

Soulless

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One - Socially Inept

Fate always greets me with a dance of pinpricks on the back of my neck.

That's dread to me. Not the plunge of a lead ball in my gut—though it comes along in time too—but a lick of cold up my spine and little pricks of warning on my neck below my hairline.

I never found fate to be a capricious bitch, as others describe her; I found her patient. She waited because, unlike the rest of us, she had all the time in the world.

My gloveless fingers wrapped around the icy handle of the door to my apartment building and I glanced up at the sky. Dusk came early in winter, injecting darkness into the bulky clouds overhead. Snow was coming. Thank god I didn't have to go anywhere this week except work down the street.

Those pinpricks started again. My fingers flexed around the door handle; scratching at the back of my neck would do no good. I shifted my gaze down, swallowed dryly, and shouldered the heavy door open. The cold followed me in and a cloud of white left my lips when I huffed out a breath.

A single row of six mailboxes were set into the wall across from the door. Six apartments in a narrow, old brick building stuck between more narrow brick buildings. Three floors, one bedroom apartments. It didn't quite qualify as a dive, but it had seen better days. I liked it because I didn't share walls with anyone, so it stayed pretty quiet.

And my box was empty—no sign of anything in the vertical slats running across the door. Not even a parcel tag. That would teach me to online order. Disappointment burned behind my breastbone, then flickered out.

Something rose high in my throat, that claw of irrational panic that had nothing to do with the missing package. My feet dragged up the steps, reluctant to head upstairs as if they knew something I didn't.

Halfway up the steps, the main door into the building—across from the mailboxes—opened and closed behind me.

And now the panic got a little more rational; I hated running into people in the halls and my first urge was to flee. But then I also didn't want to seem too eager to get away, so I ascended at a normal-seeming pace. My keys were a heavy lump in my pocket and I fumbled to get them out as I walked.

Just as I reached the top of the staircase, footsteps sounded on the bottom steps. Relief eased my thudding heart as my fingers wrapped around the knobby, black and white Sylvester cat keychain and I wrenched my keys out.

I ducked around the corner to my apartment, key ready to slide in the lock. I even skipped the step where I glance at the number on the door, just to double check I'm heading into the right place. I'd lived there eighteen months, but I still had that habit.

The heavy footsteps hit the top steps. "Anais?"

I turned the key so sharply suddenly that it nearly broke in the lock. My head twisted to glance over my shoulder. A fringe of dark brown hair fell over my eyes; I kept one hand on the doorknob, and used the other to sweep the hair back.

My gaze inadvertently traveled up him. He stood a head taller than me. Black pants, brown corduroy jacket, and a long knitted scarf in earthy tones wrapped twice around his neck. Shoulder-length dreads of honey colored hair were pulled into a loose ponytail. That face was lovely—all straight lines but rounded edges. Soft and elegant. I imagined him as an artist or photographer, or something romantic like that.

But then that's what my mind always did. I made up lives for people and never bothered to find out if it was true.

It's easier than making real friends.

His eyes were a warm gray, and color crept into my cheeks as I met his gaze. A smile quirked his lips then snapped down again, fighting to stay hidden, and I realized he'd noticed me give him the once over. Normally, people didn't notice that.

Normally, people didn't notice *me*.

It registered in my mind then that he'd said my name. Before I could open my mouth to speak, he said it again.

"Anais Peake?"

I should have gone up the stairs faster.

My nod was short and brief—the vaguest of movements. If he hadn't been staring at me so intently, he might have missed it.

"I have something of yours," he said. "It was sitting on the stairs earlier." I liked the sound of his voice, too. Warm like his eyes, his hair, his complexion. Even his scarf. He was nothing but tall, very pretty warmth. My heart knocked hard against my ribcage but at least the cold dread mouthing my spine had quit.

He dug his key out of his jacket pocket and went for his door. It was directly across from mine, apartment number three. We were the only ones on this floor and I couldn't remember if I'd seen him before or not. Maybe out in the parking lot. Maybe not at all. I did what I could to avoid people when I didn't have to speak to them.

He swiftly unlocked the door, opened it, and started inside. His step paused on the threshold and he glanced over his shoulder at me. Gray eyes darted behind me to my closed door, then back at my eyes again. "It's right here."

Ah, I was supposed to follow. Little social cues were often lost on me.

I peeled my fingers one by one from the doorknob and left the key in the lock, the black and white cartoon cat Sylvester dangling upside down and staring accusingly at me as I walked to the other apartment.

The neighbor's booted foot propped against the door, holding it open while his long, narrow body leaned around the corner and angled towards something. I glimpsed walls painted a

dark green beyond him, and some photos propped up in frames on a shelf. Smiling people. Friends and family, I guessed.

“Here we go.” He returned with a package and handed it to me.

My fingers closed on the squishy envelop. The return address suggested this was the parcel I had been expecting earlier.

“Postwoman left it on the stairs,” he said. “It was still there when I came home at lunch, so I grabbed it for you. Number six,” he gestured upward, “stole some DVDs from me once. Did it right in front of me a month ago, so I grabbed this in case he tried it with you. I figured I’d just knock on your door later.”

I clutched the yellow bubble envelope in both hands, tight enough that my knuckles went white, and gazed up at him. The heater in the hallway kicked on. Sweat slithered down my forehead, but I didn’t know if it was nervousness, or because I was standing in a bulky black winter coat in a suddenly hot hallway.

“Thanks,” I said as common sense returned to me.

He flashed a smile. I felt warmer. “No problem.” His hand extended suddenly. “I’m Rafe.” A tilt of his head towards his door. “Number three, obviously.”

I stared at his hand for a moment. Long, thin brown fingers reached towards me, then hung in the air for a few seconds before starting to withdraw. I always froze a little when someone wanted to shake my hand.

At last my right hand released the package and I reached out. Fingers clasped mine.

“Anais.” *Wait, he already knows that.*

Rafe smiled. “Nice to meet you, finally. I think I saw you, the odd time, carting around a bag of laundry to the mat. Either that, or it was a body.” His smile faltered a little, as if he worried I didn’t get the joke. “Kidding. I don’t actually think you’re a serial killer. Purely a crimes of passion kind of girl.”

I felt like the classic deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck, barreling towards me at full speed...only the truck was an attractive young man with the unreasonable expectation that his neighbor was capable of carrying on a conversation. I hoped he didn’t say anything further—I’d just make more of a fool of myself. I had many unique ‘gifts,’ but social skills weren’t among them.

Pins of dread still did a tap dance on the back of my neck. Was this the height of Fate’s tricks now? Making me interact with people? She must have been bored. The fingers of my free hand twitched; I really couldn’t start scratching now or he’d think I had lice or something.

He released my hand and backed towards his apartment. “Well. If you ever need anything, give me a shout. Cup of sugar, help burying a body, whatever. Okay?”

I nodded. I think.

“See you around.”

“Yeah.” Had I said “thank you” yet? I couldn’t remember. “Thanks.”

He smiled again.

I spun and retreated to my apartment. Social retard didn’t even begin to describe me. He probably regretted saving my package from the klepto upstairs after that little exchange.

Sylvester waited for me, still looking pissed off. Didn’t matter how many times I looked at that keychain—it always seemed like someone else’s. I’d never actually seen the Loony Tunes before. Just picked the keychain out of a dollar store bin because it seemed like a “normal” sort of thing to do. And quirks are needed to seem normal. They make me seem like I have a

personality. It isn't the real me, but I don't know who that is, so I pretend. If I pay attention to details and present myself as normal, no one bothers with me.

I did the "quiet, mysterious loner" for awhile. It still attracted people, just the kind who were into loner, loser girls.

This time I glanced up at the number four on my door, then unlocked it and walked inside. I flipped on the light and my gaze went to the parcel. It wasn't something exciting, either. I led a very unexciting life. Just a book.

I read a lot of paranormal young adult novels. Weird for a twenty-seven year old, probably, but it was my only quirk I hadn't made up. I liked YA because I always identified with teenage characters. More than adults. The heroines on the covers of urban fantasy books always seemed so put together and ready to take on the world. Hot chicks in leather pants. They'd flash a smile to the cute neighbor, played in this fantasy by Rafe, and he'd crumble at their feet. Then they'd kick demon ass with a quip and a smile.

That wasn't me. I was the kind of girl who put Sylvester on her keychain to seem like she had a personality, when in reality, she had to think long and hard about what she liked, what she wanted. What her "favorites" were.

But that was okay because I didn't want to be a sexy book heroine. Most days I went by with no one, save for the girls at work, interacting with me. Rafe had been my major excitement for the day.

So why did I still feel cold pins stabbing my neck?

I swallowed painfully, dread turning my throat to sandpaper. I dropped the keys on the little table by my door, then slipped off my coat and walked around the corner to the kitchen.

My step stopped dead at the sight of a hot chick in leather pants sitting on my kitchen counter.

Her face lit up with a smile. "Hey Ani."

Hello, Fate. Nice to see you again.

Patient bitch indeed.

Two - Simona

At least I knew why I was getting twitchy with that pesky sense of impending doom. I gave in and dragged my nails across the back of my neck.

My unexpected guest hopped off the counter. Her boots, with two-inch heels, clicked when they hit the tile floor. At some point since I'd last seen her, she'd relaxed her hair and bleached it. Some women with a darker complexion like her would have looked silly. Most, in fact. But Simona didn't look silly, just looked wildly confident and sexy. I felt very aware of my own hair then; thin, bone straight, and hanging around my shoulders in a way that suggested I was always a few weeks behind my hairdressing appointment. Never stylish, but never ratty. Just enough to blend in.

Simona's long legs were clad in dark red leather and a white blouse was knotted at her abdomen to show off a belly button ring and toned muscles. Even in the dead of winter, she dressed like it was time to party.

Simona Sullivan belonged on the cover of one of those urban fantasy novels. In fact, it wouldn't have surprised me entirely if she'd modeled for one at some point.

That is, if she found time away from monster hunting.

“I forgot I gave you a key,” I said dryly. I set down the parcel on the armchair in the living room across from the kitchen and threw my coat on top of it.

“Lost that. Picked the lock.”

Mental note: Change the locks since a spare key is apparently floating around somewhere.

I sat on the couch to slip off my boots. Angeles, my gray semi-Persian tabby, strolled over for a greeting, and I scooped her up to sit on my lap. She didn't take to Simona very well—I wasn't sure how long my guest had been there, but Angeles was likely quite put out by it. Come to think of it, she didn't take to anyone very well. Just like me.

But you love Simona, I reminded myself. I shouldn't have had to remind myself of that, but irritation flared up hot and heavy. I stuffed it back down again.

I loved her like a sister, because in a lot of ways, she was. A year older than me, but that made all the difference. She often held me when I woke up crying in the night. Sat at my side when we were really little and I was confined to a bed with IVs jabbed in my arms and crystals placed around my head. She read me stories, and chose books with bright colors and huge pictures. Simona showed me a world outside of the experiments.

We didn't share blood, but we shared memories. For all intents and purposes, she *was* my sister.

So why was my stomach churning nervously at the very sight of her?

“Guy out there was cute.”

My totally opposite, switched at birth kind of sister. I blushed hard. She probably knew I would. “Eavesdropping?”

“Well, I heard the key in the door, then voices, and I wondered what was going on.” Her grin widened, and voice took on poorly masked innocence. “Had to check to make sure you were okay. Of course.”

I pictured her peeking through the peep hole in my door, watching the scene unfold in the hallway. That stupid package clutched to my chest, a fringe of hair damp with sweat and plastered to my face. The very definition of delayed reaction as I tried to interact with Rafe...

The blush didn't abate. “Right.”

“Still.” A hunger slithered through her brown eyes and they almost seemed to glow. “Very cute. Probably not human, you know. No boy that cute could be entirely human.”

Small talk. Voice airy and cheerful, like she had been out of my life for a day, and not over a year. This wasn't like her. She didn't travel all the way to Healey Corners from wherever the hell she'd been just to chat about my neighbor.

But I'd play along with the fakeness until she came out and said what she wanted.

“Are you looking for an excuse to go over there?” *Please don't. I'll still have to live here when you leave.* And she *would* leave. She never stuck in one place for long. “Investigate some supposed demonic activity? Strip him, tie him to a bed, all in the name of that which is Holy and Good?”

She rolled her eyes. “It was just that one time. I *really* thought the guy was evil. And, since he wasn't, and he was all tied up like that...” Simona shrugged.

A warm chuckle left my lips, my face feeling strange as I very rarely genuinely laughed. But I did miss her.

Then there was a pang deep in my chest and my heart squeezed. *She* was the one who didn't keep in touch. I missed her. She never missed me.

“It's been awhile.” The words came out flat and colorless. I supposed that was better than irritated and hurt.

“Yeah.” Her eyes shifted as she paced across the floor. Her voice was too light, too casual. “Eight months? Nine?”

The air was thick and awkward, and I tasted something bitter on my tongue. “Almost fourteen. You came by the Christmas before last.”

A brief glance back at me and her eyes widened. “*Oh*. Right. You know me—on the road, it all bleeds together.”

Do I know you? I did. Once. And then I would have bought that she just lost track of time. Now, though?

I didn’t want to answer that thought. Instead, I scratched at the back of my neck again.

Simona continued to pace, boots thumping steadily on the carpet, heightening the tension in the room with each step. The silver barbell set into her navel shimmered almost white against her dark skin.

Nothing with Simona was ever social—she was constantly going in work mode. And I knew her presence was behind the continuous source of dread niggling at me as I returned from the day job. But I wouldn’t ask her about it. Oh no. Because if she was here for work, she was here because she needed me. And I didn’t want to help, so I preferred to avoid the subject all together.

I had loved Simona like a sister; she loved that I could help with “work.” A long, long time had passed since we were kids, sharing space back at that old farmhouse. I didn’t chase and hunt things anymore.

“But I helped you move in here, right?” she said. “I didn’t just imagine that?”

“You helped and that’s when I gave you a key.” *Because I thought you’d be staying put too. Of course, I was wrong.*

“Where do you work now?”

Like she cared. Dread welled and dropped hard into the pit of my stomach. She was gearing up to something big.

“Printing shop a few blocks away,” I said. “I make photocopies.”

“Glamorous.”

“It pays the bills. I’m happy here.” That last part was directed at whatever conscience she might possess. She knew it, too—I saw something change in her eyes. The hunt mode switched on. It was never entirely off, but now it was cranked on full.

It’s what she was born and bred for, after all.

Literally.

She dropped onto the chair where my book and coat lay, narrow rear resting on the edge of the seat so she didn’t notice the paperback. Her elbows rested on her knees and fingers steepled just in front of her face.

Her voice grew low and serious, all pretense of catching up long gone. “I’m not asking you to go anywhere permanently.”

But temporarily? Yeah, that’s okay with you.

My hands, which had been petting Angeles, stilled. When they didn’t start up again, she turned her gaze up to me, a questioning half-purr, half-meow rolling out of her mouth.

I bit hard at my lower lip. “We both know damn well that whatever you want me to help with will fuck up everything here and I’ll have to leave. Again.”

Her full lips set into a straight line. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t...critical.”

It was always critical. To her.

“You wanna know what I’m hunting?”

“Not unless it’s my neighbor.”

“Ani—”

“You’d only be here if you wanted to ask me to...” I let my sentence trail off. We both knew what she was asking. And what it would do to me. Once upon a time, I might have cried. But tears didn’t well in my eyes now. I wasn’t sure I *could* cry anymore. That’s the thing about what she wanted me to do—if I came back from it, I was less of a person. I couldn’t keep doing people things, like cry or laugh or whatever.

Maybe that’s why I had to remind myself she was like my sister and I loved her. Maybe I couldn’t *love* anymore either.

“People are dying.”

I went back to petting Angeles and her purr vibrated my fingertips. At least she was happy. “I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do.”

I didn’t. I didn’t care about people. I just wanted to live among them, keep to myself, and not bother.

I wished I could have fun like she did. A decade ago, when we were stupid kids, we worked as a big team. Simona always led us, and we each had our function. She was the muscle and the brains. Taylor was the magically inclined one who did recon along with his brother, Mason, who specialized in research and had astounding intuition. Gail was our reader. Prescott could communicate telepathically with just about anything sentient. And I...

I cleaned up when no one else could.

Which means Simona can’t clean this one up.

“Have you even *tried* to—” I began.

“Of course I have.”

Of course she has. “—on your own?” I continued, as if she hadn’t interrupted.

Simona rose, undid the belt of her pants, drew down the zipper, and then peeled the leather down. Since she didn’t normally strip, I waited to see what she was going to show me.

A diagonal gash the length of my forearm ran across her skin, from where the bottom of her lace underwear touched to nearly reach her knee. The skin was raised, and the scar had to have been half an inch thick in its widest point. It had healed over, sure, but not too recently. What’s more, the skin around it had a black tinge to it and had risen into unnatural looking gooseflesh.

“I was in a hospital bed for three weeks. *Me*, Ani. That hasn’t happened since...”

Since never. Longest she’d ever been out was two, and that was half a dozen years ago. She’d been in a coma for thirteen days, and out of commission for months. Our last outing as a group. There’s always some job that not everyone comes back from—in our case, both literally and figuratively. Simona went rogue afterward, because she just had that kind of fiery will that wouldn’t ever quit. Me, I played sidekick until I couldn’t take it anymore.

She yanked her pants back up, and I noticed her wince a little when she drew the tight leather over her wounded leg. It hadn’t healed right. I could tell that straight away.

“So what did it?”

“Well...” She left her pants and belt undone, crossed over to where I was sitting, and slumped onto the other end of the couch. “It *wasn’t* your neighbor. What’s his name, anyway?”

“Rafe.”

“As in Rafael?”

I shrugged.

“Shit, that’s kinda hot.”

“If you decide to retire too, maybe you can date him then. What did that do to you?”

“Do you remember that anaconda demon?”

Eight feet long with skin that set itself on fire when it was ready to attack? Of course I did, and I had a scar on my left arm to prove it.

“Well, add a few feet to the length, a razor-sharp line on its back and tail, and make the upper body a grotesque sort-of human woman with three claws for fingers, slits for a nose, and hair like strings of blades.”

“So what did that? The hair, the claws, or the tail?”

“Tail.” She set her hand down on her thigh over the wound and a wince touched her eyes. Definitely not healed right. “Bitch went down easy, at first. Caught her while she was sleeping—on top of the trailer in the woods where a family of five had gone camping. Only one who got away was their Golden Retriever. So I shot her once in the head, sliced her in half, decapitated her to be sure, and set the whole thing on fire. Seemed easy enough. Then what comes out of the flames totally intact?” Simona shook her head and shuddered. “Shot her up a few more times, hobbled away. She was fast, but not faster than my Harley. Very few things can reattach their bodies like that immediately, and even fewer aren’t killed by decapitation *and* fire.”

So she did try to do it without me. Guilt bloomed, shading my face even redder. She cared about me—of course she wouldn’t drag me into something unless she was desperate.

Right?

Tension rolled off my shoulders and down my arms, like shrugging off a jacket, but though I physically relaxed a little, the twisting of worry in my gut didn’t cease.

Ever patient Fate.

“This thing took up residence in a forest two hundred miles north of here,” Simona continued. “If she kept to herself, then cool, I wouldn’t bother. But she’s killing people. It’s not so bad now because it’s winter—there aren’t a lot of people around, except the idiots who camp in February. But come summer...”

Summer meant death, wherever this thing went.

And then I caught the sense of wheels turning in my head, thinking, planning, anticipating how this new problem would be solved... Funny how quickly *I* switched into work mode too.

“I get the sense that I wouldn’t be here, Ani, if it *weren’t* winter. For her build, she should have been faster, but I don’t think she liked the snow.”

“You said serpent. She’s probably from a southern climate.”

“Right, which is my next problem—which *you* don’t need to help with. I’ll be figuring out who imported her to Canada. But my point is that sure, I can wait and look around for someone like you to help. But the odds of that happening *ever*, let alone before she speeds up in summer, are abso-fucking-lutely impossible.”

“Fine. I’m in.”

“Was it my promise to take you out of crappy cottage country that did it?”

“I like Healey Corners.”

A shapely eyebrow lifted, true sign of skepticism. “This is where old people come to die and serial killers bury victims. Trailer park people look down on the stagnant gene pool in this kind of town. You don’t belong here.”

I do. I wasn’t old or a serial killer, but I liked the small, slow community. A city would have provided me more anonymity, but Healey Corners didn’t have that thick rush of people on every street.

No sense arguing with Simona, though, so I didn't bother responding. Or maybe I couldn't form words. I rarely got the sense that Something Very Bad would happen anymore, but this was definitely one of those times. Danger has a smell and a taste for me. It hovered there, lingering in the corners of the room, startlingly familiar.

Very Bad.

I couldn't tell her that, though. She'd just tell me it was nerves because I'd been out of the field for so long.

She might also be right.

"Get a bag packed," she said. "We should leave right now."

"I have work tomorrow."

"So skip it."

I hesitated.

"We'll be home in a few days. Plenty of time for whatever hot Valentine's Day plans you have."

So maybe she didn't know me that well.

"Ange," I said suddenly. Angeles purred in response. "I need a few days to make arrangements for her—I can't just drop her at the kennel."

"Bring her along."

Bring my beloved feline companion to the giant snake woman? Right.

Simona rose. "I'll start packing your stuff. I already pulled out your overnight bag. You deal with the cat."

I set Angeles on the couch beside me, then went about gathering up her bowls and some food, as well as her litter box. Rafe had said if I needed anything, I could contact him...

I hope he likes cats.

Three – Away We Go

I knocked on his door before I could talk myself out of it. Angeles was cradled in my arms like a baby and her things sat in a bag at my feet. She gave me one of those cat-looks of regal disapproval.

The door to apartment three opened. Rafe smiled at me, then frowned a little when he saw Angeles. His lips parted, no doubt to voice the questions running through his mind.

"Do you like cats?"

"Um..."

I couldn't even pretend to have social skills at this point. "I should preface this with something nice, probably, and then segue into a request, but I don't have time. I need help."

"Uh—"

"I have to go away for a few days and I can't bring her. It's sudden. Can you look after her?"

His lips parted to say something, but then closed again. His gaze went to Angeles, then back to me again. "You aren't worried about leaving her with a stranger?"

"You rescued my mail and returned it to me, so you have integrity, and I've seen plants in your window, so you must be somewhat nurturing." *And having hunted monsters in the past, I'm fairly good at catching human ones now.*

"You've checked out my window?"

“I...” *Stupid*. “From outside. I’ve seen it.” Great, now I seemed like a stalker. Best to stick to the topic at hand. “She has a good sense of people.” I nodded at Angeles. “Since she hasn’t tried to claw me yet, you must be okay. So? Can you?”

He smiled. “Anything for a cute girl.”

A blush swept up through my face furiously. My apartment door opened and closed, and there was Simona with my luggage in one hand and my jacket in her other.

“Isn’t that nice, Ani—he thinks you’re cute. Say...” She stopped next to us and gazed up at him, batting her eyelashes. “What’ll you do for a smoking hot girl?”

I had to get Simona out of there. I handed Angeles over to Rafe, then scooped up the bag of her things and set them inside the door. “Thank you.”

“What’s her name?”

For a second, I almost said “Simona,” but then I realized he likely meant his new charge. “Angeles. She shouldn’t be any trouble, but I left her vet’s number in with her things.” I snatched my coat from Simona and shoved my arms into the sleeves as I spoke. “Thank you very much.” Before going, I stepped forward to cup Ange’s face and kissed the top of her head. “Be good,” I whispered.

“Mummy better get a move on,” Simona said behind me. “Because Auntie Simona has some demon slaying to do.”

My eyes darted up to Rafe’s. “Figuratively.”

Simona locked my door. I grabbed my luggage and hauled it down the stairs after her. She had a bright orange jeep waiting in back of my building. I stowed my bag in the back and climbed in the passenger side.

I’d thought for sure this life was far past me. For a few seconds I actually felt a slight thrill, but dread hammered hard against my ribcage from deep in my chest and pins danced on my spine. This wouldn’t be fun. It would be hard, it would be dangerous, and I might not come back from it. Even if my body survived, well...

My soul was a whole other matter.

Simona drove fast.

Her whole life seemed to be on hyper drive, constantly. Foot heavy on the gas pedal, always, be it in her Jeep, her Harley, her hunting, her sex life... She never hit the brake.

I’d always desperately wanted to be like that. But I knew I wouldn’t be. That’s why I never picked up the urban fantasy books with the Simona-clones on the covers. I wasn’t that strong. Or that thin. And I didn’t read for the sake of escapism—I couldn’t identify with some hardcore badass, sporting quippy one-liners, killer shoes, and a mean roundhouse kick.

Simona drove and I sat in the passenger side.

Inky, starless sky fell swiftly in Ontario during the winter. The darkest point had been in December, when dusk hit at about four-thirty in the evening. Now it swept in between five-thirty and six, which was before we’d left. The Jeep sped out of Healey Corners and onto a quiet, minor highway. We’d pass through various towns, not much different from my own. That’s all there was out here. Stretches of little used highways and back roads, small, tight communities along the way, and a smattering of farms in between.

The road was clear, but snow ran up and down the gravel shoulder. Snow on the big arched trees on either side of the highway, too. The black sky had a texture to it—round bumps of dark gray. Heavy clouds, waiting to burst. No way we’d miss the snowstorm ready to hit in the next

few hours. A few flakes had already begun their descent, a deceptively friendly promise of what was to come.

A chill worked down my spine. I tried to ignore it. “I was hoping I’d see you at Christmas.”

The windshield wipers squeaked, moving to clear the white speckles away from the glass.

“I was hoping to come by too. Honestly, An, I’m right out of it most of the time. Christmas came and went. I got called down to Australia, was deep in the outback, and didn’t even know what day it was. It snows down there in summer, you know? I was gone almost six months. Threw me right off.”

She cast a glance at me. I turned to stare out the window, rejection a hot bubble ready to burst beneath my breastbone.

“Made a New Year’s resolution, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yup. Not ready to put roots down anywhere yet, but I’m gonna touch base with people more often. Honestly...I get tired of being gone all the time. I don’t mind living out of hotels, but I hate doing it alone, you know?”

“You spend nights in hotel rooms alone? I’m shocked.”

Her hand left the stick shift to smack my knee. “Funny. I mean I miss you, dummy. And you’re not going to come back to the old life—tonight being the exception—so I need to come to you.”

“You just want to date my neighbor.”

She pressed her lips together and the corners lifted into a sly grin. “Well, I can’t just sleep on your couch when I come to visit. That would annoy you too much. And they have *no* hotels around here—just bed and breakfasts which are way too expensive.”

“Going to connect with Mason too?”

Her attention snapped back to the road. The muscles in her shoulders tensed first, then swept down through her arms and she tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

Six years. Still no change, apparently.

“Mason doesn’t want to see me.”

“Have you even talked to him—”

Something hit the roof of the Jeep.

I ducked down on instinct and looked upward. “What was that?”

Simona’s gaze flickered to the roof, then back to the road. “Hold on.”

The Jeep sped faster. I listened for the sound of something—anything—but I couldn’t hear over the wind outside the vehicle. The stabs of dread on the back of my neck went from annoying to painful.

This isn’t right. I should have known that under an hour after Simona arrived, trouble of some sort would find us.

Old instinct was buried deep, like a small animal’s food in winter, but I dug around and found it. Cleared my mind. Focused.

Despite the noise outside and the sense of movement of the Jeep, everything went incredibly still suddenly. The heater was on, blowing hot air at us. I focused more. Breathed in sharply.

Like I said, danger always has a smell and a taste. It had been hovering around Simona all night. Sometimes tar, sometimes singeing flesh, sometimes decay.

This time it was sulfur.

Musty, acrid, like someone lit a dozen matches right under my nose.

“This is bad—”

I’d no sooner spoken the words when something tore through the hard top roof. Long, sharp talons shot down into the Jeep, swiping at us. They cut through the air wildly, a faint, cool breeze touching my cheek. Years of practice were still ingrained in me, and I leaned to the right, away from the thing clawing at us. Simona did the same. How she managed to move out of the way while keeping her hands on the wheel *without* swerving the vehicle was beyond me.

The thing above us wailed, a noise resembling some kind of predatory bird, perhaps, but nothing of this world. The smell of sulfur grew stronger.

Huge white talons, the longer and wider than my fingers, shot towards me, three stripes of white cutting through the dark Jeep interior. I flattened myself as well as I could against the passenger door.

“Weapon?” I asked Simona with some hope.

“Below the dash.”

It wasn’t like I knew how to use one well, but Simona could shoot while driving—I’d seen her do it.

I popped the glove compartment and pulled out the Colt .45 auto within. Simona snatched it from my hand without taking her gaze from the road and fired up at the roof.

It took constant maneuvering to avoid the creature’s claws. A few more bullets left the gun and the talons retreated out of the Jeep. Some rumbling followed, and then the piercing shriek came again, but this time far from the vehicle. The worry wrapped tight around my chest eased a little, snaking back and waiting to clench again. Still, momentary relief. I’d take it.

“You have more problems than a giant snake woman?” I said.

“No fucking clue what that was or where it came from,” she said. Her gaze darted between each of the mirrors and the road. “You’ve had no sightings or anything? Local rumors?”

“No.”

“Great. Let’s just hope *this* one stays dead when I cut its head off.”

That’s Simona. Always the confident one.

The Jeep halted suddenly, throwing me against my seatbelt. She reached across me, grabbed a new magazine from the glove compartment, and popped it in her pocket.

Simona met my gaze before exiting. No spark of fear in her eyes at all, just that good ol’ confidence. “Stay here.”

I wasn’t going anywhere.

She exited the vehicle. A *whoosh* of cold air entered as she slammed the door. Both hands gripping the Colt, she raised the weapon and swung around, gaze scouting the sky for a sign of her prey.

I debated sliding into the driver’s seat. I wasn’t great with a stick shift, though, and she’d probably kick me out anyway. A sidekick who was incapable of even being a getaway driver...so sad.

My eyes followed Simona’s reflection in the various mirrors as she rounded the Jeep. Though she’d left it running, being halted in place had left me extra aware of the cold, even with the heat blasting. The hole in the roof wasn’t helping me feel any warmer either. That thing hadn’t just put a few tears in the roof—a whole chunk seemed to be missing. I held my hands up to the heater for a few moments, then pressed them together and rubbed them back and forth. Maybe Simona had some gloves somewhere...

Something flickered in the sky over the dark arch of trees, flying in my peripheral vision and catching my attention. I craned my neck to try to see out the window without lowering it...whatever had gone by, it had to be the thing that attacked us.

Sulfur. Thick, heavy. I choked on the smell.

Sometimes I couldn't tell if the smells were real, or in my head. No one else talked about them. Since I caught the strange scents that turned my stomach before things got too close, I suspected if it was more in my brain. A warning of some kind.

More snow fell. Not storm-heavy yet, but enough to blanket the dark road. There was a reason no one liked to drive out here at night in the winter. Roads got downright slippery.

The headlights cut through the darkness, two beams of comfort in an otherwise eerie night. Simona still paced around the car, her white blonde hair stark against her black leather jacket. I didn't think she'd seen what I had.

Something bothered me. I mean, beyond the critter flying around the car, ready to strike. Something in that flash in the sky, moments ago...but my brain couldn't quite pick it up. When shit's flying at you and happening so fast, it's hard to keep straight what's going on.

My hand clasped the door handle.

Something thumped onto the roof, shaking the entire Jeep. My grip tightened on the handle and I ducked. That there is my flight or fight response...I duck.

Outside, Simona fired at the creature on the roof. That didn't stop it, though—its claws tore through the hole in the hardtop and slashed my shoulder. Hot pain zigzagged down my left arm and straight into my fingertips.

I didn't scream. The kinds of things I've seen...you don't scream. Screaming alerts others, or makes you look weak. Sometimes both. And weakness gives them a greater sense of strength. Like an adrenaline rush or something.

A yank of the handle and the door swung open. I'd already been leaning so heavily on it that I lost my balance and toppled out onto the thin layer of snow. The frigid air caught me and I choked as I sucked in a gulp of it. Years of practice had lent me the skill to scramble to my feet somewhat gracefully, and I did so then, backing towards Simona. She fired another bullet and the sound was deafening now that I stood so close to her.

A great winged creature sat hunched on the roof of the Jeep. Wingspan was nearly twice the length of our vehicle, I'd guess, if it expanded to fly. Black skin was stretched tight over long, thin bones. Shaggy hair—not feathers—covered its torso, but it had the clawed feet of a predatory bird. I'd expected a beak, since it seemed to be birdlike, but instead I found a long snout. That's the thing about these critters—they looked just enough like one of our animals to be familiar, but so much was off that it was even creepier than if it'd looked completely alien. That look of natural, but with something wrong. Unsettling.

The eyes, glittering amber and set far apart, narrowed on us. It hunched forward, opened its mouth, and shrieked. Saliva and filth dripped from its gaping mouth and many plaque-ridden teeth. Even from a few feet away, I caught a whiff of its breath; decaying flesh and a few other putrid things I couldn't recognize.

My shoulder stung. If it had been Simona, she might've been running on adrenaline and not noticed. Not me, though. I felt it all.

But I didn't scream. And I didn't cry.

"Will it die when you cut its head off?" I asked hopefully. I took my gaze from the winged creature for a second to see Simona's eyes spark with excitement.

“I’m interested to find out. Sword’s in the back, though. Might be tough to get past the harpy.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant “harpy” as a joking name or a real one. I’d ask her later, maybe, when we were safely drinking hot chocolate in the twenty-four hour Tim Hortons several miles up the road. Ah, optimism.

“Suggestions?”

“Decoy?” She glanced at me, shrugged, then returned her attention to the beast.

The harpy shrieked again, the sound drilling into my brain and settling there, and echo that would likely haunt me in my sleep. Bullets hadn’t slowed it down at all. Decapitation seemed like the next logical choice.

“I’ll bait her,” Simona said. “You get the—”

She let out a startled cry. I turned and pivoted at the same time, then it hit me what my eyes had caught but brain hadn’t registered.

There were two of them.