

Kelley Armstrong



The Case of EL CHUPACABRA

art by xaviere_daumarie@hotmail.com



One

Sometimes there's a thin line between cowardice and common sense. Sean had made the mistake often enough to recognize when he'd made it again. Recognizing it *before* he made it would be nice but, it seemed, too much to ask for.

He looked around the small, crowded bar. That the clientele was over ninety percent male was the only sign it catered to a specific clientele. A typically understated small city gay bar. Or so he'd heard. His only other visit to one had been in New York City where, drunk and in a rare rebellious mood he'd gone into one of the more popular gay bars . . . only to walk out again five minutes later.

Common sense, he told himself. If you're a Cabal prince who is desperately trying to hide his sexual orientation from his family, you don't go to gay bars. Yet that little voice had always gnawed at him, telling him his decision wasn't common sense but cowardice.

"You look like you could use some company."

Sean looked up into the slightly bloodshot eyes of a man standing by his shoulder. Mid-thirties. Decent enough looking in a bland, pleasant way. A nice smile. Overall, about a

seven. Sean liked sevens. Easy on the eyes, but not high maintenance. Yet buried in that “nice smile” was a nervousness that, combined with the bloodshot eyes, told a story Sean had heard too often and never wanted to hear again. So he said he was waiting for someone, and the man retreated to his seat across the bar.

Sean sipped his Scotch and looked around. More than a few men caught his eye, trying to get his attention, but they were all brethren to the man who’d approached him: over thirty, in town on business, and hoping to score before driving home to the wife and kids.

Sean shuddered and stared down into his glass. He wasn’t getting what he wanted tonight. That much was obvious already. Any of the guys *he* was eyeing—the ones his age and here for a good time—were giving him wide berth. It wasn’t his looks—he was twenty-three, blond, physically fit and attractive.

The problem was what his last visitor had said: that he looked like he needed company. Not “a wild night of anonymous sex” company, but a shoulder to cry on. The former was exactly what he *did* need, but he wasn’t going to get it sitting in a corner, staring morosely into his drink, looking like a jilted lover on the rebound.

Sean straightened and slugged back his Scotch, wincing at the icy burn.

Not jilted, he reminded himself. He’d ended it.

Atta boy, Sean. After being lied to, betrayed and humiliated, you ended it. Takes courage.

He slammed back the rest of his drink, and motioned to the server for a refill.

He’d been a fool. He saw that now, the realization made all the harsher by knowing, if he’d had a female friend in the same situation, he’d have seen the truth right away.

He’d met Chris at his health club, almost two years ago now. It had started with a locker room conversation, Chris noticing Sean’s racket and lamenting the shortage of racquetball

partners. Sean had offered to play with him. After that, well, it took a few weeks to get going, both uncertain, neither wanting to jump to conclusions, but when it did start, everything had happened very fast. Like a slow fuse on a keg of dynamite, Chris always said, grinning in that way that—

Sean took his fresh drink from the server and downed most of it.

Chris. High school science teacher. Thirty-two years old. New to New York City. Lived with his in-laws. Yes, in-laws. Normally, Sean avoided married men. But he'd understood his predicament better than most.

Chris had been raised in a small conservative town, growing up as the son of an evangelical minister. Being gay wasn't an option. So Chris had done what he was supposed to do. Dated a cheerleader. Married her. Had two kids.

Living up to expectations.

Sean knew all about that.

But now Chris was in love, and he was tired of hiding. He wanted to leave his wife for Sean. He just needed some time before he took the plunge.

How many married men say that to their mistresses? Everyone around them knows it's bullshit. Everyone thinks the women are fools for buying it.

Yet Sean *had* bought it. The situation wasn't the same, and he couldn't fault Chris for not coming out of the closet when he was still in it himself. So Sean made a decision. If Chris was willing to risk his family for Sean, then Sean would take the same chance.

Chris had been all for it. But first, he wanted to wait until after the holidays, so he'd have one last family Christmas with his kids. Then his son had chickenpox, and that wasn't a good

time. Then his wife had plans for a March Break getaway, and he just couldn't break it to her then . . .

Sean considered going first, both to prod Chris and prove his commitment to the relationship. When Chris had suggested he wait, and he'd agreed, his conscience had called him a coward.

Cowardice? Or common sense?

As Easter had approached and Chris had continued to stall, Sean's bullshit radar finally switched on. He'd hired an investigator, just to . . . check a few things. To quell his suspicions.

The investigator had only needed a week to make his report. That small Midwestern town Chris had grown up in? Chicago. The evangelical minister father? A United Church minister who preached acceptance of all diversity, including sexual orientation. Chris even had an openly gay uncle.

So all Chris's "excuses" for maintaining his heterosexual life were just that: excuses. For Chris, Sean was the equivalent of a hot young mistress, someone who could scratch the itch his wife couldn't, add a little excitement to his life, and be strung along indefinitely with promises.

The server brought over a fresh glass of Scotch. Sean's stomach churned at the sight of it.

He lifted a hand. "Had my fill."

"It's from the gentleman at the bar."

The server's lips twitched, and he gave a slight eye-roll, as if to say to Sean "Can you believe this guy, sending over drinks like you're some pretty young girl in the corner?"

"Shall I send it back, sir?" the server asked, mock-formal.

"Please."

"Don't blame you," the server muttered under his breath.

Sean glanced at the man who'd sent the drink, and saw his reaction when it was refused, the confusion and dismay and embarrassment. Another thirty-something businessman, thinking Sean looked like a tempting morsel, a pretty boy yet respectable, someone he wouldn't be ashamed to be seen walking down the street with.

Better take a good look, Sean, because in ten years, that will be you. Wife and kids at home, sneaking into small-town bars on business trips, looking for pretty boys.

Sean's gut twisted. Really twisted, too much Scotch drank too quickly threatening to come back up the way it'd gone down.

He pushed his feet, tottered, and grabbed the chair for support. The room spun, suddenly too hot, and his stomach lurched.

Bathroom.

A sign over the back hall pointed in the right direction. He headed toward it, as fast as he could move without staggering.

The bathrooms were occupied. It was a small bar, and they only had two single-occupancy bathrooms, though Sean suspected they weren't always used for single occupants. In a town that courted conventions, most of the people in this bar weren't the type who'd even walk out the front door with their date, let alone take him back to their hotel.

One couple waiting for a bathroom looked like they'd be finished needing it before one was free. Sean averted his gaze as he passed them. Farther down were two guys, separate, on cell phones, getting away from the noise of the bar. One, around Sean's age, pulled his phone from his ear and said, "If you need to take a piss, better head out back."

He jerked his thumb down the hall. As Sean passed, he felt the guy's gaze on him, appraising. He considered looking back but, faced with the possibility that he might get what he came here for, he realized he no longer wanted it, and it had nothing to do with his churning stomach.

When he avoided gay bars, that little voice called him a coward. Maybe there was some cowardice in the decision, but there was a bigger dose of common sense. Why take the risk to do something he didn't really want to do? If he'd been straight, he wouldn't be in a bar picking up women. It just wasn't him.

His brother, Bryce, called him a homebody. *You can always count on Sean*, he said, with that mixture of envy, pride and derision that was pure Bryce. But it was true. Sean had never held wild parties when their dad had been away on business. Never skipped class to smoke up with his friends. Never came home puking drunk.

Making up for it now, aren't you?

His stomach lurched, and he steadied himself with one hand on the wall as he walked.

How much longer was this hall? There was an unmarked door to the left. The exit? He didn't want to throw up in some storage room. There was a corner up there. Maybe the exit was around that—

Another stomach revolt, telling him he wasn't going to make it to that corner. He grabbed the door handle to test it, see if it was locked. The door was ajar, and flew open when he touched the knob. He stumbled, then righted himself, and blinked in the darkness. Yes, it was a storage closet. There was a sink across the way. He started toward it.

Always the good boy, aren't you, Sean? Can't puke on the floor if there's a sink. Wouldn't be right.

His foot hit something, and he pitched forward. He grabbed a pile of boxes. His gorge rose at the sudden movement. His head dropped, and he saw what he'd tripped on. An arm, stretched out in front of him.

He followed the arm to a body. It was a man, lying on his back, eyes wide and lifeless, face unnaturally pale. On his neck were two ragged gashes. Bite marks.

LUCAS

Two

Paige was on the telephone. Not unusual at three o'clock on a weekday afternoon. Though she encouraged her business and volunteer contacts to communicate via e-mail, when something went wrong, her name was at the top of their call list. What *was* unusual was that she'd been on the phone for—I checked my watch—eleven minutes.

When it came to business, Paige was nothing if not efficient, and for even the most convoluted problem, she could take the details in minutes and end the call to begin working on the solution. A lengthy conversation meant it was a problem of another sort: personal. One of her friends or witch students or fellow council members with some crisis that needed a sympathetic ear more than a quick solution. I admired Paige's ability to empathize—not simply to listen and feign interest, but listen and care. Yet it was, at this moment, somewhat . . . inconvenient.

I'd come home a day early, eager to see her. Now I was stuck waiting. That seems inexcusably selfish—that I'd begrudge her conversation with a friend because it postponed my homecoming. But there was something frustrating about hiding in the kitchen, waiting for her to

get off the telephone. Like crouching behind the sofa at a surprise party while the guest of honor chatted with a neighbor at the door. No one's fault, but frustrating nonetheless.

As the call reached the fifteen minute mark, I checked the display on the kitchen telephone, and felt the odd twist of pleasure and consternation I always had on seeing Adam's name.

Again, my reaction reflects poorly on me, suggesting that I dislike my wife conversing with a male friend. Not so. While Adam and I would never be as close as he and Paige, I considered him a friend and knew he felt the same. And yet . . .

While I was certain that Paige's feelings for Adam were platonic, and probably always had been, I'd never been as positive with him. I had the sense that my relationship with Paige had come as an unwelcome shock. I suspected he'd harbored, not a great unrequited love for her, but some romantic interest and the complacent confidence that, should he decide to act on those feelings, she would always be there to receive them. Hardly cause for jealousy or concern, and yet . . . perhaps I can be forgiven for a mild wariness when it came to Adam.

I slipped across the kitchen to a chair, having realized my hopes of a quick end to the conversation were futile. When I drew close enough to pick up strains of the conversation, I tried ignoring it . . . until I heard my name.

"I have to tell Lucas," she was saying. "I know I have to. But . . ." A moment's silence, then her voice dropped, barely audible. "I don't know how I'm going to break it to him. He's going to . . ." She inhaled sharply. "Oh God, I don't want to be the one to tell him."

My mind threw up a dozen alternate explanations, none of them remotely related to our relationship. Of all the uncertainties in my life, our marriage was the thing I was sure of. Yet I still found myself gripping the edge of the table, straining for her next words even as part of me feared to hear them.

“No, it’s not your—” Pause. “No, you were right to tell me.”

I relaxed . . . a little.

Paige gave a tight laugh. “If you hadn’t told me, and I found out you knew, there’d have been hell to pay.”

I leaned back in my chair, eyes closed, breathing returning to normal as they bantered over Paige’s threat.

Finally, she said, “I’ll have to figure a way to tell him before he gets home tomorrow.”

I looked toward the back door, seized by the urge to postpone my now-unwanted early arrival. Silly, of course. And yet selfish or not, my heart sank with the realization that I wasn’t going to get the enthusiastic welcome I’d expected.

While Paige signed off with Adam, I laid a gift box on our tiny kitchen table. As gifts went, it was hardly worth the fancy box and bow. New spells were the exchange of choice in our marriage, but I’d been unable to find one, as often happened on shorter business trips.

My backup gift was candy or pastries, something small and rich from a specialty shop. Paige struggled, not with a serious weight issue, but with the issue of self-perception, vacillating between “I really should lose a few pounds” and “I’m healthy and comfortable, so I’m okay with it.” The candies and pastries were my way of saying “I’m more than okay with it.”

Today’s gift was a quartet of handmade truffles. I was adjusting the bow when she hung up. I darted into the back hall.

Her soft footfalls entered the kitchen, then stopped.

“Lucas?”

I glanced around the corner. Seeing me, her face lit up, so radiant that, as always, I faltered, caught in that split second of “is this really my wife?” shock.

“When did you get in?” she asked, crossing the floor to meet me.

“Just now. It became clear that my presence at the trial—” Her arms went around my neck, “—while welcome, was in no way a necessity—” Her face turned up to mine. “—so I decided that any further consultation could be conducted—“

She pulled me down, her lips going to mine, stopping the end of my explanation, which, I suppose, had already been sufficiently—

Her kiss swallowed my train of thought. Swallowed all thought, and I lost myself in the faintly spicy taste of her mouth, flavored by herbal tea with notes of lemon and chamomile—

Her tongue slid into my mouth, light and teasing, as the kiss deepened. As her body pressed into mine, I lifted her and set her on the edge of the table. Our kiss broke as we shifted, and when I moved in to recapture it, she pulled back, face tilting up to mine, hands moving to the sides of my face.

She gave a slight smile, half-happy, half-wistful, and I read her sentiments as surely as if she spoke the words. Yet she *wouldn't* speak them. She used to. After my first few business trips, she'd met me at the airport or at the door with a passionate kiss and an equally fervent “I missed you.” And I'd stumbled into apologies, promising I'd be home longer, wouldn't be gone for as long next time, would find more local work soon. Three years later, those local jobs had yet to materialize.

Portland didn't have a Cabal office. That meant it was a place I felt was safe for Paige and Savannah, and a place where I could escape my father and my family name. But no Cabals meant few supernaturals, and that meant no work for a twenty-something self-employed lawyer with a spotty formal employment record. After passing the Oregon bar exam, I'd managed to

secure only a few human clients. Most of my work remained in the few states, like Illinois, where I'd passed the bar *and* had supernatural clients.

Soon, seeing how much it pained me to be gone, Paige stopped saying she'd missed me when I returned. But that didn't resolve the underlying issue, which was that I *was* away too much and, as much as we struggled to pretend otherwise, we keenly felt the separation.

"I believe I may be able to forgo the Cleveland trip next week," I said. "I can, instead, provide long-distance consultation with the local lawyer my client has retained to represent her in court."

"That would be nice," she said. "But if you can't, we'll work it out."

Her lips touched mine. I held back, wanting to promise that whatever "emergency" arose in the Cleveland case, I would remain firm and refuse to fly out and solve it myself. But I could make no such promise. There were always complications—emergencies and contingencies—and my cases were so specialized that there was never anyone else to handle them.

So I lost myself in her kiss again, pushing aside other thoughts as she was clearly doing herself, endeavoring to forget whatever crisis Adam had mentioned.

As the kiss deepened and she pulled me closer, I snuck a look at the microwave clock.

"Savannah's going to a friend's after school," Paige murmured.

"Ah." I pulled back and smiled. "In that case, I declare a change of venue unnecessary."

She pulled me back into a kiss and I started unbuttoning her blouse.

Two hours later, leaving Savannah with her homework and a delivered pizza, Paige and I went out for dinner. Now sixteen, Savannah could be left on her own for an evening—a milestone that had seemed a long time coming. I'll admit—with no intended ill reflection on Savannah herself—that falling for a young woman with a preteen ward hadn't been what I'd consider an ideal situation. I suppose, though, that if I said I'd been overjoyed to find that my life partner had come with a thirteen-year-old girl in tow, that would reflect most suspiciously on *me*.

But I'd always known Paige and Savannah were a package deal. Were it not for her guardianship of Savannah, we would never have met, so I can hardly regret the circumstances.

Tonight I'd taken Paige to her favorite bistro in Portland, a tiny place where the view was as exquisite as the food. Sitting there, watching her nibble a slice of duck confit, her eyes closed for that first bite, I heard my father's voice, telling me that this was how she should be treated every day—not as a special occasion when I had a little extra money.

I *had* money, he'd remind me, and even if I refused to touch my trust fund for myself, I shouldn't deprive Paige of the luxuries it could bring. Vying with my father's voice, though, was Paige's, telling me if I ever dipped into that hated trust fund for something as frivolous as buying her fancy dinners, she'd—well, she never specified the threat, but the message was clear enough.

“That's the first smile I've seen from you all evening, Cortez,” she said. “And you've hardly said a word.”

“I could say the same for you . . . on both counts.”

Her smile faltered, and I upbraided myself for reminding her of Adam's call. And yet . . . had she ever forgotten it? Perhaps during that homecoming interlude, but once it had ended, I'd felt her watching me, trying to decide how to broach the topic. Now it sat on the table between

us, ruining a rare private meal. Could I spoil it more by pushing the matter to a resolution? Was it not crueler to watch her suffer and feign ignorance?

I sliced through my stuffed pork tenderloin. “When I professed, earlier, to having ‘just’ arrived home when you entered the kitchen, I was being somewhat fallacious. I had in fact arrived sooner, when you were in conversation with Adam.”

“Oh.”

“And while I didn’t intend to eavesdrop, I did inadvertently overhear a portion of the conversation, one pertaining to myself and a problem Adam had brought to your attention.”

She sipped her wine, her fingers tight around the glass, trying to figure out a way to salvage my peaceful meal without lying.

I forced a smile and ducked to catch her eye. “Were it not for Adam being the one bearing the news, from your expression, I’d be convinced that my father was behind this ‘problem.’ As that cannot be the case—” My smile turned genuine. “Well, then, it can’t be that bad, can it?”

She looked up at me, and my smile froze.

“It is my father, isn’t it?” I blinked and pulled back. “But what would Adam have to say about my—” I winced. “Graduation. Adam is preparing for graduation and seeking employment . . . and my father has offered it to him.”

Paige nodded, and took a long drink of wine.

“Well . . .” I said slowly. “While I had hoped he’d stopped mentioning Cabal employment possibilities after Adam expressed disinterest, we all feared he was simply waiting for Adam to graduate. Disappointing and frustrating but, I’m afraid, not unexpected. Is he pushing the matter? Or is that, I suppose, a silly question?”

“He isn’t pushing yet. The problem—” Paige inhaled. “He *has* offered Adam a post. As head of security for a new Cabal satellite office.”

I stopped, my fork partway to my mouth. “Security? I don’t blame Adam for being upset, then. While head of security is a prestigious position, it’s hardly what Adam envisioned when he returned to college.”

“That’s not it. The problem . . . It’s the location of the new office.”

I took my bite of tenderloin and chewed as I thought. Location? Had my father decided to go ahead with the satellite office in Anchorage? Or perhaps a new one overseas.

But if Adam wasn’t interested in the position, what difference did the location—?

“He’s putting it here,” Paige said. “In Portland.”

My head jerked up so fast the meat slipped into my throat, and I started to choke.



Three

Sean backed out of the closet, his gaze glued to the bloodless corpse. A vampire kill? It looked like one, but here? In a small-town bar? No serious attempt even to hide the body?

Don't analyze it. Just get out.

He turned and smacked into the dark-haired young man with the cell phone.

“Hey,” the guy said. “Just coming to tell you *that's* not the exit—“

He looked over Sean's shoulder. And Sean froze, brain screaming advice—close the door, stall, run—none of it useful . . . unless he cared to be a murder suspect.

“Holy shit! Is that—?”

Not finishing, he pushed past Sean and crouched beside the body.

“He's dead,” Sean said. “I was just going to call the police but . . .” Sean swallowed and pushed on. “I have to take off. I can't— I can't be found here.”

The guy glanced up.

“Door's down there,” he said, pointing.

When his gaze met Sean's, Sean blanched, seeing the same contemptuous look he'd given the businessmen who had tried picking him up. In that instant, he knew he wasn't in danger of ending up like them—he already had. Maybe he didn't have a wife or girlfriend at home, but was he any different otherwise? Sneaking in here on a business trip? Running from a crime scene to avoid being caught at a gay bar?

Epiphanies for another time. Right now he *did* need to run—or slink—out of here. A Cabal son at the site of a vampire kill? Not the time to take a stand.

As the dark-haired guy reported the death, Sean turned and almost smacked into someone else—several “someone elses.” It was a trio of men, two older business types and a kid younger than Bryce.

“Hey, bud,” the kid said, his eyes glazed. He hooked his thumb in the direction of the storage room. “That free?”

And Sean Nast—scion of the Nast Cabal, descended from a line of men who could talk or bully their way out of any situation—stood there, mouth open, brain blank.

For the thousandth time in the past three years, Sean wished his father was still alive. There were many reasons he wished that, but he missed his father's guidance most. Of all the lessons not yet imparted, this was chief among them: how to act like a Cabal son.

If his father had been here, in Sean's place, no one would have gotten into that storage room. He'd have bluffed and charmed and, if necessary, intimidated his way out of this dilemma. Cabal sons were supposed to inherit the knack of wielding authority—even Lucas had it, and he kept as far from Cabal life as possible. Then there was Sean . . .

“The, uh, room—? No, it, uh, it's not free . . .”

One of the businessmen had already brushed past, too eager to wait for Sean's reply. Sean reacted on instinct, reaching deep into his genetic pool, throwing up his chin, steeling his gaze and stepping into the man's path.

"You'll have to move back, sir," Sean said. "This is a crime scene."

Even as the words left his mouth, Sean realized his error, and cringed as the cry went up, from the glassy-eyed kid to a guy waiting for the bathroom, then into the bar itself.

Crime scene

Sean wheeled, seeing the hall stretch before him, the exit—and escape—somewhere at the end. But as the corridor filled, he knew his chance had passed. Run now and he'd be chased down as a suspect.

People crowded into the storage room doorway. Gasps and cries of "is he dead?" rose from all sides.

"Back away," Sean heard the dark-haired young man inside say. "You heard the guy—this is a crime scene."

Sean came to life then, mustering that air of authority, not to escape, but to move the bystanders back. Not the wisest move, when he should be keeping a low profile. But it was the right thing to do.

"Yes, he's dead," Sean said, waving people back as he moved into the doorway to block it. "The police are on the way."

"What's wrong with him?" someone asked.

"He's all pale," another answered.

"Everyone, please—" Sean began.

"I saw bite marks. Fang marks, in his neck."

“Oh my God,” the kid with the glazed eyes said. “Blood drained. Fang marks. It’s gotta be—“

Sean cut in quickly. “The cause of death has yet to be—“

“It’s El Chupacabra!” someone shouted.

El Chupacabra.

Sean had no idea what the hell that meant, but in his language, it translated into trouble.

He’d given his statement to the Middleton police. Even used his real ID, as he’d been taught. When other kids were being told how to behave if pulled over for speeding, Cabal boys were drilled on how to handle criminal investigations. If you’re not involved and the crime isn’t Cabal related, you never use fake ID. Sean wasn’t a suspect, but if a detective called to check a detail and found he’d been given false contact information, that could change.

He’d cooperated fully, but asked that his privacy be respected. He was sure that many of the bar’s patrons had asked the same thing, but that didn’t make the look the officer gave him go down any easier. Just another closeted businessman on the make. Pathetic.

Sean stepped from the room the police were using for interviews. Those still awaiting their turns glanced up with equal parts curiosity and trepidation. If they were checking his expression to see how well he’d fared, they found no clues there. Sean’s attention had moved on, past the interview, past the bar, to the media gauntlet waiting outside.

He tried to remember how much money he had in his wallet. A few hundred. Would it get him out the back door? No, if he did that, he’d call more attention to himself.

He picked up his pace, heading for the door.

“—cause of death is clearly exsanguination,” boomed a voice behind him.

“You mean he bled to death,” replied a woman.

“That, my dear detective, is the definition of exsanguination.”

Sean glanced over his shoulder. A sixtyish man with gray whiskers and a pot belly was striding through the bar, a pinch-faced brunette struggling to keep up.

An officer near Sean stepped into their path.

“Doc? You might want to go out the back. With this chubawumpa business.”

“Chupacabra“, the dr. corrected, giving the words a word a Spanish lilt. “And it’s not ‘business’ young man. It is nonsense, superstitious nonsense.”

“Okay, but you still might want to—“

“I do not fear the media,” the dr. boomed, like a general about to take on the Mongolian hordes.

Sean let the dr. and detective pass, then slid out in their wake, staying a few yards back so he wouldn’t eat mistaken for one of their party.

As soon as the doors opened, the flashes and shouts began.

“Dr. Bailey! Are you aware this is the first recorded instance of a chupacabra killing a human?”

The dr. answered with a derisive snort.

“Detective, over here!”

“Doc, is it true that—“

“Detective MacLeod! Could this be the Middleton Chupacabra?”

The detective turned to the young woman who'd yelled the last question. "Sandy, you know I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. Chupacabras." She rolled her eyes. "Next thing you know, you'll be telling me it was a vampire."

A wave of laughter rolled out.

As the crowd pelted the coroner and detective with questions, Sean slid away.

The next morning, Sean sat on his hotel bed in Tacoma, staring down at the newspaper. Even here, twenty miles from Middleton, the chupacabra story had made the front section. Near the back, and written as tongue-in-cheek "monster" speculation, but it was there nonetheless.

Even after reading the article, Sean didn't know exactly what a chupacabra was. Obviously a beast of folklore some people around here believed in. That was a problem. Unlike a vampire story, which no self-respecting journalist would write, the chupacabra was news in this region, having apparently been "terrorizing" Middleton for months now.

The Cabals, vigilant for vampire activity since a spate of revenge killings two years ago, would find this. And, in investigating, they'd find his name attached . . . and discover where he'd been. Part of him wanted to say "oh, well" and let the chips fall where they may. But he wasn't ready for that.

A rap at the door.

It was his executive assistant, Mary. Now nearing retirement, Mary had been with the Nast Cabal since Sean's father had been a boy. When Sean had selected her from the secretarial pool, his grandfather had praised him for choosing experience over attractiveness. Truth was, Sean

didn't dare pick one of the nubile twenty-somethings . . . or there'd be office cooler talk when he didn't at least flirt with her.

"Mr. Nast, sir?" Mary eyed his jeans and sweatshirt with disapproval. It might be Saturday, but that was no way for an executive to dress. "Shall I send the porter up for your bags?"

"No, I'm not taking the jet back. I'm driving to Portland for the weekend."

Her disapproval solidified with a hardening of her lips. Everyone knew what Portland held for Sean, a subject of much office gossip. His half-sister, Savannah, lived there with her guardians, Paige Winterbourne and Lucas Cortez. The half-sister his family refused to acknowledge, whose name could not be mentioned in his grandfather's hearing . . . not if an employee wished to keep her position.

"If you're quite certain, sir . . ." Mary said.

"I am," he said firmly, then nodded a dismissal, waited for her to step back, and shut the door.

He stood there a moment, behind the closed door, then smiled.

Portland. Savannah. Lucas. The solution to his dilemma had just landed in his lap.



Four

A Cortez Cabal satellite office in Portland.

I stared down at the untouched legal papers on my desk. I didn't know who I was more angry with: my father for doing this or myself for not seeing it coming.

Paige had tried to convince me that this decision might have nothing to do with us, that it was simply part of an overall expansion plan. Not telling us was inexcusable, but perhaps my father had been worried about our reaction, not wanting to break the news until it was a “done deal.” According to Adam, he'd asked him to keep quiet only because the proposed office was still that: a proposal.

All perfectly valid explanations. And all patently false.

I sighed, lifted my glasses, and pinched the bridge of my nose, struggling to focus on my work. Paige had gone shopping in preparation for a weekend visit by Sean Nast, Savannah's half-brother. I wanted to get through this before he arrived. Bad enough I was away half the time—I didn't want to spoil our weekend by retreating to do paperwork, particularly when we had a guest.

I picked up the top sheet. Real estate law. Closing a purchase. As dull as legal work got, but it paid well enough.

Speaking of real estate, where was my father planning to build—?

I slapped the stray thought aside and concentrated on the papers. The business property in question had sold for an astounding price, considering the neighborhood. Portland was doing well. Very well. Perhaps that's why my father—

No. I knew better. Five years ago, the Cortez board of directors had debated northwestern expansion, adding a Portland office, but they'd rejected the idea. There was no solid supernatural community in Portland. The market, while good, didn't suit Cortez Corporation interests. And they already had a tiny office in Seattle, which had staffing problems, being so far from Miami that employees saw it as an exile.

So when I'd wanted to settle down, to get both Paige and Savannah as far from the Cortez Cabal as possible, which city had I chosen? One my father had declared he had absolutely no interest in: Portland.

"Hey, Lucas," Savannah said, walking in. "Is there a stapler in here?"

I held out mine, but she ignored it, plunked down in Paige's chair and started looking through her drawers.

At sixteen, Savannah was almost as tall as I, finally outgrowing her awkward coltish stage and maturing into a willowy young woman. She was also growing into her strong features, and starting to turn heads. Yet boys had yet to begin banging down our door. There was something about Savannah—an edge, a forthrightness—that I suspected frightened off many a would-be admirer. I'd heard the same said about her mother—that men had admired from afar . . . preferably out of spellcasting range. Having met Eve both before and after her death, I didn't blame them.

"So," Savannah said, continuing her drawer search. "Are you still brooding about the satellite office thing?"

“I’m not—” I cut off my defense. Useless. Argue with Savannah and she’d only needle all the more, some of those needles sharp and deep enough to draw the blood of truths more comfortably left hidden.

“Is it really such a bad idea?” She lifted her hand to ward off my argument. “Hear me out, okay? Yeah, going to Adam—especially behind your back—was a dirty trick, even for Benicio. Setting up in Portland without warning you? Really nasty, especially since your roots are too deep to leave easily—with me, Paige’s business, the house . . . I’m sure he’s counting on that. And he’s definitely going to use this to advance the whole ‘get Lucas to run the company’ master plan. If Mohammed won’t come to the mountain, blah blah. It’s going to cause problems, but . . .”

She met my gaze, hers steady, daring me to look away. “It could actually *solve* one big problem. A Cabal office here means more supernaturals here and more Cabals wrongs for you to right. Without ever leaving home. And Paige can help. That’s what you guys want, isn’t it? Pool your resources more often, combining your—” A dismissive hand wave. “Crusades.”

I sighed. “Our work is not a cru—”

“Yeah, whatever. Point is, it won’t be all good, but maybe it won’t be all bad either.”

“True, but the bad, I’m afraid, will significantly outweigh the good. Do you know why we settled here, Savannah? What made Paige and me choose Portland?”

She leaned back in Paige’s chair and started listing reasons on her fingers. “The whole ‘escape the Cabal’ thing. Give you a break from your dad and that Cabal heir crap. Keep me away from Grandpa Dearest and anyone who thinks I’d make a good addition to a Cabal stable. Protect Paige from anyone wanting to get at you . . . or wanting to help the Cortezes rid themselves of a witch daughter-in-law.” She stopped. “Shit. Paige.”

I suppressed a smile. Savannah might dismiss my Cabal problems and her safety issues without a moment's thought, but if Paige was in danger, that was another matter. Paige could take care of herself. But Savannah's protective streak grew with each passing year. Another trait inherited from her mother.

"My father would try to ensure that a Cabal office here would not increase the danger Paige faces," I said. "However, her comfort with living here, and her concerns over *our* comfort and safety would grow."

"That's not good. She worries more than enough already."

"And, in this case, it would be justifiable. An increased supernatural presence *would* mean increased risk—for all of us—from supernaturals outside my father's sphere of influence. He should have considered that."

She smiled. "Ah, but then he'd have to admit there are supernaturals who aren't afraid of Benicio Cortez."

"Inconceivable."

Paige's car sounded in the drive.

"Go help her unpack the groceries," I said. "And tell her I'll be right down."

Sean arrived just before lunch. Of all the Nasts, he was the only one who recognized Savannah as Kristof's child, let alone attempted to form any sort of relationship with her. According to his grandfather, Thomas Nast, Savannah's paternity claim was a malicious lie, the beyond-the-grave scheme by a notorious black witch to secure a share of Nast wealth for her daughter. As for the

fact that Kristof—not Eve—had been the one to proclaim his paternity, that apparently was a minor and inconsequential detail.

When Savannah came of age, the choice to pursue a claim or let the matter lie would be hers. For now she enjoyed a growing relationship with Sean, who had also set up a trust fund for her using part of his inheritance from their father.

During lunch, Sean was quiet, alternating between distracted and rushed, as if the meal was something merely to get through. So I was not surprised when, as Savannah served cookies and coffee for dessert, Sean said,

“I need to talk to you about something, Lucas.” He paused, then turned Paige’s way. “And you, too, Paige, since I suppose it’s something the interracial council might want to look into.”

He related the story of how the night before, in a bar, he’d stumbled upon an exsanguinated corpse with fang marks in his neck.

“Some vampire’s getting sloppy,” Savannah said, shaking her head. “Bet it’s Cass. Getting senile in her old age and forgetting where she left her dinner.”

“The chance of it being a real vampire’s annual kill is slight,” I said. “However, given the Cabal’s current attitude toward vampires—“

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Sean cut in, leaning forward. He stopped and eased back. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt. But it’s true. Granddad still . . . well, he hasn’t forgotten what happened to my cousin.”

“Forgotten or forgiven,” Paige murmured.

I nodded. “The perpetrators may be dead, but the murders only served to exacerbate an already tense situation, giving the Cabals reason to intensify their suspicion of all vampires. However, a single case in a small city will likely pass unnoticed.”

“There’s more,” Sean said.

He explained.

When he finished, Savannah screwed up her face. “They think it’s a what?”

“Chupacabra,” Sean said.

“A cockroach?”

Paige stifled a laugh. “Better brush up on your Spanish. Cockroach is *cucaracha*. Though a giant vampiric cockroach could be interesting.”

Savannah tossed a glare her way. “Okay, Little Miss Can’t Be Wrong. What’s a chupa-whatever.”

“I have no idea. The literal translation would be something like goat-sucker.”

“Goat-sucker?” Savannah chortled. “Now who’s in need of remedial Spanish lessons?”

“Paige’s translation is quite correct,” I said. “As strange as it may sound. The nature of the creature is, at the moment, unimportant. Sean is right. If this is making statewide news, it’s unlikely to pass unnoticed. Cassandra must be notified and ready for a Cabal investigation into any vampires living near—“

“Uh, actually,” Sean said. “I was hoping it could be solved *before* the Cabals get involved. If you aren’t too busy, I’d be willing to hire you—both of you—to investigate.”

“Well, that’s one idea,” Paige said. “But I’m not sure it would be worth—“

“There’s something else,” Sean said. “This bar. I went there with a coworker, for him, and . . . well, if anyone found out what kind of bar it is . . . they’d jump to the wrong conclusion and . . . it could be embarrassing. For me and my family.”

“What was it?” Savannah said. “Some kind of weird fetish club?”

We all looked at her.

“What? He said it’d be embarrassing, so I’m trying to figure out—“

“It was a gay bar,” Sean said.

Savannah made a rude noise. “Is that it? Geez. Big deal.”

“I’d really like to hire you,” Sean said.

I glanced at Paige. “Let us check our schedules and discuss it.”

“Well,” I said as Paige poured tea later that afternoon. “I suppose that answered *that* question.”

“And you owe me a spell, Cortez.”

I arched my brows. “No, you suggested the bet but, if you recall, I failed to formally accept.”

“Oh-ho, so you need to *formally accept* bets now? And I suppose you wouldn’t have claimed your prize if it turned out you were right, with your explanation of why Sean never talks about girlfriends or brings a date anywhere.”

“Dating a married woman would have been a perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“He says, adroitly avoiding an answer.”

She sat across from me at the kitchen table and sipped her tea. Sean and Savannah had gone trail riding. She’d started horseback riding after we’d come to Portland, and fallen in love with the sport. When Sean had started visiting, riding with Savannah had been an easy excuse to spend some time together, and it had grown into something special for them to share—she kept him updated on her accomplishments, and Sean came up to watch her shows and gave her lessons and equipment as gifts.

Horseback riding seemed an odd choice for someone as restless and impatient as Savannah, but Paige thought Savannah simply liked having control over something bigger and stronger than herself. It *was* teaching Savannah patience, and her spellcasting had much improved. Too much, as Paige often pointed out. Savannah was powerful enough as it was.

“I’d like to—“

“We should—“

We spoke in unison, then laughed. I waved for Paige to go first.

“I’m all for it,” she said. “Sean’s case. Sure, I’d like to help him. He’s helped us before. And anything vampire related *is* a concern. But, being totally selfish—“

“It would be a welcome opportunity to work together.”

She smiled. “Exactly. Close enough to home to commute. Unless your schedule’s changed, you’re home next week . . .”

“I am.”

“Then I’ll clear some time from mine. Besides, you could use a break from thinking about this satellite office problem.”

“It’s agreed then. Nothing stands in our way.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. There is one obstacle. One less-than-pleasant aspect to the case that may have us both regretting our decision.”

“And that is . . .?”

“We’ll have to work with Cassandra.”

LUCAS

Five

If there can be said to be a head vampire in North America, Cassandra DuCharme would be it.

Had she not been the oldest, she could have laid claim to the position by attitude alone.

Cassandra could teach Cabal CEOs lessons in imperiousness.

As the senior council delegate for the vampire community, anything affecting that community should be brought to her attention. Yet as Cassandra neared the end of her life, she found it increasingly difficult to care about the rest of her community, a condition made worse, I suspect, by a preexisting lack of natural empathy.

This alone would be an excellent excuse to bypass Cassandra and go straight to her co-delegate Aaron, who was far more likely to know—and care—about vampires in the Pacific Northwest. But as Paige pointed out, Cassandra was trying to overcome her disconnection and involve herself more fully in vampire affairs. To go directly to Aaron would not only be rude, it would undermine and denigrate her efforts.

So off to Cassandra it was. And we did need to go *to* her. Flying across the country. Ridiculous in an age of telephones and e-mail, but one doesn't tell a three-hundred-and-fifty year old vampire that one doesn't believe she's worth the time and effort of a personal visit.

We couldn't even claim want of funds. As soon as we'd agreed to take the case, Sean had whipped off a check for ten thousand dollars as a retainer. An exorbitant amount, and both Paige and I had protested, but Savannah had snatched up the check with a smile. As for Sean, he couldn't write it out fast enough. Come Sunday morning, he was heading back to Los Angeles, and we were off to see Cassandra.

On the plane, we read through the pages Paige had printed off the Internet, on chupacabras in general and the Middleton incidents in particular. Savannah was with us, having mentioned, in front of Sean, how important it was for her to be involved in interracial council business from a young age. He bought it, and had said we were more than welcome to include expenses for Savannah's participation. After he'd left, Paige had tried to persuade Savannah to stay behind, but an opportunity to bedevil Cassandra was not one Savannah could pass up.

So we were seated on a small commuter flight, Paige and me on one side of the aisle, Savannah on the other. This part of an investigation—researching a mythological beast—she was interested in . . . particularly if it provided support for her theory that your average human was a gullible fool.

As for the indiscretion of discussing such matters on a public flight, it wasn't a concern. Those hearing Savannah passing us tidbits like "oooh, look, this one has bat wings" merely glanced at her with amused tolerance. Even Paige, leaning over to listen, only earned the occasional "Should you really be encouraging her?" look.

According to the most reliable sources we found, chupacabras were a relatively recent addition to the pantheon of paranormal beasts. First reported in Puerto Rico in 1975, they'd been

blamed for attacks on farm animals. Livestock had been found with neck incisions, their corpses drained of blood. Sporadic Puerto Rican reports continued for twenty years, then like many Puerto Ricans themselves, the creature apparently decided to investigate opportunities on the mainland.

Over the last ten years, chupacabra attacks had been reported in Mexico, Chile, Central America and the Southern U.S. It was when they reached Chile that another requisite component of any decent supernatural legend was added—apparently, some of the creatures had been caught by U.S. government officials who were, of course, denying all allegations.

As for exactly *what* a chupacabra was, as with most such tales, the accounts varied with the storyteller. The most common representation looked like a gargoyle . . . or the flying monkeys from The Wizard of Oz. The creature was said to be about four feet tall, with leathery gray skin, coarse hair, fangs and glowing eyes.

As for how one arrived in Washington State, none of the local papers speculated. One article mentioned a Michigan report of a chupacabra attacking a cat, so perhaps that was supposed to be proof that a Northern precedent had already been set.

The Middleton case had begun just over a month ago, when a couple who ran an organic sheep farm found one of their animals dead, drained of blood with throat incisions. The death was blamed on local youths. Then, when a young pig was found with the same marks, the rumors of El Chupacabra hit Middleton, and from that first whisper, a local legend was born.

A few chickens and an aging goat had followed, along with a sighting of the beast itself, making off with a cat. From the tone of the articles, though, no one in Middleton seemed particularly worried about having a demonic beast ravaging their livestock. The outbreaks were

contained, few animals were affected and, on the whole, it seemed to be viewed as a welcome break of frivolous speculation after a long, dull winter.

Then Bobby Arnell died with puncture wounds in his neck, and everything changed.

Paige rang the bell on Cassandra's condo. We waited two minutes, then Paige turned and started down the steps.

"We called, we came, we made every effort—" she began.

The door opened.

"Damn," she muttered. "So close."

"Paige, Lucas, finally," Cassandra said, opening the door. Her gaze turned left and her polite smile faltered. "Savannah. Don't you have school?"

"Not on Sunday," Savannah said, brushing past and walking inside. "And you got my name right. That's the third time in a row. Impressive. You *can* still remember people. You just don't bother."

Cassandra turned to Paige. "Still working on her manners, I see."

"Nah," Savannah said. "They gave up. They kept thinking I'd grow out of my rudeness, but then they'd look at you and . . ." She shrugged. "Proof that it doesn't always happen."

Cassandra shook her head and opened the closet so we could hang our jackets.

"Did I mention I'm considering going to college near here?" Savannah said. "I thought maybe I'd room with you, Cass. That'd be okay, right?"

"Certainly. So long as you abide by the house rules." Cassandra smiled, flashing her fangs. "Boarders have to provide dinner for the host."

Savannah only laughed and strode into the living room. “Any new paintings?”

“In the sitting room. It’s a—“

“Don’t tell me. See if I can figure it out.”

Cassandra’s green eyes glittered. “Twenty dollars if you do. Artist and period. It’s a difficult one.”

Savannah accepted the bet, and hurried off.

We walked into the living room. Large, airy and modern, it was hardly what one would expect from a vampire, particularly with the sunlight streaming through the three large windows. We sat on the sofa, a modern designer piece that, I was sure, was worth more than our entire living room suite. All the furnishings in the room were modern, including the paintings. While it seemed odd for someone who made a living dealing in antiques and historical art, but as Paige says, trying to determine Cassandra’s motivation for anything is an exercise in futility.

“Savannah is joking, isn’t she?” Cassandra said as she sat down. “About college. She can’t possibly be old enough.”

“One more year of high school,” Paige said. “Though she’s kidding about coming here. She’s thinking of taking a year at a local college first. She’d move out, live on campus or close to it, but still be in Portland. I’d like that.”

“Yes, I imagine you’re eager to get her out of the house.”

“I meant the ‘living close for a year’ part, not the ‘moving out’ part.”

Cassandra arched her brows and opened her mouth.

I cut in. “In regards to this potential vampire problem . . .”

Paige told Cassandra the story.

“Oh, that is preposterous,” she said when Paige finished. “I can’t believe someone is wasting their money and your time to prove the obvious. It’s clearly not a vampire.”

“Yes,” I said. “But do you know of any vampires living in the Washington area?”

“Am I talking to myself? This is *not* a vampire and, while I can forgive you for not knowing better, Paige should. Vampires do not leave their annual kills just lying about—“

“May 1979,” Paige said. “The council investigated reports of a corpse found in New Orleans—“

“Oh, that’s New Orleans. It doesn’t count.”

“September, 1963. Philadelphia.”

“That was a mistake. An untrained new vampire. There are no new vampires in North America right now.”

“Recent immigrants?”

“Not that I’ve heard of.”

Paige looked at Cassandra. She said nothing, but they both understood what her look imparted—the reminder that Cassandra wasn’t always up to date on vampire activity. Cassandra conceded the point with a dip of her head.

“But still, to leave gaping neck wounds? Unnecessary and you know that, Paige. That alone should rule out vampires—“

“New York, 1985.”

Cassandra let out an exasperated sigh. “Do you memorize the council records?”

“No, I just came prepared.”

“Then you know that New York case was special. She was interrupted and the body was discovered before she could finish and dispose of it.”

A moment of silence, then Paige said, “Do you want to call Aaron? You’re right. This almost certainly isn’t a vampire, so there’s no reason for you to get involved. We just want to warn any vampires living in the area, in case the Cabals get wind of this and give them a hard time. Aaron can answer our questions, and leave you out of it.”

Cassandra looked out the front window, and I could see she was fighting to overcome the disconnection of vampire aging, struggling not to give in to what must have been an overwhelming urge to say “yes, give it to Aaron.”

“Aaron could use the experience . . .” she mused.

“Okay, then, we’ll call—“

“But if the Cabals do get involved . . .” Cassandra continued, as if not hearing Paige, her gaze still on the window. “They’ve been looking for an excuse for retaliation, after Edward and Natasha. Though it seems obvious a vampire is not responsible, the outward appearance of a vampire kill may be enough to provide that excuse . . .”

“That’s our fear,” I said.

She nodded. “A valid one.”

“Are there any vampires living in Washington, Cassandra?” Paige asked.

“I believe there is one. Let me call Aaron.”

LUCAS

Six

Aaron Darnell was Cassandra's co-delegate on the interracial council. Their relationship went back further than that—much further, as is often the case with vampires. While I had the impression it had been a close one, ended by a betrayal, I knew none of the details, though I would presume Cassandra had done the betraying. It was in her character as much as it was not in Aaron's.

I did not know the vampires well. Perhaps, in some ways, that's more a choice than it should be. Vampires and werewolves play no role in Cabals and while I always say, half-jokingly, that's because Cabals are loath to employ anyone who might mistake them for lunch, the antipathy goes far deeper than that.

While antipathy may be the correct word to describe a Cabal's outward treatment of the two races, the motivation is more fear than hatred. Fear of the other. That's what werewolves and vampires are, even to supernaturals. The other. Too different. Too foreign in nature.

Sorcerers and witches can harness the power of magic, necromancers can speak to the dead, half-demons can influence weather or create fire, and shamans can project their spirits from their

bodies, but we are all, essentially, human. We look human. We share a human anatomy. We live a human life, with human vulnerabilities, and die a human death. Should we choose to deny our powers, we can pass for human in the human world. Werewolves and vampires cannot.

While it's true they can live, undetected, among humans, they cannot deny their essential selves. Werewolves must change into wolves regularly. Vampires must feed from humans and take one life per year. Werewolves are long-lived and slow-aging. Vampires, while not immortal, live for hundreds of years, without aging, and are invulnerable to injury.

Centuries ago, when the sorcerer families began building Cabals, they looked out across the potential work force, and made their choices. Sorcerers, half-demons, shaman, necromancers and minor races? Yes. Witches . . . if necessary. Vampires and werewolves? No. Too different. Too much “the other.” And, perhaps, at some level, too much a threat. Too uncontrollable. Too . . . predatory.

I grew up with that prejudice and, while I know better and actively work to overcome it, it isn't easy. It doesn't help that the vampire and werewolf communities are so small I rarely encounter one accidentally, and they'd certainly never come to me for help. Paige's close ties with the werewolf Pack immersed me in that culture by necessity—thrown into the waters, so to speak, and I can count werewolves among my friends. But vampires? Yes, I can work with them. Comfortably? I was still struggling at that.

But my own discomfort did reinforce one thing that day, as Cassandra talked to Aaron on the phone. If I still clung to those prejudices, they ran a dozen times deeper within the Cabals, which meant it was critically important to solve Sean's case before the Cabals heard of it.

“Spencer Geddes,” Aaron’s voice crackled over the speakerphone after Cassandra finished explaining what we needed. “Lives outside Seattle. Or he did last I heard. Geddes isn’t the type to provide a forwarding address.”

“A loner,” Cassandra said. “Even for a vampire.”

“Christ, that echo’s bad. You got me on speakerphone, Cass? Lots of great inventions in the last century, but that’s not one of them.”

“Do you have a last known address for Mr. Geddes?” I asked.

“Sure do. And they’re forecasting rain tomorrow, so no bricklaying. I’ll swing out to Portland, meet up with you guys—“

“I have this, Aaron,” Cassandra said.

A static-filled pause. “You sure? I can catch up and we’ll both go.”

Cassandra hesitated long enough for Aaron to whistle. “Still there?”

“Yes, and while I appreciate the offer, he doesn’t need both of us showing up on his doorstep. If you have an address and a physical description—“

“You’ve never met him?” Paige said.

“Neither have I,” Aaron said. “When Cass said he’s a loner, she wasn’t kidding. He immigrated from Europe in the late nineties. Josie apparently went to extend a welcome shortly after he arrived—“

“I’m sure she did,” Cassandra murmured.

“Her welcome *wasn’t* welcome,” Aaron said. “Maybe you’ll be more his type.”

We finished getting everything Aaron knew about Geddes. It was remarkably little, considering how well-connected Aaron was within his community. Then, after we signed off, I suggested Paige, Savannah and I return to Portland. Cassandra could fly into Seattle the next morning, where we could meet and escort her to Geddes—

“You have a guest room, do you not?” she said.

Paige shook her head. “Just a pullout sofa. And Sean used that last night, so I haven’t cleaned—“

“I don’t sleep very much these days anyway. What time is our plane?”

Paige looked at me, begging for a way out of this. I struggled for an excuse—

“Six o’clock,” Savannah said.

“I’ll go pack then.”

On the flight back, Paige had Savannah sit with Cassandra. As she reasoned, if anything would persuade Cassandra to find a hotel for the night, that would be it.

The ploy failed. On some level, I think Cassandra was genuinely fond of Paige. She’d known her from birth, and known Paige’s mother from childhood. It was not, however, a grandmotherly sort of relationship. More like a mother-in-law, Paige always said.

It’s difficult for me to watch Cassandra badgering Paige, second-guessing her decisions, giving her unwanted—and almost always critical—advice. I suppose it *should* be difficult, seeing someone upset my wife, but the discomfort was magnified by the knowledge that I could not interfere. I’d once tried to defend Paige against Cassandra’s tongue, only to have Paige ask

me—nicely but firmly—not to do so. She was right. Fighting with Cassandra only made things worse.

Yet that knowledge didn't make it any easier to stand by and watch, coupled with the knowledge that, to an outsider, and perhaps to Cassandra herself, my silence spoke ill of me. To put it bluntly, I looked like a wimp, standing by silent as my wife is harangued. If I step in to defend her, I may feel better about my self—and my image—but I'll insult Paige, suggesting she's incapable of defending herself. Is concern over my image sufficient grounds for insulting my wife? Of course not. Logically, I know that, but my backbone has been questioned often enough during my life that I have developed a sensitivity in that area, as much as I endeavor to hide it.

In this case, though, I will do as Paige wishes, and keep my mouth shut. If that causes Cassandra to see me as a "wimp," then so be it. She already thought poorly enough of me on other counts that clearing up this misconception wouldn't make a difference.

Once back in Portland, if Paige and I had been alone, we would have dropped Savannah off and headed out on the case or, perhaps not even made that detour, simply taken Savannah and left. When we mentioned our plans to Cassandra, though, she stared at us as if we'd gone mad. Or more accurately, stared at me as if this was clearly my idea and I should be ashamed of myself, dragging Paige and Savannah to Oregon at such an hour when they should be at home in their beds.

"Surely this can wait until morning," she said, gaze fixed on me. "I can't imagine what you hope to accomplish at this hour."

“Checking on Geddes, of course,” Paige said.

Cassandra’s gaze swung her way. “You’re hoping to secure this man’s trust and assistance by arriving on his doorstep at two in the morning?”

“No, we’re hoping to make sure he’s home, and hasn’t bolted. Or gone looking for a fresh victim.”

“And if he’s not there? How will you track him at this hour? You can hardly contact his neighbors or employer inquiring into his whereabouts. If he *has* run, that will all need to wait until morning, as will any investigation into this murder itself. Better to rest tonight and get an early start in the morning.”

Paige looked at me. I knew she was eager to get to work, as was I, but Cassandra did have a point. There was no need to start tonight as opposed to early tomorrow. The Cabal wouldn’t find the case until today, Monday, as they reviewed the weekend news. If they decided to pursue it, it would take time to assemble an investigation team. While the Cabals were capable of moving faster, the dead man was human and no Cabal interests were in danger, so there was no need for haste.

When we arrived home, Cassandra insisted on a proper tour. She’d been to our home once, for a Christmas party, but now she wanted the opportunity to explore—and evaluate—it fully.

Our house was in one of the older but less prestigious neighborhoods of Portland. A street of narrow, two story homes, most of which had been allowed to “age gracefully” for many years—neither neglected nor regularly renovated, owned by middle-class families who’d lived in those same homes most of their lives. As the owners died and the homes went up for sale, the

area underwent a “revitalization.” Gentrification, one could say, though not to the extent of boutiques and cafes popping up on the corner. A strictly residential neighborhood, with homes that ranged from high-end to . . . ours.

Our house had been one of the last holdouts, standing firm in the face of real estate suitors who’d stuffed the mailbox with offers. When the owner died, his grandson—a particularly danger-prone half-demon whom I’d helped several times—had seen the opportunity to repay me by offering us the house at a fair market price, uninflated by demand in this particular neighborhood. So we had bought it. Or Paige had.

She’d argue the point—marriage means shared property—but I am keenly aware of who paid for the house. My “contribution” had been the reduced price, which allowed us to buy a house in a neighborhood we couldn’t otherwise afford.

At the time, it had seemed a deal my pride could live with. I’d told myself the situation would change. She had the money—from her inheritance and insurance—so it made sense for her to buy it, but soon I’d be contributing my full share to our living expenses. Almost three years later, that had yet to happen. If anything, I contributed less—most of my income going to expenses incurred in tracking down out-of-state clients and living away from home during those investigations. I told myself I was building credibility and it would pay off . . . but I’d been building it since my college days with little change in income.

Now, as we led Cassandra around the house, I was keenly aware of her roving gaze, picking out a repair I had yet to complete or a project Paige was undertaking in my absence, keenly aware too of her language, which attributed the house and all it encompassed to Paige. Cassandra was under no illusion as to who bought it and who furnished it and who, after the initial flurry of renovations, did most of the work in it.

While others would—like Paige—overlook that, focusing instead on the good I was doing in my work, Cassandra gave me no such allowances. She had come to accept, albeit grudgingly, that I did love Paige, but persisted in seeing me as an idealistic gadabout, the penniless crusader supported by his doting wife, so intent on saving the world that he doesn't tend to his own corner of it. Like so many of Cassandra's criticisms, as unfairly critical as it seemed on the surface there was, underneath, that harsh kernel of truth that made it all the more uncomfortable.

On her tour, Cassandra lingered longest in the office.

"We're still working on plans to move this to the basement," Paige said. "We keep meaning to, but we haven't had a chance yet."

Cassandra's gaze cut to mine, telling me she knew full well who "hadn't had a chance yet." She surveyed the room.

"I hope you aren't clearing it out for a nursery," she said. "Once Savannah finally leaves, you should take time for yourselves, not pop out babies—"

"No nurseries for quite some time. We just need—" Paige waved around. "—a bigger office."

"Why don't you use Savannah's room? It'll be empty soon enough."

"Excuse me?" Savannah said as she passed on the way to her room. "I'm still here for another year. And I'm going to college, not Siberia. I'll be back on weekends and holidays."

"I'm sure you'll find the sofa bed quite serviceable."

Savannah snorted and disappeared into her room.

"I hope you're getting that twenty you owe me," Cassandra called.

"Like you need it," Savannah called back. "And I got the artist right, just not the period."

“Well, I should hope you got the artist right, considering he signed his name.” Cassandra turned back to the office, gaze going to the oversized wipe-off calendar. “Is that *your* schedule, Paige? My God, how do you find a moment’s time for yourself? You really have to learn to say no to people, particularly with your volunteer efforts, however just the cause.”

Cassandra paused only long enough to wave at the blinking answering machine. “Five new messages? On a Sunday? I hope those aren’t for work. If you let clients get away with calling you at all hours—“

“Lucas?” Paige cut in. “Could you check those? I want to show Cassandra the bed.” She turned to Cassandra. “It’s an antique. Needs some work, but I picked it up cheap—“

“I should hope so, if it needs work. You must watch antique dealers, Paige—“

“—and I was hoping you could give us some advice on how to find someone suitable to repair it.”

Paige waved Cassandra into the bedroom, and pantomimed throttling her from behind as she passed.

“Wouldn’t do any good,” I murmured.

“I know.” She grinned back at me. “But that’s okay. All the pleasure. None of the guilt.”

In the next room, Cassandra returned to her diatribe about Paige’s workload. Paige said nothing, but I knew she’d already tuned her out, as she always did on this particular topic. Yet it was one subject on which I wish she’d listen. Like Cassandra’s quiet insinuations about my freeloading, there was, in this, some truth. Paige did work too hard.

If someone needed help, Paige was always there. While I understood that urge better than anyone, I saw the toll it took and knew that the real solution was not to reduce her volunteer

efforts, but to rechannel them, focus them in the direction she loved: her work for the council. Yet how could she jet off to Indiana or South Carolina, chasing a council investigation, when she had Savannah to look after, a household to run and a full-time job to attend to? She had to refocus that altruistic urge on local charities, concentrate on her website design business and let me pursue cases of injustice involving supernaturals. Let me do what she dreamed of while she paid our bills.

That would change. When Savannah left for college, Paige would have more freedom to travel, either on her own cases or accompanying me on mine, taking her programming work with her. And yet . . .

Perhaps it's pride speaking again, but I didn't want Paige to have to wait for Savannah to leave. More importantly, I didn't want Savannah's leaving to resolve the problem for me. I wanted to do it myself—to prove to Paige that I recognized and regretted the injustice of our financial arrangements and was willing to make sacrifices to see her dreams realized. Yet acting and having the will to act are not the same thing. I had yet to find a way to accomplish my goal, and had begun to suspect, with each passing year, that Savannah's leave-taking would solve it before I did, however much I wished otherwise.

I lowered the volume on the answering machine. Three messages were indeed work-related for Paige—two clients and a coworker from a volunteer group. The fourth was also for her. It was Adam, asking how “that, uh, thing went.” Then came the fifth.

“Lucas, it's Papa. I'll be in Portland later this week. I have business in the area and I'm looking forward to seeing you and Paige. Give me a call—“

I hit the stop button and went to join Paige in the bedroom.

I could have pretended not to have received my father's message. Four years ago, I would have . . . then suffered the self-disgust that would accompany so blatantly immature—and dishonest—an avoidance tactic. When I first contemplated a relationship with Paige, I'd assumed it would further damage my fractious relationship with my father. I know others have speculated that I began seeing her for that very reason—to upset him. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

I had no desire to hurt my father. I rebelled against his way of life by retreating, not by lashing out. Defensive tactics rather than offensive. With my father, my defensive strategy had always been to ignore him. Engaging him, by dating someone who would cause embarrassment to the Cabal and the family, would hardly have achieved that goal.

And yet, to everyone's surprise, perhaps my own most of all, my relationship with my father has improved since I began seeing Paige. Greatly improved. Ignoring him had always been difficult for me. Whatever our ethical differences, I wanted a relationship with my father. Even though I'd grown up with my mother, I'd been closer to him than most children who live with their fathers. Paige taught me that it took more strength to stand firm in my opposing philosophical beliefs than to run and hide them from his influence.

It was a far from easy situation. Lately, though, he'd eased back in his manipulations and his attempts to return me to the Cabal fold. I thought we'd been making progress. Now I saw my error. He'd simply been letting me relax my guard before a strategic strike—the Portland satellite office.

I wanted to call him back and demand answers. Yet I knew that, even if I caught him off-guard, there was no guarantee I could elicit the truth. The telephone also placed the matter in his favor, giving me no body language cues or facial expressions with which to judge the veracity of his claims.

What claims could he make? How could he possibly “explain this away”? He would try—I had no doubt of that—but there was no way to put a positive spin on a Cabal office in Portland. That itself was almost excuse enough to call—tell myself I was satisfying curiosity, seeing how he would explain this. But I would regret my haste. Better to wait until he was here and get my answers face-to-face.

In the meantime, I had other things to occupy my attention. So I called—not his home or cellular—but his office, knowing he wouldn’t be there on a Sunday night, and left a message explaining that I was on a case, but if he let me know when he’d be “in town” I’d set aside time to meet him.



Seven

The next morning, we drove to Washington State. Paige dropped me off in Tacoma. She and Cassandra would continue on to Geddes's house, outside Seattle, while I'd rent a car and drive back to Middleton to investigate the murder. I understood this was an efficient division of labor—one that I'd suggested—yet I couldn't help but wish it could be otherwise, that I could be fully sharing this investigation with Paige, accompanying her to Seattle . . . preferably without Cassandra.

Before we left, Paige joked about sending Cassandra to Middleton in my place. Let her sweep through town, demanding answers, and they might give up the killer willingly, just to get rid of her. An excellent plan but, sadly, we had to admit we would feel somewhat guilty, unleashing Cassandra on a town already reeling from tragedy.

The alternative would be to send Cassandra to Seattle alone to deal with Geddes but, again, while tempting, was less than wise. She was liable to stride up to Geddes's door, ring the bell a few times and, if he didn't answer, leave without making any effort to track him down and declare her duty done. While Paige insisted Cassandra was attempting to involve herself more fully in vampire affairs, even she agreed that regular prompting was necessary.

So I was off to Middleton to solve the murder of a human, while Paige and Cassandra tracked down a potential rogue vampire. As for any disappointment over getting the decidedly less attractive task, I squelched it with the reminder that Paige was not yet experienced enough to pursue a murder investigation alone. She would have tried, had I suggested it, but that would mean I'd be accompanying Cassandra to Seattle and, given the choice, I'd question the good people of Middleton instead.

I arrived in Middleton at ten and proceeded to the police station. I did not, however, go inside, but instead found the nearest coffee shop. It was the sort one could expect to find in any town—heavy on linoleum and vinyl, the faint smell of burnt coffee ingrained in every surface.

I picked up an abandoned newspaper from a booth, then perched on a stool at the counter. After ordering a black coffee, I opened the paper, not so much to read it, as to persuade the two police officers sitting beside me that I wasn't interested in their conversation.

One glance at the newspaper heading told me the murder had not been solved. It took only a few minutes longer of eavesdropping to know it wasn't even close to being solved. The chupacabra attacks had not been a high priority for the local authorities. They'd been playing hot potato with the state police. The city side argued that livestock attacks were a rural concern

and therefore state jurisdiction. The state side argued that the first had fallen within city boundaries and the perpetrators were almost certainly city residents. Both sides argued that they had neither the budget nor manpower to invest in isolated attacks on livestock. Now that a murder had been committed, the city police had taken control but were almost starting from scratch.

When the officers left, so did I, pausing only long enough that I wouldn't appear to be following them. They headed back to the station, the one place I couldn't follow them, so I stopped to check my phone. Paige had sent a text message, to avoid interrupting me.

“House yes. Occp'd no. Will check records.”

In other words, the address Aaron provided appeared to be correct, but Geddes was not at home. They'd take some time checking public records while awaiting his return.

I considered the meaning of Geddes's absence. Was he at work? Running errands? Or already on the run? I estimated a fifty percent chance of the latter, plus the possibility he was home, not answering the door, but watching Paige and Cassandra, seeing them as enemies, either coming to expose his crime or blame him for a murder he didn't commit.

It took all my willpower not to drop what I was doing and rush to Paige's aid. I had to trust that she didn't need that aid, which was . . . sometimes difficult to do. While Paige was capable of defending herself, she did have an unfortunate habit of rushing into trouble, heedless to danger, perhaps more confident in her abilities than was warranted. She has, since I met her, learned to recognize that trait within herself and, largely, to overcome it, but she was not above taking risks in pursuit of a suspect she deemed a danger to others.

I reopened my phone, then stopped. Paige could handle this. She knew how to proceed and knew if Geddes escaped no one would be in immediate danger, so there was no reason to pursue him—not before calling me in to help.

I took a deep breath, then closed the phone, pocketed it and continued walking.

I pushed open the front door to the Middleton Herald, and stood in line behind a woman dropping off a classified ad for a washer and dryer, waiting as she and the receptionist debated the merits of “good working condition” over merely “working condition.” I looked around, assessing my surroundings. A small reception area with offices to the rear and stairs to the left, presumably leading up to more offices. Down the hall I could make out the glow of an exit sign. An alternate escape route. Under such circumstances, it was almost certainly unnecessary but I have learned it’s always wise to have one.

“Can I help you?” asked a voice to my right.

A middle-aged heavysset man stood in a doorway, eyeing me, likely trying to figure out what I was selling. While I’d forgone my suit that day, I was well aware that my definition of casual—a dress shirt and slacks—didn’t coincide with most people’s.

I extended a hand. “Luis Cortez, Miami Standard. I was wondering whether someone might have a moment to discuss the chupacabra case.”

“Miami, huh?” He waved me toward a flight of stairs. “Guess that makes sense. Case like this would probably interest your readership down there. I suppose you people know more about this chupacabra stuff than we do.”

I suspected that by “you people” he didn’t mean Floridians, but I only said, “Yes, sir,” as I followed him upstairs.

At the top, he ushered me into a small room with a table and a few cheap chairs.

“So, where you from?” he asked as I sat.

“Miami.”

A laugh. Then, “Before that, I mean.”

I resisted the urge to say “Miami.” True, but not the answer he was looking for. My father’s family had come from Spain nearly two hundred years ago. My closest immigrant relative was my maternal grandfather, whose parents had arrived from Cuba when he was an infant. While I will admit to a pang of indignation, knowing this man wouldn’t have asked the same question of someone who was white and spoke unaccented American English—as I did—I felt no need to pursue the matter.

Others may argue the point, but I was raised to believe that ignorance, while annoying, isn’t on the same level as racism. We must pick our battles, and this wasn’t one I’d chosen for my life. So I lied and said my family was from Mexico, and listened while he waxed eloquent about a winter trip to Acapulco.

“I believe there were reports of chupacabra activity in that region in the early nineties,” I said, not because I knew any such thing, but because it provided a polite segue back to the topic.

“And I do appreciate you taking the time to speak to me this morning, Mr. . . .”

“Sullivan. Call me Sully.”

I told him what I knew so far about the case.

“Yeah, cops dropped the ball on this one,” he said. “Can’t say I blame them, though. I think this whole chupacabra nonsense made them—” He stopped. “I mean, not to offend anyone’s beliefs or mythology . . .”

“The chupacabra is considered a modern myth, unconnected to any religious or cultural beliefs. It’s merely a legend, one that people enjoy propagating, but one that most do not believe in. Similar to, let’s say, werewolves.”

Sullivan grinned. “Good, then, were speaking the same language. The lingua franca of superstitious bullshit. That’s why the cops were giving those animal mutilations low priority.”

“Not wanting to lend credence to what is, presumably, a hoax.”

“You got it.”

From Sullivan, I received the names and addresses of people involved, from the farmers originally targeted by the mutilations, to the dead man—Bobby Arnell’s—widow. It was rarely so simple, but in Sullivan I’d landed a fortunate break. He’d lived in Middleton all his life and had likely been the paper’s lead reporter in his day. As he’d neared retirement, though, he’d been moved to an editorial desk and appreciated the distraction and ego boost of talking to a young reporter.

“So the question is, how does Bobby’s death tie in with these livestock killings?” he finished.

“Does it?” I asked.

Sullivan frowned. “You think the murder is separate? Seems to me there has to be a link, and I’ll bet it has something to do with that bar.”

“Was Arnell gay?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? He had a wife—ex-wife, too—and four kids, but . . .” Sullivan shrugged. “Maybe someplace like Miami, a young man like yourself might go into a gay bar with some friends, and it doesn’t mean anything. But here? A guy like Arnell? Thirty-eight, blue-collar worker, never lived anywhere but Middleton? He doesn’t just slip into a place like that for a beer.”

As soon as I left the office, I tried calling Paige, telling myself I only wanted to provide an update. If I’d had any doubts as to my true intentions, they evaporated when Paige’s voice mail clicked on and my stomach clenched. I disconnected and called again. Still no answer.

Here then was my excuse to go to her, reassure myself she was safe and, if she was, join her hunt for Geddes. Yet, logically, I knew that the chance that she needed rescue was minimal. Whatever scrapes Paige got herself into, she always managed to find a way out. Even more likely, there was no “scrape” at all, and it was simply an inconvenient time to answer her phone.

If I dropped my investigation to run to her, claiming I feared for her safety, only to discover she’d been busy chatting up a city hall records clerk when I’d called, it would be awkward. Serious backpedaling and prevarication would be required.

No, I had to leave a message, move on and phone when I could.

Next, I stopped at the bar. The owner was in, doing paperwork. Pictures of his wife and kids plastered the office walls, competing for space with centerfold pinups and girlie calendars. This was a man who wanted everyone to know he ran a gay bar purely for the profit.

He agreed to answer my questions, thrilled that his little bar might be mentioned in a Miami newspaper. His answers added little to my current knowledge. He knew Arnell, but swore he'd never been a patron or had any reason to be in the bar—deliveries, odd jobs, etc. I was, however, welcome to take a look around.

The police had finished processing the scene, and the bar had returned to business as usual. On a Monday afternoon, though, it was closed and empty so I could investigate freely, arousing the interest only of a lone cleaner.

The storage room was located in the bathroom hall, which Sean said had been occupied by several people when he'd found the corpse. Difficult then for someone to drag Arnell's body in during business hours. Difficult but not impossible. It could be done, if executed early enough in the evening, after the bar opened but before it became busy.

Contrary to Sullivan's suspicions, I doubted Arnell had been a patron. Sean had come here because he deemed it safe—a place far enough from home and his colleagues in Tacoma that he wouldn't risk encountering anyone he knew. A gay man from Middleton, attempting to hide his sexual orientation, wouldn't set foot in here.

Was the dumping place still significant then? Or merely a matter of convenience?

I checked the storage room. The lock was broken. Sean said the door had been left ajar. Someone had wanted the body found.

I walked to the rear exit. It opened only from the inside. To get in from outside would require a key. Unless . . .

I found the cleaner, and asked whether she ever arrived in the morning to find the back door propped open.

“At least once a week,” she said. “They use it to sneak outside and do . . . whatever, then come back in. I tell Neil—that’s the bartender—to check it before he leaves, but he never remembers. I tell you, one of these days, he’s good to come in and find me dead, killed by some punk cleaning out the liquor.”

While I was in the bar, Paige had text-messed me again, and I phoned the moment I got outside. She was fine and had been doing exactly as I suspected—questioning someone—when I’d called. They were making the rounds, gathering information on him while regularly swinging past to check his house.

“No sign of Geddes yet, but I think he’s only out for the day. There were wet tire tracks in his driveway earlier, suggesting he left this morning. He’s a financial advisor, self-employed, but a neighbor said he’s often gone for the day, so he probably conducts his business through house calls. His home is a single-family detached bungalow in a suburb, which makes a stakeout tough, but we found a church parking lot about a half-block down and we can see his driveway from here. When we’ve exhausted our sources, that’s where we can hole up and wait for him.”

“Sounds as if you have everything under control.”

A husky laugh. “Not really, but I’m trying. All those years on the council, thinking I knew how to conduct an investigation . . . then finding out how little I *did* know.”

But it was under control. Meaning there was no excuse for me to join them. I swallowed my disappointment and offered a few suggestions.

As we discussed the possible necessity of a post-dark break-in—should Geddes not return—I’ll admit that prospect helped alleviate my disappointment. Standard investigative

work, such as I'd been doing all day, while necessary, is somewhat . . . less than exhilarating, and while I understand and accept the need for the monotony, I'm more than happy to alleviate it with the occasional bout of "less than legal" adventuring.

I continued my rounds of the places and people involved in the chupacabra "appearances."

While I maintained the guise of a Miami reporter, the subterfuge was hardly necessary. Half of those I approached took one look at me and guessed I was there about the chupacabra. Even when I thought it prudent not to mention my supposed newspaper affiliation, they still talked to me, seeming to assume I was on some sort of cultural pilgrimage.

Speaking to the farmers, I got the distinct impression that the "attacks" brought more benefit than harm. Rather like crop circles. As annoyed as they may have been to lose their livestock, the loss was relatively minor and their subsequent fame more than adequately compensated for it. The first "victims"—a young couple running an organic goat farm—had used the interest to promote their struggling farm. One farmer, a widower, now had a freezer stocked with sympathy cakes and casseroles. Another family's refrigerator was covered in articles, their names highlighted in each. The fourth's enterprising preteen children had preserved their goat's corpse as a science fair project, and charged area youths a dollar to see it.

As one farmer put it, "To be honest, son, this chupacabra is the most exciting thing to hit Middleton since the kids won the state football championship in '99."

One person who would doubtless disagree was Bobby Arnell.

I didn't get the opportunity to speak to the widow herself. I was met at the door and told she was tired of talking to reporters and asked to be left alone to grieve. I couldn't say I blamed her.

Arnell's coworkers were more inclined to talk. According to everyone I spoke to, Bobby Arnell was an "all-round great guy." A fine epigraph, but not terribly useful in a murder investigation.



Eight

“I’ll be done exams on the sixteenth,” Bryce said. “Then I’ll fly home the next day. You guys haven’t given away my office yet, I hope.”

Sean laughed and switched the phone to his other ear as he leaned back in his office chair.

“Never. You know how Granddad is. We get our name on an office door at sixteen and it’s ours for life, whether we want it or not.”

Silence. Sean wondered whether he’d misspoken, injected more frustration into that statement than he meant to.

“Not even going to ask how my exams are going, are you?” Bryce said. “You don’t dare.”

Sean winced. Out of the frying pan . . .

There was no “right” way to handle Bryce’s school situation. Ask how it was going, and Bryce would get short-tempered and defensive. Don’t ask, and it sounded as if Sean knew he wasn’t doing well, and didn’t expect that to change. Bryce was a smart enough kid, but he had

no head for—or interest in—political science. His chances of getting into law school dimmed with each passing semester.

“Sorry,” Sean said. “I’ve been . . . preoccupied. Some internal problems here.”

“Nothing you can’t handle, though, right? You’re the golden boy. Going to make VP by Christmas. I’d lay bets on it.”

Again Sean hesitated, replaying Bryce’s voice, assessing his tone. Were the sentiments spoken with brotherly pride? Sibling envy? Or simply a statement of fact? Any of the three were equally possible.

Bryce had always been a difficult one. No, Sean thought with a smile, the “challenging” one, as Dad always said. Since their father’s death, Bryce’s moods had grown more volatile, fueled by the frustration of pursuing—and failing in—a new career path, one Bryce was convinced their father would have wanted for him.

They talked for a few more minutes, making plans for Bryce’s summer at home. When Sean hung up, he heard Bryce’s words again. The golden boy and already on the path to VP. Did he want either distinction? Not particularly. Ambition wasn’t in Sean’s blood. He worked hard because that’s how he’d been raised—to do a job to the best of your ability. But if he didn’t care about making VP any time soon—if at all—was that not all the more reason to come out? To show Bryce he was far from the perfect CEO son?

But how could he help Bryce find his place in the Cabal if *he* no longer had one?

Oh, come on? Do you really think they’ll kick you out for being gay? Lose their golden boy?

Honestly, he had no idea what would happen. The few Cabal sons he’d heard of declaring their homosexuality had been disowned. Yet his grandfather loved him. Of that, Sean was

certain. But, despite that certainty, he also knew his grandfather, his old-fashioned, immovable views on right and wrong. His treatment of Savannah proved that. He'd lost his eldest son, yet refused to take any solace in the discovery of a new grandchild. He would even allow her to be raised by his rival's son, a young man he had nothing but contempt for. All because she was a witch. Old prejudices died hard.

The thought of Savannah, and by extension, Lucas, made Sean's gut twist. There was no disguising *that* act as common sense. He had been a coward. Pawning off his problem on someone else, pulling out his checkbook to solve it, preying on what he knew was his target's sense of moral decency and need of money.

That was bad enough. Worse still was that he'd done it to someone he liked, maybe even admired. He didn't fully understand what drove Lucas. The Cabals could be corrupt, but wasn't corruption best fought from within? Without leaving the family? Whatever his feelings about Lucas's life choices, though, he'd had no right to take advantage of them.

A lousy thing to do.

A cowardly thing to do.

Was this what living a lie would mean? Not just deflecting questions about his love life and avoiding blind dates, but turning into the kind of man who had to sneak into gay bars on business trips . . . then pay off friends to cover it up when things went wrong?

A tap at the door. Without waiting for a response, his Uncle Josef popped his head in.

"Sean? We need you in the boardroom."

"Come in, Sean," his grandfather said, waving to the empty seat to his left.

Sean stepped inside and closed the door as his uncle returned to his chair at his grandfather's right—Sean's father's old seat.

Sean surreptitiously scanned the table as he crossed the room, seeing his grandfather, both of his uncles, the head of security and his second-in-command, plus the AVP of special accounting. It must be a security issue, then, something requiring budget considerations, likely a special project.

“We're hoping you can help us with some something, Sean,” his grandfather said. “You were in Tacoma last Friday, meeting with the investors for the Domtar project.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then perhaps you can tell us more about this.”

His grandfather opened a folder and passed it over. It was a file of newspaper clippings. The top one was from a Seattle tabloid. Sean read it.

Chupacabra Attack in Middleton?

LUCAS

Nine

There wasn't a true coroner's office, per se, simply Dr. Bailey's regular office in the county hospital. When I asked to speak to him, I expected to be told that he, like Ms Arnell, had done enough press conferences. The nurse *did* give me a "not another one" look, but didn't even call the doctor, just told me to go downstairs to the morgue, speak to the attendant there, and Dr. Bailey would be with me momentarily.

I found the morgue attendant—Greg Regis according to his name tag—sitting at his desk reading some sort of medical journal.

When I announced myself, he rolled his eyes and pushed, reluctantly from his seat.

"I expect you've seen more than your share of journalists these past few days," I said as he led me down the hall.

"Oh, yeah. Doc's in his glory. Biggest case of his career."

He ushered me into what looked like the actual morgue. An odd place to entertain reporters, and uncomfortably chilly, but if the coroner was enjoying the attention, I supposed he liked some theatrics to go with it.

"Guess you want to see the photos," Regis said.

“If I can.” I smiled. “I’d love to see the body itself, but I imagine that’s out of the question.”

Regis shrugged. “Me, I wouldn’t care, but the widow’s already claimed it.”

He pulled out a folder and opened it to the photos. I examined them, comparing the corpse’s condition with the research I’d done into exsanguination. As a cause of death, exsanguination means simply that enough blood was lost to cause death. What I saw supported that conclusion.

Close-ups of Arnell’s throat showed two holes. Both in the jugular. Both more like tears than a vampire’s precise fang pierces. Yet, on closer examination, the tops of the holes appeared neatly made, with the tears at the bottom, as if fangs—or some instrument—had perforated the jugular, then ripped down to make the tears.

The explanation? Any number of things. A vampire disturbed from his feeding, ripping and accidentally leaving his meal to die. A vampire covering up a victim, making it look like an animal—or chupacabra—attack. Someone with little knowledge of true vampires staging a vampire attack. A murderer staging a chupacabra attack. Or even an animal itself, biting precisely, then tearing. An expert could probably tell for certain. I wasn’t an expert.

“Cops are trying to say some guy did it.” Regis gave a derisive snort. “Those look like anything a person could do? They’re tears. Clearly animal bites.”

I kept my gaze on the pictures. “And Dr. Bailey agrees?”

“Said they look like animal bites to him. Took some molds of them, shipped them off to some lab, but I’m betting they’ll come back as animal bites.”

I considered how to best phrase my next question, without sounding either incredulous or mocking. Finally, I went with the simple, emotionless, “Chupacabra bites?”

Regis shrugged. “Why not?” His gaze met mine, defiant and defensive. “A chupacabra isn’t necessarily some mythological monster, like Bigfoot. Maybe it’s just a real animal, something that lived deep in the jungles and only came out when they started clear-cutting, taking away its habitat. I’ve heard of things like that happening.”

“That’s true,” I said, nodding. “It would make sense.”

Regis relaxed. “It would, wouldn’t it? These things originate in Latin America, then catch a ride on the rails. Happens all the time with other animals. Why not these?”

I could point out that no rendering of the chupacabra ever gave it opposable thumbs, therefore making it impossible for any such beast to kill Bobby Arnell and open two doors to dump him in a storage room. But setting Regis straight would do no good. If he thought he had a convert for his theory, then I had a valuable contact in the coroner’s office.

Dr. Bailey arrived soon after. As Regis had said, the man was clearly “in his glory,” puffed up with self-importance, spelling his name three times to make sure I got it right. On the subject of Bobby Arnell, he was far less helpful, though, I suspected, not for lack of enthusiasm.

Death by exsanguination. Presumably caused by the neck injuries. The exact cause of those injuries was still under investigation. He wasn’t ruling out an animal attack, but nor was he ruling out murder, suicide or even accident. In other words, while Dr. Bailey liked having his name in the paper, he had enough pride and common sense not to make himself look a fool by speculating.

Unable to provide very much medical information made him quite willing to answer questions about evidence that a more experienced coroner would have told me to get from the investigators and crime scene. The drained blood had not been found at or near the crime scene. No spilled blood had been found, and evidence indicated Arnell had been moved post-mortem.

No defensive wounds. That could suggest a sedative, and toxicology screens were being run. Time of death indicated he'd been killed the same evening he'd been found. The wounds were similar to those found on the animals, but that was also pending laboratory confirmation.

Before I left, he offered me a photograph of himself. I accepted it, and slid it into my briefcase, alongside the picture of Arnell's wounds I'd pilfered from the file.

When I left the coroner's office, it was nearing five. I called Paige. She answered on the second ring, slightly breathless.

"Done yet?" she asked, before I could say a word.

"No, I believe I have a few more hours work here, which was why I was phoning. I will attempt to arrive before midnight, to conduct the break-in if required, but you should make plans for a lengthy stakeout with Cassandra."

I bit my tongue to keep from laughing as she let out a curse. Then, after a moment of silence, she said, "That's not funny."

"My apologies. I couldn't resist."

"So are you on your way?"

I smiled and leaned back in the car seat. "Do you want me to be?"

"What do you think?"

"Hmmm, it's difficult to tell. Perhaps we should discuss this further, discover exactly *how* much you want me there, what you're willing to do to get me there . . ."

"Three hours until dark, Cortez. Then I'm breaking in, with or without you."

"Ah, in that case . . ."

“You’re on your way.”

“I am.”

“Thought so.”

I stopped in the local copy shop first and faxed Arnell’s autopsy photograph to a contact—a former Cabal forensics expert whom I’d helped leave the organization after a dispute with his employers. A common case, the sort I handle with disturbing frequency—a Cabal employee is asked to do something that violates his professional code of ethics, and when he balks, he’s reminded that his job is at stake . . . then if he decides to quit, he discovers that’s not as easy as it might seem. For someone like me, who knows the inner workings of Cabal structure better than any employee, it’s an easy enough matter to resolve, but it earns me enough gratitude to have a contact for life.

When I faxed the photo, I attached a note, but didn’t ask him to keep the matter quiet. As much as I trust my contacts, in my experience, “keep this to yourself” only gives people cause to wonder why, and looking for those answers can bring about the very publicity I’m trying to avoid. Better to work under a universal supposition of discretion.

Minutes before I arrived, Paige phoned back to say Geddes had come home.

“Do you want us to wait for you?” she asked.

“Yes, but only as backup. Having me accompany the two of you to the door—“

I stopped as I heard Cassandra’s voice in the background.

“Cassandra thinks you should come with us,” Paige said. “Geddes isn’t likely to know who you are, so that isn’t a problem. And, with the older vampires, sometimes they’ll take a message more seriously if a man delivers it. Born before the age of equal rights, and never quite caught up with the times.”

“Ah. That hadn’t occurred to me. I’ll be right there.”

I rang Geddes’s bell. The door opened. A man stood there. Early forties, with dark hair graying at the temples. He wore slacks and a dress shirt, tie discarded, top buttons open, brandy snifter in one hand, looking like any other businessman after a long day.

With the storm door still shut, he surveyed us. His gaze fell to our hands, looking there for an explanation—a briefcase, sales folder, charity envelope or petition.

“We should’ve brought our Bibles again,” Paige murmured.

“Mr. Geddes?” I said, raising my voice to be heard through the screen door. “Spencer Geddes?”

“Yeah.”

“We’d like to speak to you.”

“Not interested.”

He started closing the door.

“We aren’t selling—” I began.

“Actually, we are,” Paige said, flashing her most winning smile.

Geddes stopped, door half-closed, gaze on her, wary but curious.

“We’re offering anti-Cabal insurance,” she continued. “We believe you may be in need of it, and we’re here to offer it at no cost or obligation to you.”

Geddes’s gaze turned cold. “Not interested.”

“I think you will be, if you’ll just hear us out—”

“I don’t care what the fuck you’re selling, little girl. Get off my goddamn porch.”

I bristled, but Paige’s fingers wrapped around my forearm.

Cassandra stepped front of us, her gaze out-freezing Geddes’s. “My name is Cassandra DuCharme. I am your interracial council delegate—“

“I don’t care if you’re fucking Queen of Sheba. I said, get off my porch.”

“As your delegate, it is my responsibility—“

Geddes leaned into the storm door, nose touching the screen. “You are not my delegate for anything, Ms. DuCharme. I didn’t elect you. I don’t want any part of your ‘responsibilities’ or your protection or your goddamn community barbecues. Is that clear?”

“So you wish to be left alone?”

“Got that impression, did you?”

“I’m simply clarifying, for the record, that you do not wish any information we may be have regarding a potential problem, or any warning—“

Geddes slammed the door.

Cassandra turned to Paige. “And you thought *I* was difficult.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, after Cassandra passed me her cell phone. “As much as I think this asshole is making a very big mistake, I gotta go with Cass on this one. He doesn’t want our help? Fuck him.”

“That would be my sentiment as well,” I said. “However, what Paige and I need at this point, is the blessing of you and Cassandra, in light of Geddes’s behavior, to pursue him as a possible suspect. If he is responsible for this death, then it’s a matter for the council.”

“Hell, yes. I agree. Vamps want an ombudsman? I’m here. They want someone to hide behind when they screw up and leave bodies lying around? They got the wrong guy. You two are getting paid, so I’ll let you solve the case. If it turns out he’s your killer, Cass and I will take over though the council.”

Twenty minutes later, Cassandra was driving back to Portland. She’d offered to stay with Savannah overnight while Paige and I staked out Geddes’s house. Our visit may have been just the impetus to run he needed, fleeing justice, fleeing persecution . . . or stepping out to hid the evidence.

It was almost midnight. Geddes hadn’t left his house. Paige and I had spent the evening talking about the case. Even just lobbing ideas back and forth was gratifying in a way I would never have imagined before I met Paige.

I’d always been a loner. Even in childhood, while I always had playmates, I’d had true few friends. I wasn’t antisocial or unfriendly—I enjoyed the companionship of others and

maintained a large circle of acquaintances—but I’d never been comfortable allowing anyone more intimate access to my life. Nor had I ever felt the lack of it. Then I met Paige and found myself not only willing to open up and share my life, but eager to.

I didn’t want or need her at my side every waking moment—we were both too independent for that. But this? Having someone I could talk to about a case, bounce around theories, debate motivations and courses of action? Having that person be just as passionate about it as I was? It was something I’d never dared hope for.

As we talked, her face and voice were more animated than they ever were talking about website programming, however much she enjoyed her job. It was like legal work with me. I enjoy it well enough, but it is a means to an end—for me, access to the cases I love and the legal know-how often needed to resolve them. But a life of nothing but law? I couldn’t imagine it. Paige knew that. When I’d suggested significantly increasing my legal work, even taking a job with a firm, she’d vetoed the idea. And yet I let her work forty hours or more per week at a job that didn’t fire her passion the way this did.

I’d tried arguing, finding a happy medium with me working more and her less, but she was stubborn. For now, the best I’d been able to do was involve her in my cases as much as possible—calling with updates every night while I was on the road, accepting her hacking skills and other help she could provide from home and, whenever possible, taking her along with me. We both needed more, and being here, on this case together, seeing her excitement, only proved that.

By midnight, we were running out of steam and Paige was doing more yawning than talking.

“Crawl into the back,” I said. “We can take turns napping.”

“Let’s give it another hour first. If he does plan to leave, this might be just the time he’ll do it, when the neighborhood quiets down for the night.”

As she rolled down her window more to get some cool air, I said, “Shall we play a game to pass the time?”

“Such as . . .?”

“I was thinking Hangman. Unoriginal, I know, but with only a paper and pen, I’m at a loss for anything more interesting,. However I’m certain we could overcome that problem by laying wagers on the outcome.”

“Wagers?” She grinned. “Like the winner gets the last bottle of water?”

I met her grin with a smile. “That’s one possibility, though I was hoping you might be amenable to satisfying something other than thirst.”

“Winner’s choice?”

I thought about it, considering the possibilities. “The stakes, I believe, should be implicit in the solution of the puzzle, though not necessarily explicitly so. The winner, then, receives the appropriate prize.”

“You’re on.”

She grabbed a pen and paper from the back.

Paige created the first puzzle.

I won it.

Five minutes after my victory, as I was relishing my reward, I noticed a movement near Geddes's house, a dark shadow moving against the darker backdrop. Not being particularly eager to interrupt Paige for what might well be a neighbor's pet, I squinted to watch it. Even when I saw flicker of light—a flashlight beam swiftly doused—I told myself the matter was not urgent and could wait a few minutes . . . perhaps longer.

Somehow, though, I must have conveyed my mild distraction to Paige, and she lifted her head from my lap with a murmured, "See something?"

When I hesitated, she sat up and peered out my window.

"It looks like Geddes is sneaking out."

"Unfortunately," I sighed.

"Guess that wasn't the wisest idea," she said as she zipped my pants. "Too distracting a distraction."

"Rendering me somewhat disinclined to react promptly to an outside concern."

"Somewhat?" She smiled as she opened her door.

"My apologies. The correct word choice would be 'significantly.'"

"Somewhat is fine," she said, smiling, as she slid out of the car. "It only means I'll have to practice more to perfect my technique."

She closed the door before I could respond. While I could argue—most vehemently—that her diagnosis was incorrect, it would be foolish of me to dissuade her from pursuing her solution. As she walked around the front of the car, I gave myself a moment to refocus on the task at hand. She motioned that she'd start heading over to Geddes's, and I watched her go, her hips swaying, sweater tight around the generous curve of her breasts . . . which wasn't helping me refocus at all.

I allowed myself a moment longer to watch her, while reminding myself that soon we would be able to pick up where we'd left off, in the more spacious and comfortable surroundings of a hotel room. Then I tore my gaze away, and opened my door.

The houses were on large lots made private by a generous use of wooden fences and fast-growing evergreens. The fences—as well as the neighborhood dogs—made sneaking through backyards impossible, so we settled for the road, affecting the only disguise we could: a couple out for a late-night walk. When we drew close enough to Geddes's house to be spotted, we slipped into the shadow of an SUV parked at the side of the road.

“His car is still there,” Paige whispered. “And there's no sign of anyone in the yard or on the sidewalk.”

I motioned for her to stay down as I peered out. A faint, flickering glow shone from between Geddes's drawn curtains. A television.

A movement alongside his car caught my attention. A figure was huddled there, watching the house, hands and face dark. Camouflaged. As he lifted something to his lips, I pulled back.

“Cabal SWAT team,” I whispered.

Paige let out a curse.

“Our options are limited,” I said. “It's too late to get to the house and warn him—”

She lifted her cell phone. She and Cassandra had called earlier, checking on Geddes. I nodded and she crept up the front yard of the dark house to our right, getting far enough to talk without being overheard by the SWAT team. I covered her retreat, then followed.

She'd found a spot behind a cedar and was already dialing as I approached.

“Mr. Geddes,” she said, keeping her voice low. “This is Paige Winterbourne. I came by today with Cassandra DuCharme—“

Even three feet away, I heard the line disconnect. Paige looked at me, eyes fuming. I reached for her phone and pressed redial.

The answering machine picked up on the first ring.

“Mr. Geddes,” I said. “Evidently you either believe we’re lying or the Cabals don’t frighten you. If it’s the latter, then all I can say—most respectfully—is that you are a fool. If it’s the former, I’d suggest you confirm the situation by looking out your window, to the right of your vehicle, where you will see an armed Cabal security officer approaching your home. You may be aware of a death Friday night in Middleton, a man found drained of blood with bite marks in his neck.”

A click. Then a cold, “I didn’t do anything.”

“Perhaps but—“

“And I’m not going to run, and look as if I’m guilty.”

“Under normal circumstances, that might be judicious. But the Cabal most likely to be staking out your house, is the Nasts. Their CEO, Thomas Nast, lost a teenage grandson to a vampire two years ago. Edward Hagen. Perhaps you heard of the case?”

Geddes let out a string of curses, over half in languages other than English. But the tone of the outburst told me I didn’t need to explain the situation further.

“I don’t want to run,” he repeated.

“And you won’t—for long. Our primary objective at this moment is to transfer control of your defense—“

“Defense? I haven’t done—“

“And the best people to prove that, free of bias, is the interracial council,” I continued. “To get you to them, away from the Cabals, first we need you out of the house.”

I instructed him to slip out the back, and make his way out of the suburbs, then call us. As soon as I finished, he muttered something and hung up.

“Was that a yes?” Paige whispered.

“I hope so.”

Once we’d given Geddes the opportunity to escape, it was time for me to do what, according to many, I did best: interfere.

I told Paige to stay behind. No chivalry or sexism there, but a simple matter of safety, which she understood. My immunity did not extend to her.

Then I started across the road. To an onlooker it would appear my stride was determined, my chin high, my confidence unwavering. A necessary facade for pulling off such a delicate act of faith. I was well aware that my father’s protection extended only to conscious, premeditated attacks on my person.

Walking up that drive, striding into the midst of a Cabal takedown operation, I could be shot by any new Cabal employee who didn’t recognize me. I could even be shot by an employee who *did*, but who decided that the darkness would excuse accidentally killing me . . . and claiming the quiet gratitude of his employers. Yet the surest way to stay some junior Cabal security officer’s hand on his weapon was to look and act as if I had every right to be there, and has every confidence that if any harm came to me, my father’s retaliation would be swift and merciless.

As I walked toward the dark figure now crouched by the side door, I made no effort to conceal my approach. That would be dangerous.

The man turned toward me, tensing at first. Then he straightened, like a soldier snapping to attention. Still walking, my gaze dropped to his outfit. It bore no insignia—a secret ops team is hardly going to announce its affiliation—but I knew the various Cabal outfits well enough to identify the design. One sweep of this one told me my earlier supposition had been mistaken. This wasn't the Nast Cabal's SWAT team. It was my father's.

LUCAS

Ten

I entered the house through the rear door, which the team had already discovered unlocked and had used to infiltrate the house. As I canvassed the rooms to ensure Geddes had left, I gave more than one prowling team member a start. All must have been wondering what I was doing there. Yet not one asked, and I didn't enlighten them.

I was in Geddes's living room, thumbing through his address book when footsteps sounded in the hall, not the heavy clomp of boots, but the slap of dress shoes. Someone snapped an order. At the sound of the voice, the hairs in the back of my neck rose. But I kept my gaze on the book, perusing the endless client numbers. The doorway darkened as a figure filled it. He walked into the middle of the room, saying not a word, but the heat of his rage palpable.

"Hello, Hector," I said.

My oldest half-brother, twenty years my senior and the only one of the three whom I can say, with honesty, that I fear. The youngest, Carlos, had inherited his mother's cruel streak, but little of my father's intelligence. The middle one, William, sadly received neither, and little to compensate for the lack. Only in Hector did both traits coincide—venom plus the mental capacity to use it to its fullest advantage.

Hector called to a SWAT team member in the hall. “Get Stanton in here.”

“The team leader is Gus Reichs,” I said mildly. Then I looked at the security officer. “I believe you’ll find him on the upper level.”

“Yes, sir.”

Moments later, the young officer returned with Reichs, who paused in the doorway, his gaze going from Hector to me, uncertain who to address.

I greeted him, then said, “Hector wished to speak to you.”

“We’ve searched the house, sir,” Reichs began. “But there’s no sign of—“

“Of course there isn’t,” Hector snapped. “If *he’s* here—” A thumb jerked my way. “Then the vampire isn’t. Lucas is stalling us, giving his client time to escape.”

“Spencer Geddes is not my client.” I picked up Geddes’s Day-Timer. “However, as the actions for which he is being investigated in no way affect Cabal business, they are a matter for the interracial council, not the Cabal.”

“He murdered—“

“A human, not a Cabal employee or even a supernatural. And if it was his required annual kill, it does not, according to the statutes, constitute murder, however much we may argue the point. Instead this would be considered improper body disposal—a council concern.”

As I spoke, I leafed through Geddes’s planner. Distancing myself from the argument. My usual approach to dealing with Hector. I have often wondered whether my strategy is, in fact, a dangerous one. Perhaps ignoring him suggests overweening confidence on my part, that I refrain from confrontations because I don’t view him as a worthy challenger. Yet I suspect that whatever approach I took, Hector could find fault and insult in it, so I chose the one I was most comfortable with: standing firm and refusing to engage.

“Find the vampire,” Hector said to Reichs. “And place him in Cortez Cabal custody.”

Reichs glanced my way, waiting. Hector’s eyes glittered, his blood pressure rising.

“Hector has given the order,” I said. “But please exercise restraint in the capture. I was the one who told Mr. Geddes to run.”

“Since when do you approve my orders, Lucas?” Hector said as Reichs left.

“I didn’t. I was merely clarifying the situation for the team, so they don’t blame Geddes for fleeing.”

I returned my attention to the planner. Hector strode over and plucked it from my hands.

“Don’t you *ever* give an order to my employees after I’ve already done so.”

“I apologize. I assure you, my intention was not—“

“Your intention was to make a fool of me. Don’t make it worse with your pompous apologies.”

I hoped I didn’t flush, but turned my face away, just in case. “If that officer looked to me for verification of the order, that is not my fault. I wish you’d place the blame where it belongs—on the man who created the situation.”

“You’re pathetic. You manipulate Father into making you his heir, then blame him for it.”

“If you’ll excuse me—“

Hector wrapping his fingers around my forearm. “No, I don’t excuse you. For anything. But speaking of excuses, you’ve set up a nice one for me here. Barging in on a takedown. The perfect excuse for a tragic accident.”

I caught a flicker and looked past Hector to see Paige in the doorway, lips moving in a binding spell. I gave a small shake of my head. She hesitated, then stopped casting.

With my hand, I motioned for her to retreat. *That* request she pretended not to see and instead stepped into a crevice between a bookshelf and the wall, where she could hide and still cover me.

From the first time Paige had met Hector, she had distrusted him above all my family, as if instinctively knowing he posed the greatest threat. She must have seen him come into the house and followed to watch out for me.

I took out my cell phone.

“Let me guess,” Hector said. “Time to call Father. Tell him you’re being bullied again.”

I had never—even from the earliest threats in childhood—complained to my father about any of my half-brothers. But there was no sense pointing that out. Hector had created his own version of reality to explain why our father favored the son who was, arguably, least worthy of the honor. Nothing I could ever say would change Hector’s mind.

My father answered his cell phone, and I explained the situation as succinctly as I could.

“And, as such,” I concluded, “it does not fall within Cabal judicial jurisdiction, which is why I’m here, with Paige, to assist her in investigating the matter for the interracial council.”

At that moment, an officer hurried into tell us the Geddes had been apprehended.

“This is a matter for the council,” I repeated.

My father agreed that there was some “possible” basis for the claim, and that it would be “considered.” I didn’t push the matter. Even Paige, stepping from her hiding spot, gave me a reluctant nod when I looked her way.

The council had abdicated its claims over such matters, if not in theory, at least in practice. For decades they had bowed to Cabal claims, however spurious. Knowing they lacked the numbers to fight, they’d concentrated their efforts elsewhere. Paige, Adam and the other

delegates were trying to change that now, but it was not a battle that could be won in this moment.

“I’ll meet with you and Paige as soon as you arrive in Miami,” my father said. “The jet is—“

“Paige and I would prefer to remain close to the scene of the investigation, and I’m sure Mr. Geddes does not wish to serve his incarceration on the opposite side of the country.”

“Understood, but the Seattle satellite office isn’t equipped to hold a prisoner. The nearest one that has a proper cell is in Chicago.”

“Oh? There’s nothing . . . closer?”

My father paused. “Well, there is the office in Phoenix—“

“What about Portland? Or are the security cells there are still undergoing construction?”

A longer pause. Then, “Lucas, I can explain—“

“I’m quite certain you can, and very convincingly. However, it’s growing late and we have a long drive ahead of us. If there are cells in that office, that is where I’d like Mr. Geddes to be taken. Please have someone e-mail directions to me, and Paige and I will meet the team at the office.”

I hung up before he could answer.

“Maybe this isn’t the place,” Paige said.

We stood in front of a small warehouse that appeared to be in the last stages of a renovation. From the exterior, it was difficult to tell what it was being converted into—there were no signs, not even one advertising the construction company. Yet I knew once we passed through those

main doors, we'd find ourselves in a suite of offices. Cabal offices. It seemed small, even for a satellite, but there was no mistaking the structure.

"I don't get it," Paige continued. "Construction has obviously progressed far enough to have a holding cell ready, but your father told Adam they hadn't even decided whether they were going forward."

"A useful fiction. It would have explained to Adam why my father wished to keep the matter from me. If Adam knew the offices were almost complete, and my father still didn't want me to know . . ."

"He'd smell trouble and tell us."

"Mr. Cortez!"

I turned to see a small, balding man in his forties hurrying down the sidewalk. Hector and his bodyguard followed at a distance.

"I'm sorry, sir," the man said. "I hope you weren't waiting long."

"Not at all. And I apologize for getting you from bed to let us in." I extended my hand. "Chris Ibsen, isn't it? I believe we met a couple of years ago. In New York, when you are supervising the renovations to the offices there."

Ibsen beamed, as if I paid him an enormous compliment simply by remembering who he was.

"And this is my wife," I began. "Paige—"

"Mrs. Cortez," he said, taking her hand between his. "A pleasure to meet you."

"She is *not* a Cortez," Hector said as he rounded the street corner.

"Hector is correct," I said. "My wife kept her maiden name, Winterbourne."

“Paige is fine,” she said with a wide smile. Then she turned to Hector. “Has Mr. Geddes arrived yet?”

For a moment, Hector said nothing. Paige rolled her eyes at me, as if to say “not the invisible witch problem again.”

“He’s being brought in the rear,” Hector said finally, though he addressed his answer to me.

Ibsen unlocked the door and escorted us inside. As he walked through the lobby, he explained the layout and the progress of construction. Paige hung back a few paces while she phoned Cassandra, to tell her that Geddes had arrived and provide instructions in case she wanted to join us.

I slowed, ensuring she didn’t fall too far behind, and kept an eye on Hector as he drifted to the side with his bodyguard. Harming Paige in front of witnesses would be too bold a move for Hector, but that didn’t keep me from watching.

As we walked, Ibsen sought my input—and approval—on everything, as if this was vitally important. When I’d first taken Paige to the Cabal head office in Miami, I’d watched her reaction, that mix of amazement and amusement as everyone in my path seemed to trip over themselves to greet me.

“Sure, you’re the boss’s son,” she’d said to me later. “And they *think* you’ll be the next boss, but come on—it’s an employer, not a king. I don’t even think kings get that treatment anymore . . . not outside of some tiny, despot kingdoms.” And that, I told her, was quite possibly the best analogy for Cabal—a tiny despot kingdom.

Unlike modern companies, where employees were loyal only so long as it behooved them to be so—their next job being only a résumé or two away—Cabals were, in most cases, life

employment. Certainly that was the goal—to work for the same Cabal all your life, the same one your father worked for, the same one your children would work for.

Most employees were not just part of the business, but an integral part of the entire Cortez Cabal community. Some, particularly half-demons, had weaker ties—lacking that hereditary link—and they would move from Cabal to Cabal chasing better opportunities. But a man like Ibsen had grown up in the organization. From the earliest age, he'd socialized with other supernatural Cabal children—went to the same schools, joined the company ball team, used the company's private doctors, dentists, hospitals. He'd married within the organization. His children were now growing up in that same community.

For Ibsen, being a supernatural had never been a disadvantage—every complication was resolved simply by being part of the Cortez Cabal. Part of that tiny, despot kingdom.

In return, the Cabal had his complete loyalty. Why wouldn't they? He didn't know how to survive in the human world—he'd be lost the moment his child needed a doctor who could treat supernaturals.

Can one blame him, then, for kowtowing to what he believed would be the next ruler of his kingdom? It might turn my stomach—both the lie and reminder of the power Cabals wielded—but I could not blame him, so I had to accept his obeisance with grace.

As we approached the elevator, I motioned for Ibsen to wait until Paige joined us. Once she did, he pushed the button.

“The day-care facilities are on the second floor with the executive offices,” Ibsen said. “We debated that. Would it create too much disturbance? Or would it be an advantage, having one's children close enough to visit? Your father and I decided good soundproofing would resolve any

noise issues. I was hoping to have your input, but your father didn't want you being bothered. If you'd prefer to move the day-care, we can still do that."

Paige gave me a quizzical look, wondering why my input mattered, but I was accustomed to this. It seemed my father found a way to "consult" me on every office renovation, doing so under the guise of simply valuing my opinion.

When I'd met Ibsen working on the New York offices, Paige and I had supposedly been enjoying a mini-New York vacation, courtesy of my father. Then he just happened to be in New York at the same time and, after softening me up by treating us to box seats at a Broadway show Paige had wanted to see, he'd "had to make a stop" at the office renovation on the way back to our hotel.

While there, naturally, he'd had to take Paige and me on a tour . . . then took me aside to meet Ibsen and discuss the design. My father had no plans to retire anytime soon—this was just his way of reminding everyone that they'd be answering to me someday. "Someday" as in "when hell freezes over," but if I said so, I'm sure he'd find a way to accomplish that as well.

"The security cell is in the basement," Ibsen said as he ushered us into the elevator. Hector and his bodyguard headed to the stairs. "It's just a single cell, but that seemed adequate, under the circumstances."

He pressed the button, not for the basement, but for the second floor.

"While you're here, I want to ask a few questions about the executive suites."

"We really should see to Mr. Geddes," I began.

"It'll only take a moment, sir."

Once off the elevator, he led us to the main office at the end. It was still under construction and we had to pick our way through the debris.

As I stepped inside, Paige murmured. “This is an office? It’s huge.”

Ibsen chuckled. “As befits the top executive. Or I should say, executives. That brings up my first—and primary—question. According to the plans, it’s a single office with a partial divider severing the space into two equal areas. Conjoined offices so to speak. Is that what you want? Or would you prefer completely separate spaces, perhaps with a joint sitting room?”

“Conjoined offices?” I said. “I’m afraid I don’t follow, Chris. My father hasn’t briefed me on the management arrangements.”

Now it was Ibsen’s turn to look perplexed. “Perhaps you want to think about it, then, sir? Discuss it with your wife.” He nodded to Paige. “Mr. Cortez *did* say you two like to work together, but perhaps this is closer than you want.”

“Closer . . .?” Paige looked around, then asked, with trepidation. “Whose office is this?”

Ibsen laughed. “Yours, of course. For the two of you. It is your operation, after all. A new division for the Cortez Corporation, and I can’t tell you how excited I am to be a part of it.”

LUCAS

Eleven

As we headed to the elevator, leaving Ibsen behind, I struggled to forget what Ibsen had said upstairs, about this being *our* satellite office, Paige's and mine. More of my father's manipulation and delusions, thinking he could tempt me with my own satellite office . . . co-managed with my wife. But Ibsen had said something about a new division . . .?

"We should hurry," Paige murmured. "I don't like leaving Hector alone down there with our vampire."

Her words started me out of my thoughts and that, I knew, was their purpose more than any real concern over Hector and Geddes. But I played along. Anything to steer my mind onto another course.

"There's little danger. Yes, killing Geddes would be a nose-thumbing 'screw you' in the face of my efforts to protect him and, were it Carlos down there, I would be worried. But Hector would never lower himself to such a crude ploy. He'll want to battle me on this matter openly, through the appropriate channels."

As I reached for the elevator button, Paige shook her head. "Your dad won't allow it. I'd be surprised if he hasn't recalled Hector to Miami already."

I glanced at her.

“Do you think he sent Hector to Seattle knowing you were on this case?” she asked as we stepped onto the elevator. “Never. Whatever set him onto Geddes, his motivation wasn’t trying to head you off at the pass. Not that I’d put that past him—if only as way to spend some quality court time together, but if that was the case, Hector wouldn’t have been there.”

She was right. While I’d learned not to commit the cardinal sin of underestimating my father’s gift for manipulation, that did not extend to putting his eldest and youngest son together on a case to see who would triumph. When Paige and I had been chasing Edward in Miami, Hector had been ordered to stay in New York on business. He would not send Hector to Seattle knowing I was also pursuing Geddes. An error that would be rectified with a speedy recall to Miami. I won’t say I wasn’t relieved.

Cassandra arrived before we made it downstairs. We introduced her simply as “a council member” and no one inquired further. Hector was in an office, taking a call from my father, but had left order with Kepler—the young officer I’d first met at Geddes’s house. Kepler was to escort us downstairs, not for our protection, I presumed, but to keep us from liberating the prisoner.

“We didn’t try to sedate him, sir,” Kepler said as we reached the basement. “We weren’t sure that would work when, you know . . .” A faint shudder. “The guy’s already dead.”

“He’s not dead,” Cassandra snapped.

“Undead, then.”

“Vampirism is simply another state of consciousness,” she said. “An alternate form of life. You will find that vampires do not appreciate being called—” Her lips twisted. “Undead.”

“Aaron doesn’t mind,” Paige murmured. “He uses it himself.”

We stopped before a steel door. The security pad wasn’t connected yet, but Reichs—the team leader—seemed to be working on changing that.

“How is Mr. Geddes?” I asked.

Reichs grunted and pulled at a wire. “Behaving himself, sir. He’s been an arrogant SOB, but he hasn’t fought. And hasn’t tried to eat anyone yet.”

“Feed,” Cassandra said. “Vampires do not eat anyone, they feed off their blood.”

“Like giant mosquitoes,” Reichs said. “Parasites.”

He wiped sweat from his brow as he pulled back to look at the panel wiring.

He continued, “No offense to the council—” a nod to Paige. “—but after that business with those psycho vamps killing kids? You gotta start thinking the St. Cloud’s proposal might not be such a bad idea.” He jerked his thumb toward the security ward. “We can start with this one.”

“St. Cloud—?” Cassandra began.

“One of the Cabals,” I said, quickly ushering her past. “The second smallest one.”

“I know *who* the St. Clouds are—“

“Is he in there?” I asked Kepler, pointing to a second steel door, this one with a small window.

“Yes, sir. It’s not locked—we’re still working on that—but he’s in a cell inside. Would you like me to go in with you, sir?”

“No, thank you. We’ll be fine.”

As I pushed open the door, Cassandra passed Paige to get up beside me.

“What is the St. Cloud proposal, Lucas?” she demanded.

“I have no idea. But I suspect we’ll find out soon.”

“You!” Geddes roared the moment we stepped inside. He gripped the bars of his cell, glaring at me like a Rikers Island lifer. “You double-crossing—”

“I double-crossed no one,” I said calmly. “I’d hoped you’d be able to outrun them—”

“Bullshit! You’re not some pesky council do-gooder. You’re a Cortez. Benicio Cortez’s heir, no less, they tell me.”

“I’m a Cortez, yes. And Benicio’s son. But as for his heir . . . I fear that’s a misunderstanding between my father and myself. I can assure you that I do not work for any Cabal—“

“Bullshit. You’re a Cabal brat—”

Cassandra cut in. “And *that* is the reason you are here, Spencer. Incarcerated, but relatively safe, and speaking to council representatives instead of a Cabal ‘interrogation’ specialist. The only way you’re getting out of that cell with your head attached to your shoulders is if Lucas and Paige solve this crime before the Cabals invent evidence against you.”

“I didn’t—”

“Before you disavow the crime, consider that, if you did leave that body there, you might want to admit it, and be turned over to the council for a reprimand. Better that than to deny it and see what other charges the Cabals can bring against you.”

“I didn’t—”

“Perhaps it was simply an error in timing or judgment. In making your annual kill, you were surprised before you could dispose of the body.”

Geddes crossed the cell and sat on the cot. He rubbed his hands over his face as if taking a moment to rein in his temper. “No. My rebirth date is in January and this year I took a homeless person in Seattle, as I have since I emigrated. If you want details, I give them so you can confirm that.”

“How long have you been a vampire?”

“Almost fifty years.”

Her brows arched. “Young, then. Perhaps this was a feeding accident. You took too much. It happens, particularly with young vampires—”

“I’m not *that* young. I know how to feed.”

“Another sort of feeding accident, then. He had an affliction, anemia or—”

“I only hunt in Seattle. I’ve never even been to . . .”

“Middleton,” I said.

“Wherever.”

Cassandra walked along the front of the cell, her hand sliding across the bars. “Then perhaps not a mistake at all. You didn’t want to speak to us earlier. You didn’t want to run when Lucas warned you. Could that have been more than common stubbornness?”

“What are you driving at, woman? Suicide by Cabal?”

She pursed her lips. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“Well, don’t. I’d find a sharp wire and hang myself before I’d let a Cabal do the job for me.”

“Given this some thought, I see,” she said.

He met her gaze. “Haven’t we all?”

“No,” she murmured. “Not all. However, what I was thinking was, perhaps, that in killing this man you were hoping to be caught, to force the Cabals to react. To bring to a boil what has been simmering for two years now.”

Geddes barked a laugh. “Offer myself up to the Cabals to force their hand on behalf of the vampire community? You want political statements, you’ve got the wrong guy.”

“That,” I said. “I suspect is true. As for whether the Cabals will realize—or admit—it is another matter.”

It was almost dawn by the time we returned upstairs. Cassandra had stayed behind with Geddes, hoping he might be more forthcoming alone in the company of his own race. I doubted it, but appreciated the effort. Cassandra had clearly resolved to put her full efforts into acting as Geddes’s council advocate. I knew this pleased Paige. She even seemed relieved, as if seeing this as a sign that Cassandra’s life was not nearing its end as quickly as she feared.

As for Hector, he was already at the airport, awaiting my father’s jet so he could make the return trip to Miami. He hadn’t left us any message. We learned of his leave-taking only upon inquiring. The official reason for his departure was that, in light of our father’s imminent arrival here, Hector was needed to head operations in Miami.

He had, I was certain, known of his “recall” when we left Seattle. Earlier, when he’d been in one of the offices speaking privately to our father, had he been attempting to change his mind? Fighting to stay and engage me directly on this matter? Or had he simply been getting his new orders? Not arguing because he as eager to be away from me as I was to have him gone? I don’t know Hector well enough to even hazard a guess, and I suspect I never will.

We left the Cabal office before my father arrived. Had we stayed to demand an explanation about the offices, I suspected neither Paige nor I would later be in any mood to concentrate on an investigation.

When Cassandra finished with Geddes, she would return to our house to see Savannah off to school. Then she would meet with my father later to discuss Spencer Geddes. They'd worked together before, negotiating an uneasy truce between Cabals and vampires after the Edward and Natasha case. I had few qualms about leaving them together. They were evenly matched, and would, I was certain, come to an agreement regarding Geddes's incarceration with a minimum of bloodshed.

An hour after we left, Paige roused herself from her nap, stretching in the passenger seat.

"Pull over at the next off ramp," she said through a yawn. "I'll drive for a while."

"No need. I wouldn't sleep anyway."

I felt her gaze on me and turned to see her twisted sideways, her cheek against the seat as she watched me.

"You okay?" She shook her head. "I know you're not, but . . ."

"I'm coping. Trying not to think about it until I have the time to get a proper explanation and deal with it."

"A good idea. No sense speculating—" Another shake of her head, sharper. "Let's go back to where we left off. Theorizing—about the case, that is. Before Bobby Arnell, this creature wasn't really causing any grief. Well, I'm sure those dead animals would object, but you know what I mean. Those who lost livestock gained back value-plus in publicity and temporary fame. Who was first hit again?"

"The organic sheep farmers."

She made a face. “Probably not the sort to kill an animal to promote their business. Maybe one of the others then.”

“Striking first at sheep farmers to deflect initial scrutiny?”

“Right. We have preteens in one family. Plus the teenager who claims he saw his cat attacked. That’s where I’d look. At kids old enough to pull this off.”

I nodded. “Teenagers take the greatest interest in supernatural phenomena, and are most likely to undertake such acts to gain attention and shock adults.”

“And prove their theory that all grown-ups are gullible fools.”

We shared a smile.

Paige continued, “Most animal mutilations turn out to be the work of teens. We should start there—with young people attached to the case.”

We stopped at a diner just off the Middleton exit and dallied over breakfast. We had time—we couldn’t begin our investigation so early in the day.

While we lingered over coffee, my father called. I’d left a message at the Portland office, explaining that we’d returned to the investigation, but he still seemed put out that we hadn’t stayed until he’d arrived. I told him that—barring unforeseen problems—we’d be home for the night, and could speak with him then. In the meantime, he’d have Cassandra to keep him busy.

Ten minutes later I received a second call, one that suggested we might be back in Portland sooner than I thought.

“That was my contact at the Middleton Herald,” I said as I hung up.

“A break in the case?”

“Better. They’ve arrested a suspect and called a press conference for nine.”

I used my press pass to gain entrance to the conference. The Miami Standard was a tiny Spanish newspaper in Miami, owned by half-demon I’d helped years ago. In return, he’d provided me with press credentials for his paper and was always ready to support my stories, should anyone call to verify my employment.

When Paige accompanied me into the room, no one tried to stop her. Act as if you belong, and few people will question the fact.

The conference began promptly at nine with the police announcing the capture of the culprits believed responsible for the chupacabra attacks. It was a quartet of teenage boys, including the neighbor of the organic sheep farmers and the son of Bobby Arnell.

“They have been charged and have confessed to the livestock attacks,” announced the detective—a woman named MacLeod. “As for the murder of William Arnell, we are continuing our investigation, but expect to lay those charges soon.”

“Against the boys?” someone asked.

“They remain our primary suspects.”

The detective steered questions back to the to the chupacabra attacks. Though she remained evasive on motive, a picture emerged from the pointed questions of the reporters and the detective’s responses.

Four teenage boys, all friends, bored and restless as the school year dragged on toward the tantalizing freedom of summer. One completes a school project on modern “monster” legends

and shares it with his friends. They fantasize about how much fun it would be to stage their own version of an outbreak in Middleton.

Fantasy soon turned to challenge. Could they pull it off? They decide on the chupacabra. The first target? The neighbors who'd been involved in a groundwater dispute with one boy's father. Sheep weren't goats—the chupacabra's favorite prey—but they were close enough.

“But about Bobby . . .” said a young woman from the Middleton Herald. “Peter Arnell, one of the suspects, lived with his mother and Bobby had a history of child support payment defaults there. Is that the assumed motivation for Bobby's death? A son striking out on behalf of his mother?”

“Peter Arnell has not been charged with his father's murder,” the detective reiterated.

Her denial didn't matter. Throughout the room, reporters were madly scratching down the young journalist's words. With the possibility of patricide, this case had taken an exciting turn, one that would be almost as interesting as the chupacabra claims.

“I don't buy it,” Paige said as we took a booth in the coffee shop. “Sure, I'd like to believe no son would murder his father, but I'm not that naïve. If Peter lived with his mom and was constantly hearing what an SOB his dad was—and that every new pair of Nikes he couldn't buy was because his father wouldn't pay up—maybe he'd consider murder. Collect the child support through the estate. He might even be able to pull it off . . . with a gun, maybe a knife. But exsanguination?”

“The animals were fairly simple to kill in that manner. Certainly easy enough for four boys with a rudimentary knowledge of anatomy. From the photographs, the job was a messy one, suggesting the perpetrators possessed no medical finesse.”

“But not so with Bobby Arnell.”

“The puncture wounds on his neck were well-placed, though someone attempted to disguise that with the gaping ‘bite’ marks. Whoever inflicted those had at least some idea what he was doing. Also, somehow, they had to subdue Arnell. He was a big man. He’d hardly allow himself to bleed out, even if he was being held down by three teenage boys.”

“Sedated.”

“Most likely.”

“Did the coroner find anything?”

“He submitted the tests. They should be back by now.”

“Time to visit again?”

“I believe so.”

We obtained a copy of the coroner’s report from Dr. Bailey’s assistant, Greg Regis. He didn’t provide it willingly. He might have, but we didn’t ask. If there’s any doubt as to whether someone will willingly part with an item, there is some advantage to not requesting it. It’s easier to steal something when no one knows you want it.

So Paige went down to the morgue alone, posing as yet another reporter, and charmed Regis away from his desk. Then I slipped in and easily found the report. There were several copies, so I slid one into my briefcase.

“Pentobarbital,” Paige said. “Used in veterinary work as a anesthetic and in hospitals to reduce intracranial pressure and induce comas. Also used in euthanasia. Serious stuff.”

We were in the car, pulled off along a residential street. Paige was on her laptop using someone’s wireless Internet connection. Less than ethical, but we’d been unable to find a wireless-ready coffee shop in Middleton. So I’d driven along this road until Paige found a signal that wasn’t password-protected.

“So it’s probably available in hospitals or veterinary clinics, but it’s not something the average person could pick up in the drugstore.”

My cell phone rang. I glanced at the display.

“My father,” I said. I let it ring one more time, then answered.

“Lucas? I know you’re busy with the murder investigation, but you need to come back to Portland. We have a situation.”

My father’s news, while troubling, was not unexpected. Nor did it require our immediate return. I told him we’d finish a few things and be back by mid-afternoon.

Paige and I had a lead we wished to pursue before leaving. While there was always the possibility Bobby Arnell had been a random victim killed by a stranger, one who saw the chupacabra “scare” as a way to satisfy a murderous urge, statistics show that random murder is rare. People kill because their target stands in their way—blocks them from achieving some

goal. The goals are equally predictable: satisfaction of the major drives of man—money, sex, power and survival.

The most obvious suspect was Arnell's first wife—Peter Arnell's mother. It was unlikely Peter would realize that his mother could recoup her lost child support payments through Arnell's estate. But his mother would know that. Or she could find out easily enough.

She could also know that her son was involved in the chupacabra attacks. It's my experience that parental ignorance is often merely an excuse. Parents suspect what their children are doing—be it drugs, unsafe sexual behavior or criminal acts. Whether they choose to pursue their suspicions to a conclusion is another matter. If Ms. Arnell *did* investigate her son's activities, perhaps she saw in them an opportunity to get away with murder.

Paige and I split up again. When I returned to the car just over an hour later, she was already there. We began the trip to Portland before sharing what we'd learned.

“Well, I didn't need an hour,” Paige began. “Took me ten minutes to find out whether Maggie Arnell could have had access to pentobarbital. According to your initial research, she worked as a home-care worker with the elderly, right?”

“Yes, but that wouldn't provide easy access to—”

She lifted a finger to stop me. “No, but how she became a home-care worker is the key. She's a registered nurse. Looks like a case of burnout after the divorce, but she still temps as a public health nurse. It might not give her easy access to pentobarbital, but she could get it if she wanted. She's known at the hospital. No one would question her hanging around, and she'd know where to find what she needs.”

Paige ratcheted her chair back, getting comfortable. “Access to pentobarbital, plus the medical know-how to use it and to make those cuts. I think we might have struck it lucky with our first shot.” She glanced at me, studying my expression. “Or not . . . What did you find?”

“That Ms. Arnell's claim of child-support negligence appears to have been exaggerated. In the five years since their divorce, Bobby Arnell has been a model father, financially speaking. He’s only defaulted on full payments once. In January of this year, his factory unexpectedly shut down due to a parts supply problem. It was closed for almost a month. Arnell, already struggling with post holiday bills, could only make partial payments for the next two months. He has, however, been repaying the loss, gradually but willingly. Currently, he owes his ex-wife less than a thousand dollars.”

“Not worth killing for. Though I guess it wouldn’t clear Peter Arnell's name. They could claim he heard his mother badmouthing his dad about support—and denying him things because of it—so he assumed his dad owed more.” She paused, thinking. “I still like Maggie Arnell, though. What about other sources of money? Life insurance, maybe, if he hadn’t remembered to remove her as beneficiary. Or if his kids were the beneficiaries, would she get control of their funds?”

“I have a call in to an insurance contact who’s looking for the policy details.”

She smiled. “One step ahead of me, then. I should’ve known. So now our next step is . . .”

Her smile faded as she realized there was no “next step.” We’d finished what we’d come to accomplish and couldn’t tarry any longer, not when a complication of some urgency had arisen in Geddes’s case.

It was time to go back to Portland . . . where my father was waiting.



Twelve

“Sean.” Benicio Cortez strode forward and clasped his hand. “Good to see you, son. And belated congratulations on your graduation last year. I hear you’re doing an excellent job for your grandfather already. Your uncles must be looking over their shoulders.”

As they waited for Sean’s grandfather in the lobby of the new Cortez Portland office, Benicio peppered Sean with questions. How was Bryce? Was he enjoying political science? Did Sean miss New York? Was he settled into his new condo in LA yet? Was he looking forward to having Bryce home for the summer?

The questions revealed a thorough knowledge of Sean’s public life, and suggested a keen interest in his well-being. It was flattering, of course, to think that such an important man took notice of you. That was the point.

Of all four Cabal CEOs, Benicio Cortez was the most popular. Popular in the purest sense of the word—that he was well liked by the general Cabal populace. When Sean’s grandfather entered a few minutes later, Benicio greeted him, then his bodyguards—by name, asking after

their families, even mentioning the names of their children. And the bodyguards—though they’d met Benicio many times before—never failed to give the desired response. They were flattered.

It was a lot of work for Benicio—knowing the details of his rivals’ organizations, and the lives of those people important in the organizations. But as Lucas had said once, it all came down to one principle: know thy enemy.

As Sean’s grandfather and Benicio feigned pleasant small-talk, Sean wondered, yet again, if he’d done the right thing, volunteering to come with his grandfather and help him.

Help him? Help yourself, you mean. The only reason you’re here is to protect your ass. You’re making sure the identity of Lucas’s “client” doesn’t get leaked.

No. For once, Sean could be fairly certain the nagging voice of his conscience was wrong. Showing up here meant he’d almost certainly run into Lucas and Paige, and while he didn’t think they’d “turn him in,” might not their very reaction give him away? One uneasy glance in his direction when asked about their “client” would be enough.

Or is that what you’re hoping for, Sean? Outed by someone else, someone you can blame if you get disowned?

No, he couldn’t do that. When he came out, he had to make the decision himself. If he was revealed to be Lucas’s client, he wouldn’t wait to see whether his grandfather followed that information to the logical conclusion—that Sean was gay. If his client-hood came out, so would he. Voluntarily.

“There’s a meeting room upstairs,” Benicio said. “But the elevator isn’t working reliably yet. I can have my men bring the furniture to a room down here, if that’s easier for you, Thomas.”

His grandfather glared at the poke at his age and growing infirmity. Benicio was almost twenty years his grandfather's junior and as hale and vigorous as a man half that age, and Thomas Nast never appreciated the reminder. Yet, when Benicio put it that way, as a considerate suggestion, he couldn't argue without sounding petty and sensitive. He could come back with a clever rejoinder . . . but that would require thinking of one first, and verbal jousting wasn't one of his grandfather's battle skills. Instead, he said he'd try the elevator and, if it failed, the steps would be fine.

As they headed for the elevator, Sean noticed a young woman just outside the main doors. She was walking past the window, scrutinizing the building.

Tall and slender, she wore a midriff-baring black T-shirt, red slim fitting jeans and high boots. Her dark hair was gathered back in a hastily tied knot. Oversized dark shades partially obscured her face but showed a strong, fine bone structure, one worthy of a runway model.

The young woman walked to the glass and put her face against it, like a kid peering through a store window. With a jolt, Sean realized who she was.

Leaving the men still talking, he hurried across the lobby and pushed open the door.

"Savannah."

Her face lit up in a broad grin. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same thing."

She didn't answer—just acted as if it hadn't been a question. As she walked in, Sean struggled to get over the shock of momentarily not recognizing his sister. He'd seen her just a few days ago and yet, meeting her out of context, seen at a distance in her dark glasses . . . He shook his head, thinking "My God, when did this happen?" as if she'd grown from child to woman overnight.

When he turned to his grandfather, he saw he wasn't the only one caught off guard. Benicio was smiling, clearly knowing who it was, but their grandfather, who hadn't seen Savannah in over two years, shot Sean a look as if to say "Who is this girl and why are you letting her into a Cabal office?"

Savannah strode past their grandfather's bodyguards, who stared after her with looks Sean didn't like seeing directed at his sixteen-year-old sister.

A few feet from Benicio and their grandfather, Savannah whipped off her sunglasses with a dramatic flourish and a blinding smile.

"Grandpa!"

Recognition hit Sean's grandfather, first in a slack-jawed look of shock, then in a glower.

"I am not your grandfather, Savannah," he said.

"Oh." Her blue eyes widened. "I didn't mean *you*, Mr. Nast."

She crossed to Benicio, who embraced her and whispered something in her ear, probably a rebuke for the jab at her grandfather, but it was said with a smile that would reassure Savannah he didn't mean it.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" Benicio asked.

"I have a late lunch today, then a spare period so I thought I'd swing by, and see if Cassandra was still here, maybe talk her into taking me out to eat. Somewhere nice. Cass might not eat, but she has great taste in restaurants." A wicked grin. "Expensive tastes."

"Well, I'm afraid Ms. DuCharme left a little while ago, but if you wait, Lucas and Paige will be here shortly. I'll take the three of you out for an early dinner." He smiled. "Somewhere suitably trendy, I promise. First, though, we have some business to attend to."

“No problem.” She glanced across the lobby. “So this is the new office, huh? Mind if I poke around? Make a nuisance of myself?”

Benicio gave her an indulgent smile. “Have fun.”

A moment later, as they stepped onto the elevator, Sean’s grandfather, still watching Savannah saunter off, turned to Benicio.

“You’re just going to let her ‘poke around’? Unsupervised?”

“Of course. Savannah has free run of all Cortez offices. She’s my son’s adopted daughter. As far as I’m concerned, that makes her family.”

A guileless smile at Sean’s grandfather, then Benicio stepped aside as his bodyguard pushed the second floor button and the elevator doors closed.

Lucas and Paige arrived shortly after, and the meeting became a three-way struggle for control of the case, and Spencer Geddes with it.

Sean’s grandfather argued that the West Coast was considered Nast territory, and this vampire’s brutal public attack while Sean and his colleagues were in nearby Tacoma was clearly a slap in the face of the Nast Cabal. Quite possibly, it might even be a taunt, or a declaration of war.

Benicio dismissed any “declaration of war” implications or even the possibility the vampire was thumbing his nose at visiting Cabal members. If a problem in Middleton belonged to anyone, it should fall under the jurisdiction of the Cortez Cabal, who had the closest offices—in Seattle and now here in Portland.

Lucas and Paige declared that it didn't matter whose territory it was—the case might involve a vampire and *didn't* involve a Cabal, so it fell to the interracial council for resolution.

Lucas said, “Cassandra and my father agreed earlier that the council—as represented by Paige and Cassandra DuCharme—will allow Spencer Geddes to remain here, in custody, so long as we are permitted unhampered access and he is not mistreated.”

Benicio's brows rose at the word “mistreated,” but when Lucas looked his way, as if challenging him to comment, he didn't.

“If this is council business,” Sean's grandfather said. “Then what are you doing here, Lucas? Interfering on their behalf?”

“I was hired—“

“Oh, that's right. The mysterious client, the one you won't allow anyone to contact, to confirm his existence.”

Sean tensed, but neither Lucas nor Paige's gazes flickered his way.

“All my clients are assured of complete confidentiality,” Lucas said evenly. “I cannot break that confidence.”

Not even if it meant losing control of the case. Losing control of Spencer Geddes. All to protect Sean's privacy.

Sean took a deep breath. “What if this client was asked to come forward?” He met Lucas's gaze. “If he understands that remaining quiet might hinder the case, he'd probably give up that right to confidentiality.

Lucas held his gaze with a steady, emotionless stare. “True. He might. And that would be his decision. But at this point I don't feel it would resolve this particular matter.” Lucas turned

to Sean's grandfather. "Am I correct, sir, in assuming you would not release your claim on Spencer Geddes if I produced my client?"

Sean's grandfather's expression answered for him, and Sean knew whatever he might say, his grandfather wasn't going to drop the matter.

"I wasn't bluffing or trying to divert their attention," Sean said afterward, when they'd left the two older men alone and gone searching for Savannah.

"I know," Lucas said. "Your offer was sincere, as was my response. Revealing yourself to be my client will eliminate one excuse for them, but they will only find another to take its place. I will continue my refusals. If you wish to tell them, I can't stop you, but I would ask that you ensure that in no way does anyone think I encouraged you to come forward. That would make supernaturals already nervous about employing me increasingly wary and justifiably so. If you have your own reason for wishing this information would be accidentally or forcibly revealed, please consider attaining that end in another way. It will not help this case."

Sean felt his cheeks heat. Lucas kept walking, his gaze forward. Paige glanced his way with a small, sympathetic smile.

They knew.

With that, he lost any hope that discovering his presence in a gay bar might not make his family jump to the obvious conclusion. As soon as they had cause to wonder, they'd look at his dating history for reassurance—and they wouldn't find it. He'd never been good at "playing straight." Rather than date women, he'd simply kept his romantic life private. Easy enough to do at college. Harder now that he was home and working full-time in the Cabal. By their

standards, it was time for him to marry. Not necessarily fall in love, but at least marry and produce heirs. Before long, he'd need to make a decision.

He glanced at Lucas. Here was maybe the only person who could understand his situation. Lucas was a Cabal son himself, but—being outside the life—he'd would have no personal stake in any decision Sean might make. He longed to ask Lucas's opinion on the matter, how he thought the news might be received. Yet before he could work up the courage, they rounded the basement corner, heading toward the security cells, and heard Savannah's voice ahead.

LUCAS

Thirteen

Savannah was talking to Kepler—the young security officer assigned with Reichs to guard Geddes. While nothing in Savannah’s body language suggested blatant flirtation, she was giving Kepler her undivided attention and that, it seemed, was encouragement enough.

Kepler was no more than Sean’s age and Savannah could—when she so desired—act mature enough to pass for eighteen, perhaps older. So Kepler’s attentions were probably not intentionally inappropriate . . . though that didn’t mean I was eager to encourage them.

“I see you’ve met Savannah,” I said as we drew up beside the pair. “My ward.”

“And my sister,” Sean said, injecting the words with the warning mine had lacked.

Kepler colored slightly, his gaze dropping as he inched toward the security ward door—and away from Savannah. “Mr. Nast. Mr. Cortez. I was just telling Miss, uh, Nast, er, Cortez . . .”

“Levine,” Paige said. “And yes, it’s horribly confusing. Better just stick to first names.” A smile for Kepler, then she turned to Savannah and arched an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

Kepler's eyes widened. Leave it to Paige to find a defter way to avert his attention. Flirting with a Cabal "daughter" might have an illicit allure, but from Kepler's expression he didn't feel the same about a high school student.

"I had lunch, then a spare," Savannah said.

Paige made a show of checking her watch. "Can't have lasted this long."

"No, but Benicio told me to stick around and go for an early dinner with you guys. Can't argue with Benicio Cortez, right?"

"You can try that explanation on your teachers." She handed Savannah her keys. "The car's out back. Put your knapsack in and we'll head out to eat when Benicio and Mr. Nast are done."

Plans for an "early dinner" quickly became promises of a late one. We left word with my father that we'd be at home, and he could pick us up whenever he was ready.

The negotiations over Spencer Geddes and the case were not going well. Thomas Nast refused to cede authority to my father. Even with the most mundane of cases, this would not have surprised me. The Nast and Cortez Cabal had been rivals for centuries. In the past few decades, that competition had hit its peak, the title of "victor" in constant flux. The Cortez Cabal was currently recognized as the most powerful on the continent, which left the Nasts to accept "largest" as a consolation prize. To surrender their claim over Spencer Geddes would be to acknowledge the Cortezes as their superiors, which Thomas Nast was understandably loathe to do.

Such things could usually be handled diplomatically, one side or the other surrendering control without loss of face. Here, though, the vampire angle added a dimension that ensured Thomas Nast would not back down willingly. So, by protocol, they had to consult the CEOs of the other two North American Cabals to attempt a resolution. If that failed, they'd call on the impartial inter-Cabal judges for full mediation.

Paige could have joined the fray, pressing her claim on behalf of the council. But as she put it: "Let 'em fight. Hopefully we'll have the case solved before they decide who it belongs to." Which was further proof, if I needed it, that I'd married a very smart woman.

We'd just arrived in our laneway when my insurance contact called back.

"Bobby Arnell had a quarter of a million dollar life-insurance policy," I said as we settled into the living room, where Cassandra had been reading the newspaper.

"Who's Bobby Arnell?" Cassandra asked.

"The dead guy," Savannah said, sitting beside Cassandra. "Pay attention."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand isn't too shabby," Paige said. "Not suspiciously high for a guy that age with a wife, an ex-wife, and four kids. But it would be a nice chunk of change. So who gets it?"

"His current wife is the sole beneficiary."

"Ah, the grieving widow . . . who was in quite a hurry to get her dearly departed into the ground." She paused. "She works in retail, doesn't she?"

"A grocery store clerk."

“Probably not much hope of a hidden medical background there, but let’s go see what we can find.”

I left Paige to her Internet research. After about thirty minutes, she called me upstairs.

“I’m on a roll for lucky breaks today,” she said as I walked in.

“Terri Arnell has a medical background?”

“Well, no, I’m not *that* lucky. But Middleton High has an incredible alumni site, one that should raise a few security concerns and definitely proves they have grads with way too much free time.”

She pointed at the screen as I sat down. “Meet Teresa—Terri—Arnell, nee Regis. We have her parents’ names, her date of birth, educational highlights, careers past and present, husband’s name—with a convenient link to *his* alumnus page—plus the name, birth dates and pictures of their daughter, their current address . . .” Paige shook her head. “An identity thief’s wet dream. For our purposes, though, the information only rules out leads. Terri doesn’t have any medical background. She graduated from high school and married Bobby the next year—she was nineteen, he was thirty.” Paige shuddered. “I really hope she wasn’t his kids’ baby-sitter. Anyway, all her regular jobs have been in retail, and her only listed volunteer activity is helping Bobby’s softball team.”

“Hmm.”

“My sentiments exactly. Far from promising. However—” She flipped to a page of graduate photos. “You saw a man at Terri’s house. The one who stopped you from speaking to her. Did he give you a name?”

“No. I barely had a chance to give mine. It was a rather abrupt dismissal. I presumed he was a family member . . .” I stopped, catching her look. “Or perhaps not.”

“Care to take a shot at finding him?”

I moved closer and started looking through the years surrounding Terri’s graduation. No one seemed familiar. Then, in the graduating class two years before hers, I saw someone who did—the morgue assistant. But he wasn’t Terri’s “friend,” so I was about to flip to the next year when I stopped.

“What was Terri’s maiden name again?”

Paige clicked on the bookmark. Siblings: one sister and one brother. I clicked the link for her brother, and it took me to Greg Regis—the morgue assistant. According to his profile, Regis had been enrolled in medical school, but hadn’t graduated. Now he worked in the hospital “with plans to resume his medical training.”

“That explains how Terri got Bobby’s body released so quickly,” Paige said.

“And it might explain why Regis was so eager to show me the photos ‘proving’ an animal attack, and to espouse an honest belief in the existence of the Chupacabra.”

We told Cassandra what we’d found.

“Good,” she said. “So now you’ll return to Middleton and prove this theory.”

“That, I fear, would be difficult and likely dangerous. We have no right to be solving the case. That’s the province of the Middleton police. All we can do is bring these links to their attention.”

“Which you have?”

“Through my contact at that the Middleton Herald. I explained my findings and asked his opinion. He was very intrigued by my discoveries, which he’s going to pass along to his contact at the police station.”

“And that will be enough?” Cassandra asked.

“I hope so.”

When my father finally *did* take us out to dinner, only Paige and I were in attendance. Paige had persuaded Savannah to eat earlier by insisting she couldn’t go out so late on a school night. I appreciated that. Having Savannah there when my father explained the Portland office would have been awkward. In her presence, I must be careful of the example I make, and I had a feeling tonight it wouldn’t be a good one.

My father knew Paige liked small, intimate bistros, so he’d selected the most exclusive one in Portland. Years ago, he’d learned that this favored political strategy—blatantly catering to a target’s tastes and desires—didn’t work on me. Yet when I fell in love with Paige, he’d found a way around that. I might refuse a trip to New York, but if he offered it *for* Paige, knowing how much she’d enjoy—and need—the break, how could I refuse?

When my father first began using this new technique, Paige had been flattered, as most people were, thrilled that he’d taken pains to get to know her. For her, it had been proof that my father was working toward a better relationship with me. I’d known better.

My dilemma then had been what to do about it. I’d decided to let Paige figure it out for herself. While my decision had been rooted in trust—in Paige’s astuteness and ability to draw

conclusions on her own—my silence had been a *betrayal* of trust only fully apparent after she found out. It did not, as I expected, take long. After the New York trip, she'd confessed her suspicions. When I'd been unsurprised by her conclusions, she'd realized I'd seen through my father's ploy all along.

Paige and I rarely argue. We might passionately debate some outside matter—the progress of an investigation, the interpretation of facts, or some aspect of ethics—but on a personal level, we rarely squabble, bicker or fight. It is as if, recognizing that we both have enough external conflict to deal with, we wish to keep this one arena of our lives free from petty arguments. But when Paige found out that she'd been, as she put it, “played for a fool” as I'd “stood by and watched,” I'd learned that trust truly is the cornerstone of a relationship and even the strongest one can be tested if you deliver a hard enough blow.

And so, in taking us out to a restaurant he knew Paige would love, my father committed a serious tactical error. He realized this when she ordered bisque and mineral water, and refused any wine or entrée, declaring she'd lost her appetite.

My father then switched strategies and began asking about Savannah, whether she'd decided yet to pursue art post-secondary and if so, did she have any schools in mind. Safe conversation, designed to reduce any building antagonism. Paige was having none of it. She deflected all queries to me then, when the entrées arrived, she said,

“You put Adam—and me—in a very awkward position, Benicio.”

My father opened his mouth, but she didn't give him a chance.

“You gave Adam information he knew Lucas should have, and asked him not to pass it on. His only option was to tell me. And my only option was to tell Lucas what he should have heard from your lips.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“No, I’m sure it wasn’t. You thought Adam was gullible—or stupid—enough to buy your story and keep his mouth shut. Your ‘intention’ was to use him to sweeten the package before you presented it to Lucas—the same reason you designed those ‘conjoined’ offices for us.”

My father blinked.

“Yes, we know who’s supposed to occupy that main office. Next time you have a secret, make sure whoever you have working on it *realizes* it’s a secret. But the point of those offices, like hiring Adam, was all part of your strategy. You knew Lucas would never accept a Cabal satellite office of his own. But one that offers employment for a newly graduated friend? Plus the chance to work with his wife?”

My father’s gaze shot to me. “That wasn’t—“

“Your intention,” I finished. “It never is.”

“I realize I may have handled this poorly, Lucas.”

“There is no way such a thing could be handled well.” I cut into my salmon. “You have built a satellite office near my home. I can mitigate the damage by managing it myself, which ethically I’d never do. Yet if I refuse, then I accept—on behalf of my family—the danger of having the Cabal so close.”

“That’s not—” My father caught my gaze. “I wouldn’t do that to you. This is merely a proposal—“

I arched my eyebrows. “A proposal? I believe, that is the step that precedes construction, not follows it.”

My father didn’t miss a beat. “True, but in today’s market, I could easily refit and resell the offices at a profit, which is exactly what I’ll do if you don’t wish to accept my offer.”

“Then I’d suggest you call your realtor.”

“I’m not asking you to manage a Cabal satellite office, Lucas. As Paige said, you’d never agree. This is something altogether different.”

“A new division for Cortez Corporation,” Paige murmured, remembering Ibsen’s earlier words.

My father nodded. “Yes, and that new division would be internal security. A Cabal watchdog. You’d continue to do exactly what you’re doing now, except from within the organization, where you’d have complete access to Cabal resources and our full cooperation.”

“That wouldn’t work,” I said.

“Why not? Police do it—policing their own. I recognize the capacity for abuse that is intrinsic in the Cabal structure. With power comes the temptation of abuse. I want to stop the worst offenders. The Cabals *must* do that, to be the kind of organization the supernatural community needs. And you’re the best person to help us reach that goal.”

I suppose he expected me to thrill to those words. Knowing that made the knife dig in all the deeper, breaking through the scabs of old wounds, and I was a teenager again, accidentally discovering that Cabals weren’t what he raised me to believe—a utopian communal organization for supernaturals, with the Cortez family as its beneficent leaders. I could hear my father’s voice again, dictating execution writs as casually as if he’d been ordering office supplies. Later, when we attempted reconciliation, I’d heard that same voice, lamenting the “abuses” within his organization, vowing to clean them up, as if they were a cancer that others had planted.

Today, those abuses continued, unabated. But now he was telling me *I* could change that. No longer a naïve child or an idealistic youth, I was a young man with delusions of knighthood—a condition best handled by satisfying those delusions.

Gotham is corrupt, son, and you're the only one who can save it.

"Paige?" I said, barely trusting myself to speak. "I think we should leave."

"I agree."

I led her out, my hand against her back. We had just stepped onto the sidewalk when my father strode up behind us, his bodyguards staying discreetly inside the glass doors.

"Lucas."

I kept walking, Paige beside me. My father fell into step on my other side.

"I know you're upset, but when you're calmer, I hope you'll reconsider. I'm trying to help. Think what this office would mean for you. A steady income, less travel and a chance to work with Paige, pursuing a goal you both believe in." He stepped in my path, then turned to face me. "This *is* what you want, isn't it?"

I stood there, gaping, unable to believe he'd so blatantly exploit my dreams and fears to satisfy his own agenda. I wanted to say something, but there was no calm or measured response I could make, no words that wouldn't come out as the tantrum of a hurt child.

Paige's warm fingers enveloped mine and she tugged my hand.

"Lucas? Please. Can we go? It's cold."

And, with that, she saved me from having to make any response. I could turn away from my father and busy myself taking off my coat and putting it around her shoulders, then lead her away.

My father didn't follow.

Once around the first corner, Paige tried to pass back my coat, but I refused. My blood was running too hot to need it.

We walked for three blocks in silence. Paige didn't try to "get me to talk about it." She never did, knowing I would if and when I was ready. Nor was there any danger of her trying to downplay the situation by convincing me that my father hadn't meant to manipulate me or, worse, that I was overreacting. Paige was the one person whom I could trust to understand my father's actions and how they would affect me. So we walked in silence, and it was enough to know she was there for me, as she always was. I don't think she'll ever know how much that means to me.

As we passed a small park, we took the path leading inside. I don't know if I led or she did. Perhaps neither, the choice being made by mutual understanding.

Back from the road, we found a gazebo sheltered by trees. Paige cast a questioning glance toward it, and I changed direction. Once inside, she gave a quick look around, then led me to the most secluded spot on the benches edging in the gazebo.

I sat, and she eased onto my lap, her skirt hiked up as she straddled me. Her lips move to mine and we kissed, her usual playfulness replaced by a sharper edge, an urgency I desperately needed.

Her hands soon slid down my shirt and undid my pants. She stroked me, her grip firm, bordering on rough, and everything else—every thought, every worry—fell away. When my fingers moved under her skirt to her panties, she worked them off. Then, after one last glance around, she lifted her skirt and arranged it to hide us, then slid down on me.

When we arrived home—via taxi—Savannah was asleep. Cassandra was still awake, which was to be expected. She slept little these days, a symptom of the condition she refused to acknowledge—her impending death.

She wanted to know whether I'd heard back from Sullivan at the Middleton Herald. I remembered then that I'd turned off my cell phone for dinner. When I checked, I found Sullivan had indeed called. The police had acted on his tip and must have already found the evidence they needed to support our theory because, as of midnight, Teresa Arnell, Greg Regis and a second man had been arrested.

I phoned my father. I had to. With Spencer Geddes's freedom at stake, I couldn't bow to a personal grudge. My father must have already been on a call because his voice-mail came on immediately. There was no need to speak to him—not chance they'd release Geddes before morning, so I left a message and told my father if he needed more information to contact me tonight. Otherwise, I'd be at the office by eight to oversee the vampire's release.

Cassandra was satisfied with this, so Paige and I headed upstairs. We engaged in more “physical therapy” before bed. By the time we finished, I could view the events of the evening calmly, too drained and sated to work up any emotional response.

“He's right,” I said, lying in the dark,. “That *is* what I want. What I dream of. Not within a Cabal, of course. But working together, in an office, here in Portland . . .”

Her fingers clasped mine.

I turned, seeing only the paleness of her face. “Do you know what I was thinking when I saw that office? It's perfect. I couldn't have designed it better myself.”

“You know what I was thinking?” She looked over at me. “With a shared office that big, we could fit in a futon and screen. Maybe even a bed.”

I laughed, and her hand tightened on mine.

“That’s the plan,” she said softly. “We’ve always said so. Our ‘someday’ goal. What we’re working toward. And we *will* get there. When we can. We have plenty of time.”

I was fortunate enough to fall straight to sleep . . . only to be awoken thirty minutes later by my cell phone. As I checked it, Paige stirred beside me.

“Sorry. It’s my father. Probably returning my call.” I felt on the night-stand for my glasses. “I’ll take it in the office.”

“You don’t need to leave,” she said through a yawn, snuggling back down into her pillow.

I answered with, “You got my message, I presume.”

“I did, but that’s not why I’m calling. Spencer Geddes escaped tonight. I need you down here.”

I sat up. “I certainly hope you don’t expect me to help look for him. In fact, in light of the arrests, I hope you *aren’t* going to look for him. Perhaps this isn’t the way you’d like his incarceration to end, and I’m sure you’ll suffer some embarrassment with the Nasts because of it, but Spencer Geddes is an innocent man.”

“No, Lucas, he isn’t. He killed—“

“Unless you have substantial evidence to prove that, and disapprove the Middleton police’s theory—”

“I don’t mean that man in Middleton. In his escape, Geddes killed one of the guards. Gus Reichs.”



Fourteen

Sean paused outside his uncle's hotel room door. It was almost one, well past "visiting" hours, but they'd all been downstairs in the lounge until past midnight, so it was unlikely his uncle had retired yet. Still, Sean moved closer to the door, listening for sounds of activity.

And hoping you won't hear any, right, Sean? If he's sleeping, you can go back to bed and forget this whole thing.

But he didn't want to forget it. He'd spent the evening working up the nerve, and downing more Scotch than usual to find it.

Drinking "more than usual" a lot these days, aren't we?

Sean ignored the voice. If alcohol would get him through this, he'd take it. An evening of sitting with his grandfather, uncles and cousins had given him time to see exactly what he'd be losing if things didn't work out as he hoped. He'd chosen to break the news first to Uncle Josef. Between his other two uncles and his grandfather, this was the person least likely to judge and most likely to help him. He'd lost his own son to the vampire, Edward, and they'd grown closer since then—son without a father and a father without a son.

Sean could hear no sounds from within, but he knocked anyway, lightly at first. When his uncle didn't answer, he swallowed and assessed his reaction. Relief mixed with disappointment, but heavier on the disappointment. So he knocked again, louder.

The door opened.

"Sean." His uncle smiled. "I was just in the bathroom. Come in."

"I'm sorry to come by so late."

"No, no. I still have some work to do before I can even think about sleep." He walked toward the minibar, waving Sean to a chair in the sitting area. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I'm fine, thanks. I—" Deep breath. "I came by to tell you that I know who hired Lucas Cortez to investigate the Middleton murder."

He paused, waiting for his uncle to ask *how* he knew. Instead, his uncle smiled, then walked over and thumped him on the back before taking a seat.

"I knew it. I told your grandfather. He *wanted* to believe it, but I don't think he dared."

"Wanted to believe . . .?"

"The reason you've been getting cozy with your half—sorry, *alleged* half-sister. I told your grandfather that you're a clever lad. What better way to keep an eye on Lucas Cortez and his activities than to befriend his ward, particularly when you have an excuse."

"You think I spend time with Savannah to spy on Lucas?"

His uncle raised his glass in a dismissive wave. "Spy is a harsh word. Keeping tabs on him. And it paid off this time. I'm not sure whether knowing the name of his client will help, but it certainly can't hurt."

"I'm the client, Uncle Josef."

His uncle stopped, glass in midair. Then he swore and smacked it down on the table. For a moment, his uncle said nothing, and Sean held his breath, watching his uncle's face for his reaction.

"We can work with this," his uncle said after a moment. "Your grandfather doesn't need to know the truth—"

"I think he does."

His uncle met his gaze, expression hard and unreadable. "No, Sean, he doesn't. Your father had a sentimental streak when he was younger. He had . . . ideas. About the treatment of witches, vampires, werewolves. He wasn't a bleeding heart like Lucas Cortez, but he argued for some changes. Your grandfather cured him of those ideas quickly enough."

Sean flushed. "My father has nothing to do with my choices. It isn't even a choice. I didn't wake up one morning and think—"

"Of course you didn't. You came by it honestly, that's all I'm saying. You read about this 'chupacabra' attack when we were in Tacoma, and you knew we'd see a possible vampire strike. So you hired Lucas to investigate, to ensure this vampire got a fair trial."

Sean eased back in his chair. "You think I hired Lucas because I read—"

"A problem easily solved. We'll admit to your grandfather that you're responsible for Lucas's investigation. Not because you hired him, but because you read that article and, in stopping by to check on Savannah, you mentioned it to them. Casually. But Lucas, always looking for a battle to fight, saddled up and rode out to save the vampires. Not your fault."

And here, Sean realized, was a solution to his dilemma. He could declare himself the cause of the investigation without coming out. A few days ago, he'd have seized the chance. But now? It wasn't an option now. The end was close, and he was determined to get there.

“I hired Lucas because I was there, at the scene of the crime. I found the body, and I didn’t want anyone to know it.”

His uncle frowned. “Because you didn’t want to get involved? I can see that . . .”

“No, because of where the body was found. In a gay bar.” Sean paused, then pushed on, forcing the words out. “I’m gay.”

His uncle lifted his glass and took a long drink. His expression was somewhat guarded, but mainly just thoughtful.

“So it’s true then,” he murmured after a long moment of silence.

“You knew?”

His uncle laid the glass down. “There have been rumors for years, Sean. Even when you were young, when your cousins were ogling girls at the beach, you barely bothered to look. How old were you when you stopped dating altogether? Sixteen, seventeen? Do you think no one noticed?”

Sean felt his hands trembling on the chair arms. Trembling with relief. All this time, they’d known, and nothing had changed. He’d been a fool to hide it.

“So Granddad knows?” he said.

“Of course not. Nor will he.”

“But— I can’t—”

His uncle leaned forward. His blue eyes went ice cold, like his father’s when he’d been giving a subordinate an order he didn’t want questioned. “What you do in your personal life is your own business, Sean. You will not make it the family’s business. You will do what every Nast son is expected to do. You will marry, and you will produce heirs. This is your responsibility to your family.”

“My responsibility? To trick some woman into marrying me?”

“No woman needs to be ‘tricked’ into marrying a Nast. You have wealth and power. I’m sure you’ll have no problem finding a wife, even if you tell her the truth.”

“But I can’t— I’m not attracted to women. Not at all. I can’t—”

“We all have to do things we don’t like.”

Sean could only stare, unable to believe what he was hearing.

His uncle patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. “I’ll get you that drink now.”

As Sean sat there, stunned into silence, someone knocked. It was his grandfather’s executive assistant.

“Sir?” She saw Sean across the room. “Oh, good, you’re both here. You’re both needed in Mr. Nast’s room as soon as possible. Something’s happened at the Cortez office.”

His uncle promised they’d be there. As he closed the door, Sean’s shock finally faded, and he stood.

“I’m sorry if you don’t agree with my choices, Uncle Josef, but—”

His uncle lifted a hand. “Before you continue, Sean, I’d like you to remember that you aren’t the only one affected by your ‘choices.’ Imagine what your grandfather will think if he learns you found this victim in Middleton. A Cabal son, tripping over a vampire kill? Hardly a coincidence, I’m sure.”

“Yes, it was, because it *wasn’t* a vampire kill.”

“According to who?” His uncle’s face hardened. “Vampires are a threat to us all, Sean. I know that better than anyone. Give me the excuse, and I’ll have your grandfather believing he almost lost another grandson to the beasts.”

“That’s not—”

“Fair? Let’s talk about fair, Sean. Would it be fair for you to do this to your family? To rob your grandfather of another grandson? How will Bryce cope without you to guide him? He doesn’t have what it takes to be in business. Without you, he’ll fail. You’d do that to them for the sake of personal gratification?”

“Personal grat—?”

“Enough.” His uncle strode across the room. “We have business to attend to.” At the door, he glanced over his shoulder and met Sean’s gaze. “This conversation is over, and I never want to resume it. Is that understood?”

His uncle left before Sean could answer.

LUCAS

When we arrived in the parking lot, a dark-haired man the size of a linebacker stood in the delivery door alcove, waiting for us.

“Hey, Troy,” Paige said. “How are you doing?”

He shrugged. “Used to work with Reichs when I was back in general security. Good guy.” He glanced at me. “Your dad’s inside. Gotta go around. The back door’s part of the crime scene.”

“Care to fill us in?” I said as we circled to the front.

While I was certain my father would reiterate the story, Troy could be counted on to provide the plainest, least biased version.

According to Troy, he and his partner, Griffin, had accompanied my father back to the office after dinner last night. They’d gone upstairs so my father could make a few calls from the secured land-line. Before leaving, my father went downstairs to check with the guards. They’d discovered Reichs dead in Geddes’s empty cell and found Reich’s co-guard, Kepler, regaining consciousness by the back door. Geddes was gone.

“What does Kepler say?” I asked as we reached the front door.

“Not much. He’s pretty confused. Banged up his leg, too. Your dad has him resting on a cot upstairs while he flies in a Cabal doctor.”

My father met us just inside the door. As he retold the story, Troy fell back to give us privacy.

“While this is a tragedy, it’s a tragedy of the Cabal’s making,” I said when my father finished. “You confined a vampire for a crime, with absolutely no proof that he had committed it. You failed to release him when others were charged with that crime. Geddes would have no reason to trust the Cabals after that, so when he saw a chance to escape, he seized it, and one of your men lost his life. A tragedy, but I’d suggest man-hours allocated to hunting him could be better spent on an internal review of the situation.”

“Right now, finding Spencer Geddes isn’t at the top of anyone’s agenda. In fact, I’d say the Nasts would rather we didn’t look at all. The first thing they did on hearing the news was to call an emergency Cabal conference to vote on the St. Cloud proposal.”

Paige looked over sharply. “Reichs mentioned that. What is it?”

“The St. Clouds have proposed declaring all vampires dangerous offenders, and threats to Cabal security. All vampires living on American soil would be given thirty days to evacuate. Then—” He paused. “Those who remain would be executed.”

I would like to say that the details of the St. Cloud proposal came as a shock. They didn’t.

I’d heard rumblings of similar ideas even before Edward’s rampage. Afterward, the rumbles had surged to roars, but only temporarily, before my father and others managed to stifle them and deflect attention to other matters.

To the council and the vampire community, such talk had been temporary fear-mongering, too ludicrous to take seriously. Yes, Edward had killed innocent supernaturals, but it happened all the time. Three years ago, a disgruntled Cabal employee had set fire to a Cabal satellite office and killed eight coworkers, but no one had suggested exiling and executing all half-demons.

Yet vampires were different. Like werewolves, they were inherently dangerous. Like werewolves, there were so few of them that an exile could be enforced. But rarely did anyone suggest that werewolves be exiled or exterminated.

The excuse for the different treatment was that one needed to kill and the other didn't. Vampires fed off people and had to take a life a year to prolong their own existence. For werewolves, bloodlust was merely an extension of their predatory natures, and could be controlled. The werewolf Pack did not condone man eating, and promptly punished offenders. So, while the Cabals might fear werewolves, they had little reason to act against them.

The deeper reason for the prejudice, though, was that vampires posed a theoretical threat to Cabal power. Unlike werewolves, vampires resented being kept out of Cabal life. They had an innate sense of entitlement, reinforced by their semi-immortality and invulnerability. Shouldn't they, not sorcerers, stand at the apex of the supernatural world?

Most prominent vampires, like Cassandra and Aaron, had no interest in running a supernatural corporation, so the threat of a vampire uprising remained unrealized. Yet a threat it remained. Here was the perfect opportunity to dispel it . . . and few supernaturals would complain.

The other two Cabals were expected in Portland by dawn. That meant Paige and I had only those few hours to investigate before they swept us aside. While we had little hope of exonerating Spencer Geddes, we might at least be able to reconstruct the events before the Cabals did their own creative reconstruction.

My father gave us full access to Kepler and the crime scene, along with the services of the crime scene technician he was flying in with the doctor. This was no sign of apology on my father's part—he did not support the St. Cloud proposal, so he had little reason to block me.

The doctor and crime scene technician arrived shortly thereafter. The technician was a shaman named Simon, a man I'd worked with before, which smoothed the process.

Reichs's body had been found inside Spencer Geddes's cell. He'd been bitten, but that wasn't the cause of death, which didn't surprise us. It takes time to drain a man's blood, and Geddes could hardly afford to do that with Kepler presumably nearby. Geddes would have only bitten Reichs to render him unconscious. After killing Reichs, Geddes had gone upstairs, encountered Kepler, disabled him with a bite, then fled.

All the evidence Simon found supported this theory, including the bite marks in Reichs's neck. This was no repeat of the chupacabra killing, a "bloodthirsty monster" blamed for a human attack. Spencer Geddes was guilty. But there were still questions.

How had Geddes managed to get Reichs into the cell in the first place? If the bite disabled Reichs, why strangle him? If he felt the need to kill Reichs, why not Kepler? Was there an element of self-defense? Of provocation? If there was anything to be said in Geddes's defense, I needed to find it—quickly.

The doctor had examined Kepler and confirmed the bite on his neck did--like Reichs's--come from a vampire. Kepler's leg, while badly bruised, did not appear to be broken, so there was no need to fly him to Miami for further examination. We were then free to interview him.

We started with inquiries into Kepler's health and condolences on the death of his superior officer. Paige had brought coffee and a pastry assortment from down the road, and by the time we launched into our questions, Kepler's initial nervousness had vanished.

"This is what I was doing when Geddes escaped," he said, lifting his coffee cup. "Caffeine run, probably from the same place. Mr. Cortez lets us do that, as long as one person stays with the prisoner, and stays away from the cell."

"Was there a scheduled time for your coffee runs?" I asked.

"Nah, just whenever we needed the boost or the break."

"You say you were warned to stay away from Spencer Geddes when the other was gone."

"Uh-huh. To avoid being hypnotized . . . or whatever it is vamps do."

"Do you know why Reichs would break that rule?"

Kepler dropped his gaze. "No, sir."

A lie, but I pushed onward. "And then you returned . . ."

"I came in through the back door. He was right there, like he'd heard me. I went for him, but he pushed me over a pile of boxes and that must be how I hurt my leg. I don't remember. Next thing I knew, I was waking up in the back hall when you guys found me."

"Do you have any idea why Geddes would kill Reichs? He'd disabled him and could have simply taken his gun for self-defense."

“Well, sir, he is a vamp. They don’t like us. He probably killed Reichs just because he could. Maybe revenge for getting locked up.”

“Then why not kill you, too?”

As I held Kepler’s gaze, he reddened. “I—I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, sir. Reichs was a great guy. He taught me a lot. He just . . . He didn’t like vampires. A lot of us don’t.”

“But Reich’s didn’t bother to hide it,” Paige murmured, and I knew we were both remembering his comments the night they captured Geddes.

“Did Reichs make his feelings known to Geddes?” I asked.

Gaze down again, Kepler nodded. “He liked to taunt him. He told him about the St. Cloud proposal. Told him it didn’t matter what you guys found, the Cabals planned to execute him. Geddes would get so mad . . . It scared me, sir. I wondered if I should tell anyone, but I didn’t want to get Reichs in trouble.”

Kepler went silent and I let him.

After a moment, he said, “I think that’s why Reichs was near the cell. He knew it made me uncomfortable—teasing the vampire like that--so he was doing it while I wasn’t there. That’s probably why Geddes killed him too. Reichs pushed him too far.”

A few minutes later, my father came in to tell us the St. Cloud’s plane had landed. The meeting would begin in an hour. Now it was time to take a step we both dreaded: telling Cassandra.

Paige phoned and told her about the St. Cloud proposal. If Cassandra was shocked or even surprised, she gave no sign and I suspected she was neither. Cassandra was adroit enough to know such a threat had always been possible, and that raging over it now wouldn’t solve the

problem. She wanted to be at the meeting of course, which we'd foreseen, and my father had agreed to.

Before Paige signed off, she said, "Quick question. We're trying to figure out how Spencer Geddes's cell got opened. We know Reichs was alone with him at the time and may have approached the cell. Could Geddes have charmed him into opening it?"

Paige listened to Cassandra's answer, interjecting a few "uh-huh" and "I see" responses.

When she hung up, she turned to me. "Short answer? No."

I nodded. "Because vampires charm, not by hypnotizing their prey, but by inducing a highly suggestible state. Meaning if Reichs had no desire to open that door, Geddes couldn't make him do it."

"Begging the question: what would ever possess a guy to open the door for a pissed off vampire?"



Fifteen

Sean sat at the meeting table between his uncle and his grandfather and, at that moment, it was the last place he wanted to be.

His uncle's words burned in his gut. *Suck it in and do your duty to the family.* As incredibly insensitive as those words were, his uncle had made one valid point. Leave the Cabal and Sean would hurt the two people he cared about most: Bryce and his grandfather.

With his uncle's words, any fantasy of his family accepting his sexual orientation had evaporated. They already knew and they *did* accept it . . . as long as he didn't let it stand in the way of his duties to marry and have children. The need to provide heirs was just an excuse--any gay man could still have children via surrogacy. But Nasts had to uphold the Cabal culture of machismo. Being gay wasn't an option.

So Sean was trapped between two impossible choices: abandoning his brother and grandfather or living a lie. This wasn't a choice he could make today, or even this month, perhaps not for years. Yet he knew one thing. He wouldn't play the hypocrite. If they wanted to pretend he wasn't gay, he wouldn't flaunt it, but nor would he date women and marry.

Things would eventually come to a head and he'd have to choose. For now, he'd start carving his own path, making the decisions that were right for him rather than the ones that would raise the fewest waves. In some ways, he'd already been doing that—as with his relationship with Savannah—but he'd no longer feel guilty or torn.

The meeting got off to an explosive start a few minutes later when Lucas and Paige joined them. The grumbles rose to ill-concealed gasps of surprise and grunts of outrage when Cassandra DuCharme followed them in. Their neighbors promptly educated the few who hadn't met her after the Edward and Natasha problem, and a fresh round of shock and outrage surged.

Cassandra's gaze lighted on Sean's with a faint frown. He'd met her several times, and always got the same look, as if she wasn't sure whether she should know him. He smiled and she nodded, favoring him with a faint, regal smile.

Frank Boyd pushed to his fate. "This is most inappropriate—"

"I know," Cassandra said. "It's rude of me, and I apologize. I'm sure it's much simpler to condemn a race when one of them isn't sitting in the room."

Benicio rose and pulled out a chair on his left as he gestured for Lucas and Paige to sit at his right. Cassandra took her place, and removed a leather bound notebook from her purse, then a silver pen. When she looked up to see everyone watching her, she smiled.

"Please, proceed. Consider me merely an observer. I'm most interested to hear what you have to say on this matter."

And so the discussion began, not flowing and rising to the fever pitch of impassioned debate, but limping along. It was indeed harder to condemn all vampires when one was sitting there listening. Especially when that vampire wasn't a belligerent asshole like Spencer Geddes,

but the sort of attractive, well-mannered woman you could imagine gracing the halls of your own organization.

When Lionel St. Cloud's nephew, Phil, began reading his prepared notes on vampire behavior, his gaze kept shooting to Cassandra, clearly not as confident in his facts as he'd been when he wrote them.

"May I?" Cassandra said. "I believe I'm something of an expert on the subject."

Phil nodded and Cassandra began a thorough, dispassionate explanation of vampire life: their powers, their feeding habits and their required annual kill. Even the last she explained with no apology or emotion, as if it was a simple fact of her life. When asked how they chose their victims, her answer was equally honest and neutral. Vampires ranged from those who used their annual kill to stop criminals, to those who selected the elderly and ill, to those who just picked random strangers.

Vampires killed people. An indisputable fact. Move along. So they did.

Discussion then swung back to known cases of vampire attacks on Cabal members. The St. Clouds and Sean's uncle trotted out every suspected case in the last two hundred years. A few weeks ago, Sean would have stayed silent—uncomfortable but silent. But not today.

Sean signaled for the floor, then stood. "And how does that compare, per capita, to half-demon attacks? Or sorcerer attacks? Maybe we can break it down further, save ourselves having to punish all vampires. Is it the women? The whites? The middle-aged vampires?"

"Sean," his uncle warned under his breath.

"No, this is silly. It's prejudice and fear and we all know it. Even if we knew that fifty percent of white, middle-aged female vampires will kill a Cabal employee in her lifetime, how does that justify punishing all of them?"

“And there is another point to consider,” Benicio said, his voice soft but carrying through the room. “While Sean makes a valid case from a humanitarian standpoint, perhaps this is one you’ll find more appealing. The political ramifications of exiling all vampires. First, it will damage our relations with Cabals in other countries. We don’t want vampires here, so we send them there. Beyond that, let’s think this through.” He eased back in his chair. “We exile all vampires. If I’m a werewolf, that would make me nervous. While a vampire has the advantage of invulnerability, their physical threat is minimal compared to that of a werewolf—particularly a werewolf fearful of losing his territory. So we’ll need to exterminate them next, to eliminate that threat. Now who is a danger? A powerful sorcerer living outside the Cabal is always threat, so perhaps we’ll consider them next. With each step, we anger a larger group and reduce the overall supernatural population. Hardly good business sense.”

And so the debate continued. Several people seem to be swaying from their original pro-proposal stance. While Sean would love to believe his speech had some effect, he knew Benicio Cortez’s argument—the coldly political one—would carry more weight.

“One thing we’re forgetting,” his uncle said, “is the need for decisive action. If we hesitate, these vampires will—”

A discreet rap at the door. One of Benicio Cortez’s bodyguards poked his head in.

“Sorry, Mr. Cortez, but—“

Savannah slipped past the guard, who made only a token attempt to stop her. The sophisticated young woman Sean had seen the day before had vanished, replaced by the Savannah he knew better—wearing sneakers and jeans, her hair in a ponytail, no makeup. Her face was flushed, eyes anxious. Sean pushed his chair back.

“Sorry,” she said. “But I have to talk to Paige. It’s about the murder.”

Sean, closest to her, started to rise. His uncle laid a hand on his arm, a clear warning that, while Sean could privately acknowledge Savannah, he should not do so here.

Sean slipped from his uncle's grasp and went to his sister. Paige and Lucas were right behind him.

"I think I know why that guard went into Geddes's cell," Savannah whispered, too low for the others to hear. "And I think it's my fault."

LUCAS

Cassandra stayed in the meeting room, not giving the Cabal heads a chance to debate without her.

Paige led Savannah past the bodyguards assembled in the hall. Troy leaned over to murmur something to her as they passed, then pointed, directing her to a room where we could speak in private.

As Sean closed the office door behind us, Savannah said to Paige, “I heard you and Cassandra talking about whether Geddes could have charmed the guard. After she left, I remembered something. When I was talking to that other guard--the younger one--he was going on about vampires, trying to impress me with what he knew. Crap you’d find in pulp novels. A supernatural—even a half-demon—should know better.”

“So you set him straight,” Paige said, crossing her arms.

“Hey, if someone’s that ignorant, it’s not my job to straighten him out.”

“You played along.”

“Well, kind of. Yeah. I guess so. Anyway, he started going on about how he’d heard vampire saliva was an aphrodisiac that vampires used to seduce their victims. Stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, but he was right into it, trying to, uh—” She glanced at Sean and me.

“Flirt,” Paige supplied.

“Um, right.” They exchanged a look. “Flirt. It was so lame. I mean, like I’m going to get all worked up talking about vampire spit. So I . . . you know . . .”

“Played along. And played it up. Playing him for a fool.”

“Kind of. I told him he was right. We got talking about how you could collect the saliva, waiting until the vampire was asleep and using a swab.” She looked at Paige. “It was a stupid thing to do. I just got carried away.”

“Seeing how far you could take it.”

Her cheeks colored. “Yeah. But I never figured he’d actually do it. He was terrified of vampires. I guess he must’ve told the other guard about it.”

“Who decided to collect some himself.”

We split up again. Aaron was arriving from Atlanta in an hour, so I’d meet him at the airport, then we’d head to Seattle and see whether we could find Geddes or some sign of where he’d gone. His story would answer our remaining questions . . . if we could persuade him to give it.

Sean had offered to help, so I’d take him along. Meanwhile, Paige would escort Savannah to school by taxi, then return to the house where she and Cassandra would review our notes, looking for any missed leads.

They left immediately. Sean had to speak to his grandfather first. While I waited, I wandered to the second floor and ended up, not surprisingly, in the office meant for Paige and me.

Last night, Paige had said we were working toward this. True, this was our goal, our shared dream--an office and a full-time job investigating the cases we were passionate about. Yet of the two of us, only one was actually pursuing that goal.

Paige was what one might call financially comfortable, particularly for her age. Not only did she run a lucrative business, she'd inherited the estate of her mother. If I delved into our financial records, I knew I'd find a "Cortez Winterbourne Investigations" fund, alongside the emergency fund, the retirement fund and Savannah's college fund. True, we'd earmarked the money Sean gave Savannah for college, but Paige didn't trust the Nasts not to find a way to get it back, so she'd started setting aside money for Savannah. Paige was meticulous when it came to planning for our future, determined that none of our dreams—hers, mine, or Savannah's—should wither from want of money.

And my "Cortez Winterbourne Investigations" fund? It existed solely in my head, topping my list of "things I'll do when I get ahead" . . . which never seem to happen. Paige wouldn't care. But it mattered to me. Like Paige, I was a doer, not a dreamer, and as I looked into that office, I needed to be able to say "we'll get here" with all Paige's conviction. But I couldn't.

How much longer would Paige be willing to stand on the sidelines? To be my untiring cheerleader? How much longer would her eyes light up when I won another pro bono case . . . while she labored to construct websites for demanding clients, knowing her skills and passion would be better spent on more deserving causes?

In law school, I'd seen this, husbands and wives toiling at substandard jobs to put their spouses through school. Then it would be their turn. I was like the floundering D student who'd never pass the bar, but kept plugging along, blinded and selfish, as my spouse supported my dreams.

How much longer would Paige wait for "her turn?"

I wanted to give her this office.

Oh, it's too big, she'd say. Too fancy. But even as she was figuring out how to trim costs, what rooms we could rent out, she'd be dreaming of the day when it would all be ours, when we'd need all this space.

I could see her walking through our office, pointing out what would go where, talking about but about how we'd divide the cases—hers, mine and ours—about what staff and supplies we'd need. Overwhelmed by the work to come, but absolutely in her element.

At a sound behind me, I spun, certain it was Paige. I flushed at being caught here, daydreaming.

"I was just—" I began, then saw my father. "I was looking for Sean. Have you seen him?"

"No, but—"

"I should find him. We have work to do."

"A moment, Lucas, please." He laid his hand on my arm. "I know you think I'm trying to trap you with this—" A wave around the office. "But I'm not. I'm honestly trying to help."

I wanted to believe that. And there was the problem. I wanted to believe it so much that I couldn't trust myself to judge the situation clearly. "I'm sorry, Father, but I need to—"

His grip tightened. "Things aren't working out as you'd hoped with Paige. You're married to a strong, independent young woman who can take care of herself. Which is fine . . . except

you're just as independent and don't want her taking care of you too, no more than she'd want you taking care of her."

"It's a temporary problem, which I intend to resolve—"

"How? Take a full-time job at a law firm? You'd be miserable . . . and Paige wouldn't allow it. Start charging all clients, regardless of their ability to pay? Refuse those who can't? You'd betray yourself and then you wouldn't be the man Paige fell in love with. Whatever drives you to do this, I planted the seed. I recognize that and I want to help. This is my solution."

"Join the Cabal? Become part of the problem?"

"No, become the solution. You'd be an independent division—"

"But *within* the Cabal structure."

"Only financially, and with no obligations placed on your allotted budget. You'd have full power to prosecute offenders within the Cabals. And you can continue to take outside paying clients—that's how you'll subsidize your operating budget and turn a profit. With this office, you'll have the facilities and the staff to pursue and attract new clients. That is what you and Paige had in mind, isn't it?"

"How many supernaturals in trouble with a Cabal will hire a company with Cortez Cabal on the letterhead?"

"We'll be more discreet than that, of course."

"Which will look like deception when they find out who's underwriting the firm."

My father didn't even blink. "Your reputation will overcome that, Lucas. And you'll have the option to buy the business from me whenever you wish."

There it was. The antidote to the pain of delayed gratification. Have what I wanted—this office—today and make no payments until . . . whenever.

I didn't need a crystal ball to foretell the future of this deal. I'd take the office with every intention of buying it in a few years. But then I'd see my paying clientele dwindle, frightened off by the specter of my new Cabal association. My work would be primarily pro bono and Cabal assignments, meaning we'd see no profit . . . and as the business grew, the price tag would too, flying beyond reach.

"No, papá," I said. "I understand that you're trying to help. But this is a problem that I need to resolve myself."

I found Sean looking for me. From his expression, his grandfather hadn't been pleased with his decision to accompany me, but he didn't broach the subject so neither did I.

On the drive to the airport, we discussed Cabal life or perhaps more "non-Cabal" life, what it was like to be a Cabal's son living outside the organization. I suspected he was trying to get a sense of what it might be like for him, should he be forced into that situation, but again I didn't ask, just answered his questions as honestly as I could.

As we arrived, my cell phone rang. It was Sullivan from the Middleton Herald. Terri Arnell's boyfriend had cut a deal, implicating the others and providing evidence. So the case was officially solved . . . and it was disheartening to realize how little that mattered now, how far things had escalated beyond the murder of a factory worker in Middleton, Washington.

Aaron's plane was delayed. As Sean bought coffees, I was left alone with my thoughts and, as hard as I tried to turn them to the questions surrounding Reichs's death, they kept sliding back into forbidden territory: the Portland satellite office.

Was there any way Paige and I could manage this without becoming employees of the Cortez Cabal? How much money had Paige put aside? I had no idea—perusing our finances only depressed me as I realized how little I'd contributed. Would she have enough to make a down payment on the business? Would he sell it, as he'd claimed? Or would he set the price so high we'd never afford a down payment? And what if we *could* make it? Who would have to make the monthly payments while the business struggled to its feet? Paige of course, working even harder on her web design—meaning this was not the solution I wanted.

This time the sacrifices and risks had to be mine.

Would my father allow some other arrangement? Could we rent the building from him? Perhaps we could agree to provide some contracted Cabal security investigation work to insure the steady income needed to pay the rent. I knew this would be a slippery slope that would end with me immersed in the Cabal, as my father wanted. But if it was the only solution . . .

No. It wasn't. The answer came to me so fast I inhaled sharply. Yes, that *was* a solution, one I'd trained myself never to consider. But under the circumstances, it was a compromise I was ready to make.

The question was: would my father agree? If he didn't, it would prove that this had all been a ploy to lure me into the business. And that, I had to admit, worried me more than anything. I wanted him to be telling the truth . . . yet experience called me a fool for entertaining the notion.

As Sean returned with the coffees, I took out my cell phone to call Paige. I told myself I was merely informing her of Aaron's delay, but I knew better.

When I first tried, a system error prevented a call from going through. I was searching for a pay phone when Cassandra answered.

“Cassandra, it’s Lucas. I’m afraid Aaron’s flight has been delayed, but should arrive in the next hour. Is Paige there?”

“She’s heading back to the Cabal office to check on something about the case.”

I frowned. “Is she hoping to meet Simon there? She knows they were planning to go to breakfast after we left. They won’t be back yet.”

“I have no idea *what* her plans are. She was all excited about some discrepancies in the case notes. Something about coffee cups and taunting. You know how Paige is. She gets off on something and no one can understand her, let alone stop her.”

“Coffee cups and . . .?”

“Taunts. Apparently the young guard said Mr. Reichs was taunting Spencer Geddes, and Paige asked me if Spencer complained about it.”

“Did he?”

“No, and I can’t imagine he wouldn’t. God knows he complained about everything else.”

“Meaning Kepler lied. And coffee . . . Kepler said he’d gone for coffee, but I’ll wager Paige couldn’t find any mention of coffee cups in Simon’s report of the crime scene.”

“I suppose so. All I know is that she tried to call you, but couldn’t get through.”

“And now she’s heading to the office . . . knowing the only person there is Kepler himself.”

“Going to confront him? Surely Paige wouldn’t be so—” Cassandra stopped. “How far are you from that office?”

“I’m on my way.”

LUCAS

Sixteen

I phoned Paige's cell, but only got Cassandra again. Paige had been in such a rush to get a cab that she'd left her phone behind.

I would like to believe that Paige would never do anything as foolhardy as confront a potential killer in an empty building, but she could be somewhat . . . impetuous. She'd been fighting this part of her nature since we met. But it was a struggle.

She would see Kepler as a handicapped opponent, still weak and injured. Perhaps she hadn't concluded he could be the killer, and merely viewed him as an unreliable witness. If she thought he could help exonerate Spencer Geddes—and foil the St. Cloud proposal—she might behave . . . impetuously.

I now doubted it had been Reichs who'd tried to collect vampire saliva. I also suspected it hadn't been Geddes who killed Reichs. Geddes had done the expected thing, rendered his two assailants unconscious with bites. Then Kepler recovered first and killed Reichs. As for his

motive, the possibilities were endless—a personal vendetta, paving the way for promotion, starting a Cabal-vampire war . . .

My father had promised to leave the rear door open for us, should we need to return to investigate. I slipped inside, then cast a light spell to guide me to the back through the back halls to the stairs and up to the second level.

The door to Kepler's room stood open, his bed empty. As I paused, I caught the faint sound of Paige's voice, sharp with irritation. I recast my blur spell and eased along the wall to the closed meeting room door. Her voice came from within.

An unlock spell was on my lips, but the handle turned. I cracked the door open. Then I started a binding spell, ready to kick the door open and cast it—

My father's voice, answering Paige, his words, like hers, indistinct through the heavily soundproofed walls. Wild thoughts galloped through my head--my father setting up the vampire's downfall while outwardly arguing it, a Machiavellian scheme that—

Cold metal pressed against the back of my neck.

“Don't move,” Kepler whispered.

I cast the rest of the binding spell but knew, even as the words left my lips, that I'd waited to long. I quickly started a recast—

“Say one more word, and I'll pull this trigger. Don't think I won't.”

Kepler's voice was pitched high, as if trying to convince himself. The gun barrel trembled. The only thing more dangerous than a determined gunman is a nervous one. I swallowed the spell.

“We're going to turn around and head for the stairs.”

I knew to play along and let him lower his guard.

“Don’t think I won’t kill you,” Kepler said as we reached the stairwell, though I’d done nothing to require the warning. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

He gave a high, shaky laugh, pushed open the door with his foot, and guided me through with the gun.

“You mean that, having killed Reichs, you’re quite prepared to take another life,” I said as we started down the stairs.

An obvious ploy to get him talking and distracted. But few criminals can resist the urge to explain. It’s as if they’re waiting for the opportunity to unburden themselves, to either impress me or win my sympathy.

“It was Reichs’s fault,” he said as we started down the stairs. “He was supposed to be out getting coffee. The vampire was asleep, and I’d slipped in to . . . get something from him. But then Reichs came back early and freaked out.”

“Which woke Geddes.”

“Goddamn it, he got me all confused. Reichs. He was yelling at me to get out, and then the vampire shoved me into the chair and I hurt my leg and was trying to get out . . . Then he attacked Reichs.”

Intent on saving himself. Training forgotten. Comrade forgotten. An inexcusable mistake for a security officer.

“Then bit me and I passed out.”

“But you woke first.”

Kepler pushed open the door and prodded me out. “It was all his fault. Reichs. I was going to lose my job, probably even be charged, all because he came back early and thought he needed to rescue me from a vampire.”

“A vampire who hadn’t touched you,” said a voice behind us. “And probably wasn’t planning to.”

Kepler whipped us around, gun still to my neck, as Cassandra advanced.

“S—stay back, lady,” Kepler said. “This is none of your business. I’ve got a gun.”

“So I see,” she said, still walking.

Kepler swung the gun from me and fired at Cassandra. The bullet hit her in the chest and she faltered, grimaced, and continued her advance. Kepler’s finger tightened on the trigger, then stopped, caught in a binding spell.

My shock spell knocked him off his feet. I pinned him with his hands behind his back, then wrenched the gun from his fingers.

The stairwell door flew open and my father and Paige shot through.

“The situation, I believe, is under control,” I said.

Ten minutes later, Paige and I were in a closed office, Troy having taken Kepler and placed him in the cell he’d once guarded.

“You thought I came to confront Kepler?” Paige said. “By myself? Please. Give me a little credit.”

“Well, you can be somewhat impetuous . . .”

“That’s not impetuous. It’s stupid.” She put her arms around my neck. “I called and found out your dad was still here, so I came to tell him about Kepler. I was very careful, which is more than I can say for the guy who came rushing in here to rescue me without backup, without even

checking to make sure the building was *empty*. Troy was right downstairs, if you'd slowed down enough to check."

"I was concerned for your safety."

Her face tilted to mine. "So when I act without thinking, I'm impetuous. If you do it, you're chivalrous. Well, Cortez, your chivalry could have gotten you killed."

"Hardly. I had the situation well in hand."

"Uh-huh."

"As Kepler was talking, I was compiling a list of escape venues, starting with—"

She pressed her lips to mine, cutting off my explanation and, after a moment, I realized it wasn't really that important.

The Cabals still voted on the St. Cloud proposal, but the motion failed, with only the Nasts supporting it. Its original proponents, the St. Clouds, had decided it was no longer prudent to proceed. The matter would not rest forever but, for now, all was quiet.

That night, after we'd retired, I told Paige about my own proposal.

"Are you okay with that?" she asked.

"I am."

She sat up in bed. "Are you really okay with it? Because I know this is something you've always said you'd never do . . ."

"Does it disappoint you that I am?"

She met my gaze. “For anything else, maybe I would be, but if you’re ever going to do it, this is without a doubt the right cause. I just want to be sure you aren’t feeling pressured into it. We can wait, get something *much* smaller in a few years—”

“I want to do this.”

“Okay then. I guess the next step is finding out whether your dad will go for it.”

And that, indeed, was the biggest sticking point.

I’d invited my father to breakfast. I went alone.

Halfway through the meal, I said, “I’d like to discuss the office situation.”

His eyes hooded, knowing the wrong reaction could be fatal to success . . . if success was forthcoming. “You’ve come to a decision.”

“You said that, if I took this office now, I could someday buy it from you. Would that offer stand now?”

“You mean, would I sell it to you now?” He leaned back, sighing softly. “If you’re thinking of taking out a loan, I won’t allow you and Paige to be saddled with that—”

“I mean buying it outright. With my trust fund.”

He blinked. To me, my trust fund was off-limits. An unwanted inheritance, comprised of funds from a corporation I wanted no part of. But, as Paige said, if I was ever to utilize it, this was the right way: building a firm to investigate Cabal injustices and fortify the interracial council.

As my father sipped his coffee, mine spun in my stomach. Here was indeed the big test. Not whether he’d sell, but whether he’d ever intended to sell. If this entire scheme had been

designed to get me into the business, under the guise of “helping me,” then he would withdraw, offer excuses, come up with compromises . . .

“Do you have enough?” he said. “Not just to buy the building, which I’m sure you can afford, but operating costs will be heavy in the early years, Lucas, and I know your brothers were badly hit when stocks sank a few years back. If you don’t have at least half of your original five million . . .”

“I invested conservatively. A choice which saw me through the dips with minimal impact and, in subsequent years, paid off quite well. I have over seven million.”

He smiled. “I should have known. Well, then, as finances are not a concern, let me make a few calls and we’ll see what we can do.”

We agreed on a figure. It was not a bargain—my father knew I’d balk at getting a deal and being indebted to him. But it was a reasonable price for a custom-fitted Cabal office. A fair deal.

The customization would be finished by my father’s crew, and was included in the price. Paige and I would then complete construction—saving money by slowing the pace and choosing far less luxuriant furnishings than my father had planned. The frugal route, as always, which suited us both.

Later that same day, I brought Paige over, and took her up to our “conjoined” office. As I sat on a pile of lumber, she wandered around, checking everything out.

“So the divider goes here, I presume,” she said. “Equal windows, a shared bathroom . . . good, good. I think we can fit a nice sitting area here, beside the divider, to further separate the spaces. Get a couple of chairs . . .” She grinned my way. “A comfortable futon . . . Oh, and locking doors. Definitely need a locking door.”

She peered at the building blueprints. “We should consider renting out the offices on the first floor. We certainly won’t need them yet. But we’ll need to make sure access to the other floors is strictly secured, maybe use a key or code for the elevator. We wouldn’t want tenants wandering . . . especially with that cell downstairs.”

She lifted the plans. “The meeting room is perfect, big enough that we can start holding council meetings here. We’ll install teleconferencing abilities—that’s something we always wanted, to make it easier to call more frequent meetings. We’ll leave the reception area downstairs, but there’s no need for a desk. The only receptionist will be up here. I’m thinking we’ll have one executive assistant to cover all that—reception and secretarial.” A sly grin. “Think we can talk Adam into it?”

“That, I believe, would be even less welcome than head of security.”

“I didn’t get the impression he was all that offended by ‘head of security.’ Not when he realized it was more of a policing position, with detective work and SWAT detail. I was thinking . . . well, I’m not sure he’d take it . . .”

“You can always try. He’d be a welcome addition.”

She searched my gaze. “Really?”

I smiled. “Really.”

“Maybe security plus research, then. Combine his history degree and Robert’s work with some kick-ass action, and he’d be a happy guy. For an executive assistant, I’m thinking

Savannah to start. She'd be less than thrilled, but it's important for her to get some job experience. I always had a part time job in school."

"As did I."

"It's good for learning work routines . . . and learning the importance of having a job you like. I've never pushed because she has her struggles with school, but I think it's time, and working for us, we can make sure she's always free when homework heats up or at exam time." She paused. "So a security-officer-slash-researcher if Adam agrees, plus an executive assistant. I think that'll be it for staff, at least for a few years."

She continued to the windows. "These are gorgeous huge windows, but being on the second floor, we probably need some kind of blackout blinds for security when we're gone. I'm not sure how big a concern that is, but you'll be a better judge of such things. Speaking of security, we'll want a computer network with a server. A small one that can be expanded . . ."

And so she continued, barely stopping for breath. I added little, just sat in my spot and watched her. That was enough.