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HARPER

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EVER AFTER

**KIM
HARRISON**

**EVER
AFTER**

 **HARPER Voyager**
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Dedication

To the only man I'd make butterscotch pudding for

Contents

Dedication
Acknowledgments

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One

Trouble on Reserve

The Undead Pool: An Excerpt
Chapter 2

About the Author

Praise

Also by Kim Harrison

Copyright

About the Publisher

Acknowledgments

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One

This is close enough. Thanks,” I said to the cabdriver, and he swerved to park a block from Carew Tower’s drop-off zone. It was Sunday night, and the trendy restaurants in the lower levels of the Cincinnati high-rise were busy with the March Madness food fest—the revolving door never stopped as laughing couples and groups went in and out. The kids-on-art exhibit had probably brought in a few, but I’d be willing to bet that the stoic pair in the suit and sequined dress getting out of the black car ahead of me were going up to the revolving restaurant as I was.

I fumbled for a twenty in my ridiculously small clutch purse, then handed it over the front seat. “Keep the change,” I said, distracted as I tugged my shawl closer, breathing in a faint lilac scent. “And I’m going to need a receipt, please.”

The cabbie shot me a thankful glance at the tip, high maybe, but he’d come all the way out to the Hollows to pick me up. Nervous, I readjusted my shawl again and slid to the door. I could have taken my car, but parking was a hassle downtown for festivals, and tawny silk and lace lost a lot of sparkle while getting out of a MINI Cooper. Not to mention the stiff wind off the river might pull apart my carefully braided hair if I had to walk more than a block.

I doubted that tonight’s meeting with Quen would lead to a job, but I needed all the tax deductions I could get right now, even if it was just cab fare. Skipping filing for a year while they decided if I was a citizen or not hadn’t turned out to be the boon I originally thought it was.

“Thanks,” I said as I tucked the receipt away. Taking a steadying breath, I sat with my hands in my lap. Maybe I should go home instead. I liked Quen, but he was Trent’s number one security guy. I was sure it was a job offer, but probably not one I wanted to take.

My curiosity had always been stronger than common sense, though, and when the cabbie’s eyes met mine through his rearview mirror, I reached for the handle. “Whatever it is, I’m saying no,” I muttered as I got out, and the Were chuckled. The thump of the door barely beat the three loud Goth teenagers descending upon him.

My low heels clicked on the sidewalk and I held my tiny clutch bag under my arm, the other hand on my hair. The bag was small, yes, but it was big enough to hold my street-legal splat gun stocked with sleepy-time charms. If Quen didn’t take no for an answer, I could leave him facedown in his twelve-dollar-a-bowl soup.

Squinting through the wind, I dodged the people loitering for their rides. Quen had asked me to dinner, not Trent. I didn’t like that he felt the need to talk to me at a five-star restaurant instead of a coffee shop, but maybe the man liked his whiskey old.

One last gust pushed me into the revolving door, and a whisper of impending danger tightened my gut as the scent of old brass and dog urine rose in the sudden dead air. It expanded into the echoing noise of a wide lobby done in marble, and I shivered as I made for the elevators. It was more than the March chill.

The couple I'd seen at the curb were long gone by the time I got there, and I had to wait for the dedicated restaurant lift. Hands making a fig leaf with my purse, I watched the foot traffic, feeling out of place in my long sheath dress. It had looked so fabulous on me in the store that I'd bought it even though I couldn't run in it. Wearing it tonight was half the reason I had said yes to Quen. I often dressed up for work, but always with the assumption that I'd probably end the evening having to run from banshees or after vampires. *Maybe Quen just wanted to catch up?* But I doubted it.

The elevator dinged, and I forced a smile for whoever might be in it. It faded fast when the doors opened to show only more brass, velvet, and mahogany. I stepped inside and hit the R button at the top of the panel. Maybe my unease was simply because I was alone. I'd been alone a lot this week while Jenks tried to do the work of five pixies in the garden and Ivy was in Flagstaff helping Glenn and Daryl move.

The lobby noise vanished as the doors closed, and I looked in the mirrors, tucking away a strand that had escaped the loose braid Jenks's youngest kids had put it in tonight. If Jenks were here, he'd tell me to snap out of it, and I pulled myself straighter when my ears popped. There were ley line symbols carved into the railing like a pattern, but they were really a mild euphoric charm, and I leaned backward into them. I could use all the euphoria I could get tonight.

My shoulders had relaxed by the time the doors opened and the light strains of live chamber music filtered in. It was just dinner, for God's sake, and I smiled at the young host at the reception desk. His hair slicked back, he was wearing his uniform well. Behind him, Cincinnati spread out in the dark, the lights glinting like souls in the night. The stink and noise of the city were far away, and only the beauty showed. Maybe that's why Quen chose here.

"I'm meeting Quen Hanson," I said, forcing my attention back to the host. The tables I could see were full of people taking advantage of the festival's specials.

"Your booth isn't ready yet, but he's waiting for you at the bar," the man said, and my eyes flicked up at the unexpected sound of respect in his voice. "May I take your shawl?"

Better and better, I thought as I turned to let him slip the thin silk from my shoulders. I felt him hesitate at my pack tattoo, and I straightened to my full height, proud of it.

"This way, please?" he said as he handed it to a woman and took the little paper tag, handing it to me in turn.

I let my hips sway a little as I fell into step behind him, making the shift to the revolving circle without pause. I'd been up here a couple of times, and the bar was on the far side of the entry. We strode through tables of upscale wining-and-dining people. The couple who had come up ahead of me were already seated, wine being poured as they sat close together and enjoyed each other more than the view. It had been a while since I'd felt that, and a pang went through me. Shoving it down, I stepped to the still center portion of the restaurant with the brass and mahogany bar.

Quen was the only one there apart from the bartender, his stance hinting at unease as he stood, not sat, with a ramrod straightness in his suit coat and tie. He had the build to wear it well, but it probably hampered his movement more than he liked, and I smiled as he frowned and tugged at his sleeve, clearly not seeing me yet. The reflection in the glass behind the mirror showed the lights on the river. He looked tired

—alert but tired.

His eyes were everywhere, and his head cocked as he listened to the muted TV in the upper corner behind him. Catching the movement of our approach, he turned, smiling. Last year I might have felt out of place and uncomfortable, but now I smiled back, genuinely glad to see him. Somehow, he'd taken on the shades of a father figure in my mind. That we kept butting heads the first year we'd known each other might have something to do with it. That he could still lay me flat out on the floor with his magic was another. Saving his life once when I had failed to save my dad probably also figured into it.

"Quen," I said as he needlessly tugged his dress slacks and suit coat straight. "I have to say this is better than meeting you *on the roof*."

The hint of weariness in his eyes shifted to warmth as he took my offered hand in a firm grip to help me onto the perch of the bar stool. Tired or not, he looked good in a mature, trim, security sort of way. He was a little short for an elf, dark where most were light, but it worked well for him, and I wondered if that was gray about his temples or a trick of the light. A new sensation of contentment and peace flowed from him—family life was agreeing with him, even if it was probably also why he was tired. Lucy and Ray were thirteen months and ten months, respectively. As Trent's security adviser, Quen was powerful in his magic, strong in his convictions . . . and he loved Ceri with all his soul.

Quen made a sour, amused face at the reminder of our first meeting at Carew Tower. "Rachel, thank you for agreeing to see me," he said, his low, melodious voice reminding me of Trent's. It wasn't an accent as much as his controlled grace extending even to his speech. He looked up as the bartender approached and topped off his glass of white wine. "What would you like while we wait?"

The TV was just over his head behind him, and I looked away from the stock prices scrolling under the latest national scandal. My back was to the city, and I could see a hint of the Hollows beyond the river through the bar's mirror. "Anything with bubbles in it," I said, and Quen's eyes widened. "It doesn't have to be champagne," I said, warming. "A sparkling wine won't have sulfates."

The bartender nodded knowingly, and I smiled. It was nice when I didn't have to explain.

Quen leaned in close, and I caught my breath at the scent of cinnamon, dark and laced with moss. "I thought you were going to order a soft drink," he said, and I set my purse on the bar beside me.

"Pop? No way. You dragged me all the way into Cincy for a meeting at a five-star restaurant; I'm getting the quail." He chuckled, but it faded too fast for my liking. "Usually," I said slowly, fishing for why I was here, "when a man invites me somewhere nice, it's because he wants to break up with me and doesn't want me to make a scene. I know that's not the case here."

Silent, he tightened his jaw. My pulse quickened. The bartender came back with my drink, and I pushed it around in a little circle, waiting. Quen just sat there. "What does Trent want me to do that I'm not going to like?" I finally prompted, and he actually winced.

"He doesn't know I'm here," Quen said, and his slight unease took on an entirely new meaning.

The last time I'd met Quen without Trent knowing about it . . . Dude! "Holy crap, did you get Ceri pregnant again? Congratulations! You old dog! But what do you need me for? Babies are good things!" Unless you happen to be a demon, that is.

He frowned, hunching over the bar to sip his drink and shooting me a look to lower my voice. "Ceri is not pregnant, but the children do touch on what I wanted to talk to you about."

Suddenly concerned, I leaned closer. "What is it?" I said, a flicker of anger passing through me. Trent could be a dick sometimes, taking his "saving his race" quest to unfair extremes. "Is it about the girls? Is he pressuring you about something? Ray is your daughter!" I said hotly. "She and Lucy being raised together as sisters is a great idea, but if he thinks I'm going to sit here while he shoves you out of their life—"

"No, that's far from the truth of it." Quen set his drink aside to put his hand on mine. My words cut off as he gave my hand a warning squeeze, and when I grimaced, he pulled away. I could knock him flat on his ass with a curse, but I wouldn't. It had nothing to do with the fancy restaurant and everything to do with respect. Besides, if I knocked him down, he'd knock me down, and Quen had a spell lexicon that put mine to shame.

"Ray and Lucy are being raised with two fathers and one mother. It's working beautifully, but that's what I wanted to discuss," he said, confusing me even more.

I drew my hands back to my lap, slightly huffy. So I had jumped to conclusions. I knew Trent too well, and pushing Quen out of the picture to further the professional image of a happy, *traditional* family wasn't beyond him. "I'm listening."

Avoiding me, Quen downed a swallow of wine. "Trent is a fine young man," he said, watching the remaining wine swirl.

"Yes . . ." I drawled, cautiously. "If you can call a drug lord and outlawed-medicine manufacturer a fine young man." Both were true, but I'd lost any fire behind the accusations a while ago. I think it was when Trent slugged the man trying to abduct me into a lifetime of degradation.

Quen's flash of irritation vanished when he realized I was joking—sort of. "I have no issue in having a secondary public role in the girls' lives," he said defensively. "Trent takes great pains to see that I have sufficient time with them."

Midnight rides on horseback and reading before bed, I imagined, but not a public show of parenthood. Still, I managed not to say anything but a tart "He gives you time to be a dad. Bully for Trent." I took a sip of bubbly wine, blinking the fizz away before it made me sneeze.

"You are the devil to talk to, Rachel," he said curtly. "Will you shut up and listen?"

The sharp rebuke brought me up short. Yes, I was being rude, but Trent irritated me. "Sorry," I said as I focused on him. The TV behind him was distracting, and I wished they'd turn it down even more.

Seeing my attention, he dropped his head. "Trent is conscientiously making sure I have time to be with both Ray and Lucy, but it's becoming increasingly evident that it's caused an unwise reduction to his own personal safety."

Reduction to his own personal safety? I snorted and reached for my wine. "He's not getting his fair share of daddy time?"

"No, he's scheduling things when I'm not available and using the excuse to go out alone. It has to stop."

“Ohhhh!” I said in understanding. Quen had been keeping Trent safe since his father had died, leaving him alone in the world. Quen practically raised him, and letting the billionaire idiot savant out of his sight to chat with businessmen on the golf course probably didn’t sit well. Especially with Trent’s new mind-set that he could do magic, too.

Then I followed that thought as to why I might be sitting here, and my eyes got even wider. “Oh, hell no!” I said, grabbing my purse and shifting forward to get off the stool. “I am not going to do your job again, Quen. There isn’t enough money in the world. Not in two worlds.”

Well, maybe in two worlds, but that wasn’t the point.

“Rachel, please,” he pleaded, taking my shoulder before I could find the floor. It wasn’t the strength of his grip that stopped me cold, but the worry in his voice. “I’m not asking you to do my job.”

“Good, because I won’t!” I said, my voice hushed but intense. “I will *not* work for Trent. He’s a . . . a . . .” I hesitated, finding all my usual insults no longer holding force. “He never listens to me,” I said instead, and Quen’s hand fell from my shoulder, a faint smile on his face. “And gets himself in trouble because of it. I got him to the West Coast for you, and look what happened!”

Quen turned to the bar, his voice flat. “His actions resulted in a bar burning down and the collapse of a US monument.”

“It wasn’t *just* a bar, it was Margaritaville, and I’m still getting hate mail. It was his fault, and I got blamed for it. And let’s not forget San Francisco getting toasted. Oh! And how about *my* ending up in a *baby bottle* waiting for my aura to solidify enough so that I could survive? You think I enjoyed that?”

Granted, the kiss to break the spell had been nice, but the last time I worked for Trent, the assassins had been aimed at me.

Upset, I turned back to the bar’s mirror. My face was red, and I forced myself to relax. Maybe Quen was right to bring me here. If we had been at Junior’s, I probably would be halfway out the door looking for my car. Even angry as I was, I looked like I belonged here with my hair up and my elegant dress that made me look svelte, not skinny. But it was all show. I didn’t belong here. I was not wealthy, especially smart, or talented. I was good at staying alive—that’s it—and every last person up here save Quen would be the first to go if there was trouble. Except maybe the cook. Cooks were good with knives.

Quen lifted his head, the wrinkle line in his forehead deeper. “That’s exactly what I’m saying,” he said softly. “The man needs someone to watch him. Someone who can survive what he gets himself into and is sensitive to his . . . quirks.”

“Quirks?” Frustrated, I let go of my clutch purse and downed another swallow of wine. “Dude, I hear you. I understand,” I said, and Quen blinked at my word choice. “I even sympathize, but I can’t do it. I’d end up killing him. He’s too pigheaded and unwilling to consider anyone else’s opinion, especially in a tight situation.”

Quen chuckled, relaxing his tight grip on his emotions. “Sounds familiar.”

“We are talking about Trent, not me. And besides, the man does not need a babysitter. He’s all grown up, and you”—I pointed at Quen—“don’t give him enough credit. He stole Lucy okay, and they were waiting for him.” I turned back to the bar and the reflection of the Hollows. “He can handle whatever Cincinnati can dish out,” I

said softly, going over my short list of trouble. "It's been quiet lately."

Quen sighed, slumping beside me with both hands around his drink, but I wasn't going to fall for it. "I will admit that Trent has a knack for devising a plan and following through with it. But he falters at improvisation, and that's where you excel. I wish you would reconsider."

Hearing the truth of it, I looked up and Quen lifted his drink in salute. Trent could plan his way out of a demon's contract, but that wouldn't keep him alive against a sniper spell, and that's where the real danger was. My jaw clenched and I shoved the thought away. What did I care?

"I left the I.S. because I couldn't stomach working for anyone. That hasn't changed."

"That's not entirely true," he said, and I frowned. "You work with Ivy and Jenks all the time."

My eyebrows rose. "Yes. I work *with* Jenks and Ivy, not *for* them. They don't always do what I think is best, but they always at least listen to me." I didn't do what they thought was best, either, so we got along tolerably well. Trent, though, he *needed* to listen. The businessman made more mistakes than . . . me.

"He's doing much better," Quen said, and I couldn't stop my chuckle.

"Yeah?"

"He worked with Jenks," Quen offered, but I could hear the doubt in his voice.

"Yes, he worked with Jenks," I said, the wine bitter as it slipped down. "And Jenks said it was like pulling the wings off a fairy to get Trent to include him on even the smallest details. No."

Quen's worry line in his brow was deepening. "Quen, I understand your concern," I said, reaching out to put a hand on his arm. It was tense, and I pulled back, feeling like I shouldn't have touched him. "I'm sorry, but I just can't do it."

"Could you maybe just try?" he said, shocking me. "There's an elven heritage exhibit at the museum next Friday. Trent has a few items on display and will be putting in an appearance. You'll love it."

"No." I faced the mirror and watched myself take a drink.

"Free food," he said, and I eyed him in disbelief through the reflection. I wasn't that desperate. "Lots of contacts with people with too much money," he added. "You need to get out and network. Let Cincy know you're the same Rachel Morgan who captured a banshee and saved San Francisco, and not just the witch who's really a demon."

I flushed, setting the glass down and looking around for a clock. Jeez, had I only been here ten minutes?

"I expect you would pick up a few legit jobs," he said, and I stiffened. I wasn't out of money, but the only people who wanted to hire me wanted me because I could twist demon curses. I wasn't that kind of a girl, even if I had the potential to be, and it bothered me that Quen knew who had been knocking on my door. Working a couple of easy chaperoning jobs for Cincinnati's elite would do wonders for my esteem.

Isn't that what Quen is offering me?

"There would be a clothing allowance," Quen wheedled. My pulse quickened, not at the thought of a new pair of boots but at being dumb enough to consider this. "Rachel, I'm asking this as a personal favor," he added, sensing me waver. "For me,

and Ceri.”

Groaning, I dropped my head into my hand, and my dress pinched as I shifted to turn away from him. Ceri. Though she had agreed to maintaining a public image with Trent, she loved Quen. Quen loved her back with all the fierceness of someone who never expected to find anything beautiful in the world. Hell, if it was nothing more than being a security escort, I could stomach Trent for a few hours. How much trouble could the man get into out at the museum, anyway?

“You fight dirty,” I said sourly to his reflection, and he toasted me, smiling wickedly.

“It’s my nature. So will you do it?”

I rubbed the back of my neck as I turned to him, guilt and duty pulling at me. Avoiding him, I sent my eyes to the TV. It was showing the Cincy skyline, which was odd since it was a national station. The banner *THIRD INFANT ABDUCTED* flashed up, then vanished behind an insurance commercial. *Act as Trent’s security?* I thought, remembering Trent’s savage, protective expression under the city when he downed that man trying to abduct me. And then how he looked on my front steps when he found Wayde carting me out of the church over his shoulder. Trent had spun a charm to knock the Were out cold with the ease of picking a flower. True, it hadn’t been needed, but Trent hadn’t known that.

My fingers spinning the footing of my glass slowed as I recalled Trent opening up to me and telling me about the person he wanted to be. It was as if I was the only person who might really understand. *And Quen wanted me to be the one to deny him that?*

“No,” I whispered, knowing that Trent would count my presence as his failure. He didn’t deserve that. “I’m not going to be his babysitter.”

“Rachel, you need to put your petty grudge aside and—”

“No!” I said louder, angry now, and his words cut off. “This isn’t about me. Trent can stand on his own. He’s better than you give him credit for. You asked me, I said no. Find someone else to spit in his eye.”

Quen pulled back from me, his face creased in anger. “That’s not what I’m doing,” he said, but there was a whisper of concern in his denial. “I simply don’t want him out there alone. There’s nothing wrong with someone having your back. He can stand on his own without having to be alone.”

Behind him, the TV was showing the front of Cincy’s hospital, lit up with lights and security vehicles. *Have his back?*

“I won’t bring it up again,” he said, shifting away from me, suddenly closed off. “I think our table is ready.”

Confused, I slid from the stool, shimmying until my dress fell right. If I was there, Trent wouldn’t see it as me watching his back. He’d say I was babysitting him. Quen had it wrong.

Didn’t he?

“After you,” Quen said sourly, gesturing for me to follow the man standing before us with two huge menus in his hand.

God save me from myself, maybe Quen was right. “Quen . . .”

But then my gaze jerked up to the TV over the bar as I caught a familiar phrase, and my thoughts of Trent vanished. With a sudden flash, I recognized the new

Rosewood wing behind the newscaster on the scene. The Rosewood wing was simply a fancy name for the three comfortable houselike facilities they'd built for the terminally ill babies suffering from Rosewood syndrome. The cul-de-sac was damp from the earlier rain, and lights from the I.S. cruisers and news vans made everything shiny. The thought of *THIRD ABDUCTION* echoed through me, and I jerked to a halt. Behind me, Quen grunted in surprise.

"Turn it up!" I exclaimed, turning back to the bar and shoving past Quen to get closer.

". . . apparently abducted by a kidnapper posing as a night nurse," the woman was saying, and I felt myself pale. "I.S. officials are investigating, but so far they have no leads as to who is taking the failing infants, and why."

"Turn it up!" I said again, and this time, the bartender heard me, aiming a remote and upping the volume. I felt myself pale as Quen rocked to a halt beside me, both of us looking up. A phone buzzed, and Quen jumped, his hand fumbling to a back pocket.

"Because of baby Benjamin's miraculous progress in fighting the lethal disease, officials are not hopeful for a ransom demand—they fear that he was taken by unscrupulous biogenetic engineers trying to find and sell a cure."

"Oh my God," I whispered, fumbling in my clutch bag for my phone. They'd killed all the bioengineers during the Turn. It was a tradition both humans and Inderlanders alike gleefully continued to this day. That I was alive because of illegal tinkering didn't make me feel any better.

"Let's hope they find them soon," the woman was saying, and then the headlines shifted to the latest Washington scandal.

Head down over my phone, I punched in Trent's number. It would go right to his private quarters, bypassing the switchboard. I felt hot, then cold, my grip on my phone shaking. He wouldn't have abducted the baby, but he'd have a short list of who might have. The Humans Against Paranormals Association, HAPA, maybe, now that they couldn't have me. Trent had once promised that he'd give the demons the cure to their infertility, but after suffering through the chaos wrought by his father's saving me, I couldn't believe that Trent was looking to increase the number of survivors just yet.

The busy signal shocked through me, and I glanced up at the shadow of a man standing too close: Quen, his brow furrowed as he looked at his phone's screen. Blinking, I remembered where I was. Quen's lips twitched, and he held out his phone. It was smaller and shinier than mine. "He's on my line," he said with a thin, distant voice. "You talk to him."

Fingers shaking, I took the phone. "He'll know we're together, that we talked." Oh God, I didn't want Trent to know that Quen doubted him. He looked to him as his father despite the monthly stipend.

Quen shrugged. "He'll find out anyway."

Mouth suddenly dry, I answered the phone and put it to my ear. "Trent?"

The hesitation was telling, but he caught his balance quickly. "Rachel?" Trent said, clearly surprised. "I'm sorry. I must have hit the wrong button. I was trying to reach Quen."

I held the phone tighter, my pulse pounding. His voice was beautiful, and I felt glad for turning Quen down. "Ahh," I said, glancing up at a stoic Quen. "You hit the right number."

Again Trent hesitated. "Okay?"

"We were having dinner." I explained nothing, and Quen's face became even more bland. "Quen and I. You saw the news? Do you know who did it?"

My worry came rushing back, crowding out my brief flash of pleasure for having caught Trent off guard. It happened so seldom. The host was still waiting, and when Quen shook his head, he smiled ingratiatingly and walked away, dropping the menus on the bar.

"No, but I'm going out there right now." Trent's tone was tight, and my idea that he was fixing Rosewood babies died. "Since you're with *Quen*, would you both meet me there?"

My lips parted, even as I heard the accusation in his tone. He wanted me there? With him?

"Rachel, are you there?" Trent asked, and I flushed, glancing at Quen before pushing the phone tighter to my ear.

"Yes. The hospital, right?" *Where all the news vans were? Swell.* I couldn't help but wonder if his invitation was because he wanted my professional opinion or simply to find out what Quen and I were doing.

"Rosewood wing," he said, his tone grim. "I doubt there will be any indication as to who took the infant, but I don't want evidence to be buried if the I.S. doesn't like what they find. If one of us is there, we will at least have the truth."

I nodded as Quen exchanged a few words with the bartender and slipped him a bill. The I.S. was an offshoot of the original FBI and local police forces before the Turn, responsible for hiding Inderland crimes before humans could find evidence that witches, werewolves, and vampires existed. Covering up the uncomfortable or unprofitable was in their blood.

"Rachel, may I talk to Quen?" Trent asked, shaking me out of my thoughts.

"Um, sure. I'll see you there." My stomach was in knots, and I held the phone out. "He wants to talk to you."

Quen looked at the phone, his expression never shifting as he reluctantly reached out. Turning sideways to me, he drew himself up. "Sa'han?" He hesitated. "Having dinner." Another pause. "Of course Ceri knows. It was her idea."

Ceri was in on this, too? Frowning, I forced my arms from my middle. Trent would be pissed. I knew I'd been when my mom and dad rented me a live-in personal security guy for a few months.

"No," Quen said firmly, and then again, "No. I'll see you there."

I could hear Trent complaining as Quen closed the phone, cutting him off midprotest. That wasn't going to go over very well, I decided, and when Quen gestured for me to head out before him, I meekly fell into place, my thoughts turning to the hospital.

Behind us people laughed and clinked glasses. Below, Cincinnati moved with her people, uncaring and unaware. It felt wrong now. Someone was stealing Rosewood babies. The "why" was ugly.

Quen was silent all the way to the elevator. He avoided my eyes as I handed him my ticket to give to the coat-check woman. I could have given it to her myself, but high society came with weird rules, and it was no skin off my nose. "You're not going to tell him?" I said, hoping he wanted to use the time it would take to get to the

hospital to come up with some story other than Quen's asking me to babysit Trent.

Gaze distant in thought, Quen shook out my shawl and I turned around, my head lowered. "You might be right," he said, and I shivered as the silk settled over my bare skin. "I may have acted without thought."

It was an honest answer, but Quen might be right as well. Trent didn't need a babysitter, but everyone needed someone to watch their back.

Two

Quen's car was warm, the seats heated and my vents aimed at me, making the escaping strands of my braid tickle my neck as we slowly wove through the twisty hospital campus. Feeling ill, I leaned toward the dash and peered through the curved glass, both anxious to get there and uncertain as to what I was going to tell Trent. It was starting to mist, and everything had a surreal glow. The tall main building looked foreboding in the rain, lights gleaming on its slick walls. That was not our destination. People got better—mostly—at the hospital. Where we were headed, the only healing was emotional.

The tires hissed on the wet pavement as we took a tight corner into a cul-de-sac. Three modest structures, identical apart from their color, were before us, I.S. cruisers and black Crown Vics parked in the drives and at the curbs. My lips curled in disgust at the news vans, bright lights spilling out along with heavy wires like grotesque umbilical cords running into one of the houses. It must have made their night to have their local story picked up nationwide.

The three two-story homes looked out of place in the otherwise institutional hospital setting. They were relatively new, the landscaping bushes still small and inadequate. It was Cincinnati's Rosewood wing where Rosewood babies were moved to, sometimes born here, but always dying here, never surviving. A lot of parents elected to take their baby home for his or her last days, but not all, and the homey atmosphere was a boon. Counselors were more prevalent than nursing staff. They hadn't had such a place when I'd been born, and as Quen parked his two-seater into a space too small for the official cars, I felt odd and melancholy.

Quen put the car in park, making no move to get out. I, too, leaned back into the plush seat, afraid almost. Blowing his breath out noisily, Quen turned to me. "I'm going to tell him we had dinner and talked about his security," he finally said, his eyes holding a hint of pleading. "I'm also going to tell him that I was asking your opinion if he was secure on his own merits, and that you said he was, but that if the situation changed that you would . . ."

My heart thumped as he let his words trail off into expectation, waiting for me to finish his sentence and tell him I'd watch Trent when he couldn't. That wasn't even mentioning the little white lie. I didn't know how I felt about that, and I searched Quen's expression. The shadow-light coming from the lit-up building made him look older, his worry clear. *Damn it all to hell.* "That if the situation changed that I'd be able to assist in keeping the girls safe," I said firmly, and Quen's expression became stoic.

"Very well, Tal Sa'han," he grumbled, and my eyebrows rose. Tal Sa'han? That was a new one. I would have asked him what it meant, but his voice had been mocking.

"Then let's go," I said, reaching for my bag. The little clutch bag felt too small as I

got out, and my clothes were totally inappropriate for a crime scene. The cool mist touched my face, and the thump of Quen's door surprised me. Dropping my eyes to the damp pavement, I shut my door as well.

I took a deep breath and lifted my chin, starting for the door, already propped open for the sporadic flow of people in and out. I couldn't help but notice the opening was almost twice as wide as usual. I hated oversize doors—or rather, I hated the wheelchairs they alluded to. A sudden wish to be anywhere but here struck me. I had escaped dying from Rosewood syndrome. It had taken almost all my early life to do it and it shaped me in ways I was only now figuring out, but the reminder was bittersweet.

Quen met me stride for stride. “Are you okay?”

We had gained the paved walk, which artistically meandered to give the appearance of distance and interest. It just looked fake to me. “Fine,” I said, my mood growing worse. I didn't want to be here—didn't like the memories being stirred up. Someone was stealing Rosewood babies, and what followed from there was enough to make my nights sleepless.

Head down, I stepped over the news van's cords, walking sideways to get through the door and flashing my ID to the I.S. guy. I think it was more Quen's and my fancy dress that got us in than my ID. The officer clearly didn't recognize me, but only someone who needed to be here would come dressed in formalwear. I'd have to remember that.

The cool night mist vanished, and I hesitated just inside the wide entryway, feeling Quen's silent, solid presence behind me. A set of stairs led up, probably to the nurses' quarters; the kitchen was behind the stairway, down a short hallway. There were two living rooms, one to either side of the door. Both of them were full of people standing around talking, but only one had the lights of the news crews. It was warm, even for me, and I didn't like the excited tone of the newswoman asking the distraught mother how she felt now that her baby—thriving against all odds—had been stolen.

“What a slime,” I whispered with a surge of anger, and Quen cleared his throat. Someone had pieced together that the Rosewood syndrome was actually an expression of too much demon enzyme and was “harvesting” demon blood while the babies still lived. I'd be dead, too, if Trent's father hadn't modified my mitochondria to supply the enzyme that blocked the lethal action of the first enzyme that actually invoked demon magic. It was a mouthful that basically meant he'd enabled me to survive being born a demon.

Quen's hand cupped my elbow, and he gently pulled me out of someone's way. Numb, I looked for a familiar face—somewhere to start. My evening dress was garnering odd looks, but it also kept people away. That stupid newscaster was still interviewing the parents, and I.S. agents stood at the outskirts hoping to get some airtime. No one recognized me, thank God, and I felt guilty for being surrounded by so much grief—grief that my parents had endured and triumphed over. Damn it, I would not feel guilty for having survived.

“There he is,” Quen breathed in relief, and I followed his gaze to the back of the living room to the hallway running from the nurseries to the kitchen.

“And Felix,” I said, surprised to find Trent talking to the undead vampire. Or rather, he was talking to Nina, the young vampire that Felix currently liked doing his

aboveground talking through. The young woman was looking thinner than the last time I'd seen her, better dressed and confident, but decidedly peaked, as if she'd been on too many amphetamines for the last four months. It was hard to see her behind the suave, collected undead vamp controlling her body, living through her for a few hours at a time.

It was about what I had expected. Serving as an undead master's mouthpiece wasn't safe for either party—the old vampire was reminded too strongly of what it was like to be alive and began to pine for it, and the young was given more power running through his or her mind and body to handle alone. It was a knife's edge that only the most experienced attempted at this level, and I was starting to think that the relationship had passed the point where it could be ended safely.

Concerned, I bit my lip, wondering if the I.S. was questioning Trent about the abductions. But as I watched, I decided that though Trent had proved he could be calm even while being arrested for murder at his own wedding, he didn't have the guarded air of someone being grilled for kidnapping. He was probably getting the real story, not the canned tripe they were feeding the reporters.

Trent's short, translucently blond hair next to Nina's thick shoulder-length wash of Hispanic elegance was striking. The woman herself had no political sway, but Felix was shining through, making the woman unusually sophisticated and in control—and slightly masculine in her mannerisms as she stood with her knees too far apart for her professional skirt and suit coat.

"Running into Trent and Felix at a crime scene is starting to become a habit," I said as I rocked into motion, moving slowly to avoid the reporters as we crossed the room. Seeing Trent, I felt my entire perception of Quen shift. Oh, both men had grace, but Quen's was born in the confidence that he could handle any situation. Trent's was from a lifetime of being listened to and taken more than seriously. They were both dressed well, but Trent's suit was tailored to every inch of his trim, sexy self, and it was growing obvious that Quen would rather be in his usual loose-fitting security uniform. Though I'd seen both men take down an attacker, Quen would always use the minimal amount of force, whereas Trent would be a conflict of visions—elegance coupled with savagery and a frightening grace, magic sung into existence.

Trent felt my gaze on him, his expression startled until he hid the emotion. Only after running his gaze up and down—appreciatively taking in my evening gown—did he touch Felix's shoulder to point me out. The young/old I.S. operative turned, beaming, the young woman's normal mannerisms gone as Felix took complete control.

"Rachel!" Nina said a shade too loudly and with an exaggerated slowness as Quen and I tucked into the marginally quieter hallway where we could still watch what happened. "I'm surprised to see you here. Is Ivy back yet?"

With a guarded air, I shook both my head and her hand. "Not until next Saturday," I said, pulling my hand from hers, not liking Felix's interest in my roommate. "I was at dinner when I heard the news and came over because . . ." I hesitated, my grip tightening on my clutch bag. *Because I wanted to know who was kidnapping babies who could invoke demon magic? Sure, that sounded good.*

Trent cleared his throat as the silence became awkward. "Because I asked her to," he said, reaching to shake my hand. It was missing the last two digits, but he hid their absence well until our fingers met. The glint of a ring twin to my own was still on his

index finger, and I hid my hand behind my back, not wanting Felix to notice and ask. “Hello, Rachel. I appreciate you . . . changing your plans.” The hesitation had been slight, but it was there. Beside me, Quen cleared his throat, clearly not wanting to explain in front of Felix.

I don't know if I want to lie to you anymore, I thought, warming at his touch and wondering if I had felt a faint tingle of spilling energy before our fingers had parted. “Who did this?” I said, trying to block out the woman sobbing on the couch. My God, didn't newspeople have any soul at all?

Nina laughed lightly, Felix apparently immune to the human tragedy. “Let me consult my magic ball,” she said, then sobered when both Trent and I stared at her. We weren't the only ones. That laugh had traveled.

“Quen, thank you for bringing Ms. Morgan out,” Trent said as he inclined his head.

“It wasn't a problem. Sa'han . . .” Quen paused. “If I can have a second of your time?”

“In a moment.” Trent beamed one of his professional smiles, and I slumped ever so slightly. As long as Felix was here, Trent would be the epitome of Teflon—knowing nothing, seeing nothing, accomplishing nothing—boring, boring, boring. He was also ticked. I could tell by the faint rim of red on his ears. He wouldn't talk to Quen until they were alone, and until then, he was going to believe the worst. Three days in a car was having unforeseen benefits. “I hope you and Rachel had a pleasant dinner.”

That was catty for him, and I slipped my arm into Quen's, startling both men for different reasons. “He bought me sparkling wine. It doesn't give me a headache like most wines do.”

Trent's attention lingered on my arm in Quen's, then rose to Quen's eyes. Slowly Quen pulled away, stiff and uncomfortable.

“Quen,” Nina said as she looked at the reporters now asking the staff for their views. “Since you're here, could you give me your professional opinion on something?”

Quen blinked in surprise, his hands behind his back. “Me?”

Nina was bobbing her head. “Yes. That is, if Trent will let me steal you away for a few moments. You're well versed in a variety of security techniques both mundane and magic,” she said, one hand reaching out to touch his shoulder, the other extended to escort him deeper into the building to the bedrooms.

“Personal security, yes. I don't see how I can help.”

Drawn by the living/dead vampire, Quen brushed by me, leaving the scent of wool and cinnamon. “I'd be most appreciative if you would look at the security system here and tell me what would be needed to circumvent it,” Nina said.

The man glanced back at Trent, and when Trent shrugged, Quen said, “It would be my pleasure. Ah, I don't want to give testimony in court.” He continued, “This is strictly my casual opinion,” his voice going faint behind the noise in the front room as they walked away.

I couldn't help but smile. It was quickly followed by the sour emotion of envy. “Always a bridesmaid,” I muttered as I shifted to stand shoulder to shoulder with Trent. No one ever asked *my* opinion of a crime scene. Reconsidering, I glanced at Trent. At least not before the vacuuming guys were done.

If I didn't know better, Felix had taken Quen away intentionally so Trent and I