wait.” Except what could she say? “Hold on a sec—”

“You are *embarrassing* yourself, right now. And *me*, too.”

As Marcia’s voice cracked like a whip, Lyric knew exactly why the male had gone into retreat mode.

Shaking her head, she didn’t even bother to look at her manager. “Gimme a minute.”

“No.”

Lyric wheeled around and loomed over the woman. Narrowing her eyes, she gritted out, “Yes.”

Then she once again took off after Allhan through the snow and ice. There was no dematerializing for a pretrans, and that meant he'd either Ubered here or been dropped off by someone—and considering he didn't hang with anybody, he was clearly headed out into the wilds of Caldwell where he might or might not be able to get a car on a cold night like this.

And if anything happened to him?

"Allhan!"

"Get *back* here!" Marcia hollered.

Off in the lead, Allhan glanced over his shoulder at the woman and started flat-out running. Which meant Lyric started running. Which meant Marcia started running.

It was like something from a fucked-up rom-com, two women in high heels, one guy gunning for his life to get away, all of them slipping and sliding down the dark alley in the dirty city snow. And because the "zany hijinks"—which were feeling really desperate, actually, on all accounts—needed to be witnessed by a crowd of astonished strangers, the wait line congregating in the blue-and-green glow of Bathe's entrance checked that box as that peanut gallery pulled a collective pivot.

Instantly, the for-the-most-part-female congregation recognized Lyric—*OMG! It's HER!*—and order broke apart as they grabbed their phones and rushed forward to take pictures.

As Allhan got to the head of the alley, he skipped right through the gathering gate of people, but as Lyric closed in, she knew she wasn't going to get away with that kind of magic trick—so she started in with the sorrys way ahead.

"I'll be right back!" she told them, waving her hands. "Thank-you'scusemethankyou'scuse me—"

Give her a football and she was a Heisman candidate as she threaded through the spaces between the young human women, dropping apologies as fast as her feet were poking holes in the crusty slush with those heels. As she broke through and burst out onto Market Street, the wind lashed at her and her long blond hair tangled around

her face. By the time she got the strands free from her eyelashes, three things were true: Allhan was gone. She was in the middle of the four-laner with cars honking and swerving around her.

And what the *hell* was that screeching sound?

The noise was so loud that it cut through the roar of the icy gusts and the high-pitched fuck-you of the horns.

Spinning around, she looked up.

The purple billboard was mounted on the roof of the old-fashioned building diagonally across the intersection, and even though it had been secured with metal supports, the panels had been caught by the powerful wind and were ripping free.

*Had* ripped free.

It took only a split second to calculate where the impact was going to be as gravity took over what the gusts had started—and that logo and the face that went with it were the punchline to the fact that Lyric was standing at ground zero.

Or maybe they were a message from the universe that her priorities were going to kill her.

Lyric hauled ass.

Digging into the crusted hump between lanes, she rechecked the sky as she tried to avoid being crushed.

The Resolve2Evolve logo was getting bigger by the second, the face of the woman at the head of the movement on a zoom-in that was downright deadly. Ducking the eye contact, Lyric changed directions in hopes of getting out of the line of fire, heading for a brightly lit construction site and a gaping group of men in orange vests and hard hats inside a fence.

But it was like the damn thing was coming after her.

In the mirrored windows of the building that was being renovated, she saw the billboard zeroing in on her in the wash of aqua light from Bathe's facade—and also got a good snapshot of herself running for her life in the shimmering dress she loved so much. And then there were all the people from the wait line screaming while the cars hit their brakes and careened into snowbanks, lampposts, and storefronts.

The only thing she didn't see was her savior.

Out of thin air, there was suddenly a mammoth man right on her. He grabbed her waist, spun her off her feet, and curled his massive body around her in a protective tuck—

The crash was so loud, her ears rang, and there was a *whoosh!* of cold air with all kinds of debris falling like weird snow.

After that? Just breathing.

Hers. His.

She took a deep breath—

“Are you okay?” the man asked in a low, deep voice. Which was oddly quiet.

Before she could respond, a glow surrounded them, like something in the universe had preordained both the near miss and their meeting—

Nah, it was just a delivery truck fishtailing while it tried not to run them over.

It was then that the man started to straighten. And straighten. And . . . there was also some cursing. Then again, he was holding the entire billboard over them as well as half its ugly-duckling strands of scaffolding.

With one arm.

As he released her so he could put two hands into the effort, she was transfixed. The face staring down at her from what surely was outer space was something she instantly committed to memory, from the low brows to the strong jaw to the lips that were tight with exertion. It was . . . a harsh, hard face. One that reflected age, without showing the passage of years by way of wrinkles or thinning hair.

Old eyes. Ancient . . . remote . . . eyes. In the visage of a man in his prime. And they bored into her, a different kind of headlights.

“Who are you,” she whispered.

What she got in return was a grunt, as he somehow picked up the load and swung the entire billboard above his head, knocking off his hard hat.

Resolve2Evolve. With the famous brunette's face big as an SUV, her smile wide as a doorjamb.