

One

As Gabriel's Jag tore up the country road, I stared at the house ahead. Flames blazed from every window. An ambulance sat in the driveway, lights flashing. As I saw that, I exhaled. The only witness who could set my father free was in that house, and we'd been terrified we'd finally found her only to lose her again. But the ambulance said otherwise.

That's when they brought out the stretchers. With body bags.

"Maybe it's not Imogen," I said.

Gabriel parked, and as we walked toward the burning house, I surveyed the personnel on duty. I chose my target and picked up speed as Gabriel fell back. We were almost an hour outside Chicago, and these police might be state troopers, but that didn't mean they wouldn't know Gabriel by reputation . . . as one of the city's most notorious defense lawyers.

I approached the young officer left guarding the perimeter and extended my hand. "Liv Jones. We've been looking for one of the women renting this house. Imogen Seale. She's a material witness in a multiple homicide."

The trooper peered at me with a *Don't I know you from somewhere* look. But it was dark and smoky and tonight I was just Liv Jones. Not Olivia Taylor-Jones, former debutante daughter of the Mills & Jones department store owner. Certainly no relation to Eden Larsen, daughter of notorious serial killers Todd and Pamela Larsen.

"Hope she wasn't a valuable witness," the trooper said.

"Kind of," I said with a wry smile. "I'm guessing she didn't survive."

"Dead before we arrived, I'm afraid," she said. "Her mother fell asleep smoking on the sofa. You'd really think people would know better."

"No smoke detector?"

She shook her head. "In old rentals like this, nobody checks until something happens. A fifty-dollar investment could have saved two lives."

“Any chance I can see the bodies?” I asked. “If she’s definitely my witness, I need to move fast in another direction.”

“I hear you,” she said, and waved for me to follow. “And I hate to see a killer walk free. Especially a multiple murderer.”

Mmm, yeah, sorry, but actually, if we win this one, we do set a multiple murderer free. It’s a package deal—getting my father out of jail means freeing my mother, too.

As we walked, Gabriel fell in beside me. When the trooper glanced at him, I said simply, “My colleague.”

“Organized crime?” she said.

I choked on a laugh, and she quickly added, “I mean the case. I can imagine you’d need security for something like that.”

It wasn’t the first time Gabriel had been mistaken for my bodyguard. When we met, I’d pegged him as hired muscle myself. Even the expensive cut of his suit had only made me amend that to “hired muscle for someone with a lot of money.” He was at least six-four and built like a linebacker. It was more than his size, though. He just had a look that made people get out of the way.

The trooper said something to one of the paramedics, who nodded and opened the smaller body bag. It was Imogen’s mother. Death seemed to have been from smoke inhalation, with signs of suffocation and minimal burning, mostly to her clothing. Which meant there was no chance we were looking at the badly burned remains of a stranger. And the corpse in the other body bag? Imogen herself, mistress of Marty Tyson, one of my mother’s victims. The only person who could have testified that Tyson had actually killed the first couple my parents were supposed to have murdered. That was the reasonable doubt we’d needed to overturn the conviction.

And now we’d lost it.

Twenty-two years ago, my mother killed four people so that I could walk again. She'd made a deal with the Wild Hunt—the Cŵn Annwn—to take the lives of four killers. In return, her two-year-old daughter's severe spina bifida would disappear. And it had. I don't even remember having it.

For twenty-two years I didn't remember my parents, either. They'd been in prison, the Cŵn Annwn unable to do more than make incarceration easier for them. Of course, what the Cŵn Annwn never knew was that my father played no role in those murders. He'd gone to jail because he believed my mother did the right thing—the brave and strong thing. He stayed there because freedom would come at the cost of testifying against her, erasing any chance she had of winning an appeal.

Now, with Imogen dead, I wasn't sure either of them had any chance at all.

The next morning, Gabriel drove me to work. He'd spent the night at my house in Cainsville. In the guest room, I hasten to add. We'd been up for hours discussing the case. Now, as he pulled into the laneway of his office greystone, his topic of conversation had nothing to do with work and everything to do with distracting me from fretting over my parents' appeal. Gabriel had put himself through law school with illegal gaming, and he was finally sharing details.

“Blackjack,” he said as we got out of the car. “That was my specialty. It's simple and efficient.”

“It's also one of the easiest games to cheat in, isn't it? Counting cards?”

“No one counted cards at my table. Not after the first time.”

As we walked around the building, the front door swung open, no one behind it. I stopped short. When I blinked, the door was shut.

A door opening on its own. The sign of an unwanted visitor.

“Olivia?”

I shook off the omen. Given what Gabriel did for a living, we got plenty of unwanted visitors.

“Sorry. Missed my cue,” I said as we walked through the front door. “So, tell me, Gabriel, what’d you do the first time you caught someone counting cards?”

He studied me.

“Well, are you going to tell me?” I said. “Or is this one of those stories you tease me with and then say *Whoops, looks like we’re at the office already. I’ll finish later?*”

His lips twitched. “You like it when I do that. It builds suspense.”

“I *hate* it when you do that. It’s sadistic. You have five seconds—”

“Gabriel?” Lydia stepped out of the office, closing the door behind her.

He bristled at the interruption.

“Client?” I guessed.

Lydia nodded, and we backed farther down the hall. She glanced toward the stairs, but there was no sign of the other tenants. Still, she lowered her voice as she said, “It’s a woman. She claims to be a relative.”

Gabriel grumbled under his breath. The fact Gabriel had a legit job made him one of the few “white” sheep in the Walsh family. So, yes, I was sure relatives showed up now and then, in need of his services. Which he would happily give, providing they could pay his fees.

“Prospects?” he said to Lydia.

Lydia’s look said this one wouldn’t be paying her bills anytime soon.

“I’ll get rid of her,” I said.

Gabriel hesitated. While he hated relinquishing control, this was the efficient solution. Also, listening to some distant relative sob on his sofa was both terribly awkward and a pointless waste of billable hours.

“The sooner we get rid of her, the sooner we can get to work on our appeal strategy,” I said. “I’d appreciate that.”

He nodded. “All right. I’ll go get you a mocha. Lydia?”

“Chai latte, please,” she said.

As Lydia opened the office door, I raised my voice and said, “So, yeah, don’t expect Gabriel anytime soon. This courthouse issue could take all day. We need to—”

I stopped short, as if Lydia hadn’t mentioned a client in the reception area. When I got a look at the woman, though, I didn’t need to feign my shock.

I couldn’t guess at her age. Maybe sixty, but in a haggard, hard-living way that suggested the truth was about a decade younger. Her coloring matched Gabriel’s, what his great-aunt Rose called “black Irish”—pale skin, blue eyes, and wavy black hair. She also had the sturdy Walsh build that Gabriel shared with Rose, along with their square face, widow’s peak, and pale blue eyes.

Yet I already knew this woman claimed to be a relative, so it wasn’t the resemblance that stopped me in my tracks.

I’d seen her face before. In the photo of a dead woman.

I had to be mistaken, of course. The dead woman had also been a Walsh, so there was a strong resemblance—that’s all.

I walked over, hand extended as she rose. “I’m—”

“The infamous Eden Larsen,” she said, and my hackles rose. I am Eden Larsen, as much as I’m Olivia Taylor-Jones. But calling me by my birth name is the social equivalent of a smirk and a smackdown. *I know who you really are, Miss Larsen.*

I responded with the kind of smile I learned from my adoptive mother. The smile of a society matron plucking the dagger from her back and calmly wiping off the blood before it stains.

“It’s Olivia,” I said. “And you are?”

A smile played at her lips, and that smile did more than raise my hackles. My gut twisted, and I wanted to shove her out the door. Just grab her arm and muscle her out before she said another word.

“I’m Seanna Walsh,” she said. “Gabriel’s mother.”

Two

“Seanna Walsh?” I forced a laugh. “Uh, no. If you’re going to impersonate a long-lost relative, I’d suggest you pick one who’s actually alive.”

“Don’t I look alive to you, Eden?”

Behind me, Lydia said, “I believe she asked you to call her Olivia.”

Lydia’s gaze laser-beamed on the woman, as if ready to throw her out. Gabriel’s assistant may be well past retirement age, but I didn’t doubt she could do it. When I shook my head, though, Lydia walked stiffly to her desk and lowered herself onto the front of it, perched there, ready for action.

“You are not Seanna Walsh,” I said. “I’ve seen photographs of her, both before and after her death. You may resemble Seanna, but those coroner pics guarantee you are not her.”

“And I guarantee I am. The pictures were staged.”

“Bullshit,” I said, bearing down on her. “You cannot stage—”

“With enough money, you certainly can.”

“Which only proves you are not Seanna Walsh, who never had a dime she didn’t stick up her arm.”

“So it’s true, then. You and my son are more than coworkers.”

Footsteps sounded in the hallway.

“Get—” I began.

“Get where? Under the desk? Behind the bathroom door? Where exactly are you going to hide me, Eden? And why bother, if I’m not really his mother?”

The footfalls continued past the office door. Just one of Gabriel’s upstairs tenants.

I took out my phone and texted him. *Can you stay away longer, pls?*

The *please* would tell Gabriel I was serious. A moment later, he replied saying he was supposed to visit a client at Cook County this morning and should he just do that?

Yes, pls.

I pocketed my phone and turned to the woman.

“Sit down.”

She gave that spine-raking smile again. “So you *are* sleeping with my son. I notice you didn’t deny it.”

“Gabriel and I are friends. Good friends.”

“Gabriel doesn’t have friends. No one wants to hang out with a freak.”

I felt Lydia’s hand on my arm before I even realized I was surging forward, my fists clenched.

In that moment, I forgot that this couldn’t possibly be Seanna Walsh. That was who I saw, who I heard, and I wanted to wrap my hands around her throat and choke the life out of her. It was only when I realized what I was thinking that I exhaled fast and hard.

“Sit down,” I said again.

She started for the door.

I stepped into her path. “I told you—”

“No, Eden. You are adorable, really, but completely out of your league. Go back to painting your nails or picking out a new wardrobe or whatever your type does.”

I lifted my hand . . . to point a gun at her forehead. “This is what my type does. Or have you forgotten who my parents are?”

She laughed. “You aren’t that girl, Miss Eden. You might carry that gun and call yourself a private investigator, but those blue jeans cost a week’s salary. You’re a trust-fund baby, and *my* baby is going to fleece you for every penny you have. I hope you realize he’s running a long con here. Give the debutante her bad-girl dream, empty her trust fund, and then dump her pretty little ass.”

I could have told her Gabriel doesn't need my money. That he owned this building. Owned a million-dollar condo. Kept a hundred grand in cash under his bed for "emergencies." But that would mean giving her some idea exactly how much *her* mark was worth. So I shot her.

The woman fell back, yowling as if the bullet hadn't barely scraped her leg.

I turned to Lydia. "Please call the police and tell them I have been forced to shoot an intruder. It's only a scratch, but they still may want to send an ambulance."

Lydia picked up the phone. The woman lunged to grab it.

I motioned for Lydia to hang up and said calmly, "Are you going to sit down now?"

"You—you shot—"

"I grazed you." I grabbed a tissue box from Lydia's desk and tossed it at the woman. "Wipe up the blood. If you play nice, I'll get you bandages. I might even toss in five bucks to buy a patch for your jeans. Now sit. Lydia? Any chance you could grab me a mocha?"

Gabriel had a rule about not involving Lydia in trouble, and the legality of that bullet graze was already highly questionable. When I mouthed, "Please?" she nodded with reluctance.

"I'll be right around the corner," she said.

I waited until she was gone. The woman still wasn't sitting. She wasn't making any move to leave, either, so I decided not to press the point.

"Seanna Walsh is dead," I said.

"No, Seanna Walsh was *playing* dead." She tossed bloodied tissues aside. "I knew this guy—a police sergeant—who used to make problems disappear for a price. We had an arrangement. One night he brought dope to a party, where he got loaded and told me he nabbed a half kilo of coke from the evidence locker. I saw an opportunity."

"To do what? Steal it?"

She snorted. “That would be stupid. I’m not stupid.”

I bit my tongue.

“I was dealing with other shit at the time,” she said. “I’d conned a guy who blew it all out of proportion. Put a bounty on my head. A *bounty*.” She sounded genuinely insulted. “I cut a deal with this sergeant. I’d keep my mouth shut about the dope if he’d help me disappear—stage my death so no one would come after me.”

“No one even realized Seanna Walsh was dead until this spring. Fifteen years after she disappeared.”

“He screwed me over. The cops were supposed to find this Jane Doe who OD’d—I knew where her body was. My guy would wait six months and then swap her photos with mine and have someone ID me as the dead woman.”

“That is the stupidest scheme I’ve ever heard,” I said. “One, someone could have ID’d the real body, which would have ruined everything. Two, six months isn’t enough time for those who actually worked on the dead woman’s case to forget what she looked like.”

“Do you really think anyone gives a shit about some addict who offs herself in an empty building? She was a white chick with dark hair and blue eyes. Close enough. The problem was that, six months later, I was long gone, so this sergeant decided he could swap the photos and leave it at that. Skip the positive ID. I spent years—*years*—on the run because the asshole who put out the bounty on me figured I bolted. All because that bastard cop couldn’t hold up his end of the deal.”

“And Gabriel?”

Her face screwed up. “What?”

“His mother left him. At fifteen. She walked away without a word. Without leaving him one penny.”

A dismissive eye roll. “Gabriel could look after himself. He’d already been doing it for years. Not that he ever contributed anything. Just made enough for himself.”

“He was a *child*,” I snarled. “He shouldn’t have had to take care of *anyone*.”

“Why not? Everyone does, eventually. Better to learn that lesson early. And look where it got him.” She waved around the office. “A big-shot lawyer. Drives a fancy car. Lives in a fancy apartment. He wouldn’t have all this if I’d coddled him.”

“Get out.”

“Oh, so now you want me to leave? Make up your mind, girl.”

I pulled out the gun and pointed it at her head. “Get out now.”

She started to make some sarcastic comment. Then she met my gaze, shut her mouth, and limped out the door.

When Lydia returned, I was in the bathroom, plucking hairs from Gabriel’s brush and putting them into a plastic bag. I emerged, and her gaze traveled from the bag in my hand to the bag on her desk, containing the bloodied tissues.

“You really think it could be her?” she said.

“I think I need that answer as fast as I can get it,” I said. “I’ll pay whatever it takes.”

Three

Cook County Jail was about a mile from the office. My car was at home in Cainsville, so I walked to the prison, after texting Gabriel to say I was coming. He usually left his cell in the car, and I was almost there before he replied.

I met him in the parking lot. “Lydia says your schedule is now appointment-free for the day. Any chance we can work at my place? We need to talk, and I don’t want that woman showing up at your office again.”

He paused before opening his car door. “May I ask what she wanted?”

“We can talk at my place.”

He got in. When my door closed, he cleared his throat and then said, “You’re obviously shaken, which means it was more than a stray relative seeking free legal advice. I’ve mentioned that I faced a false paternity suit before . . .”

I burst out laughing, mostly in relief. The paternity suit had been a scam that backfired spectacularly. Anyone who knew Gabriel wouldn’t have attempted it. He’d never be careless about anything that could cost him money.

He continued, “Ah, well, I can assure you, it won’t be the first time a relative—real or otherwise—popped from the woodwork hoping for a handout. I’m sure your family has their share of experience with that. And in mine, there are even more empty hands and wild stories intended to fill them. But we can work as well at your house as in the office, and Rose has been asking us to tea. Text, and tell her we’ll come at four.”

We drove to my house. Well, it’s not actually mine. I’m halfway through a two-month trial run. The elders offered me the Carew house for an excellent price, purportedly because it belonged to my great-great-grandmother and has stood empty for years. The truth is that they’re desperate for me to put down roots in Cainsville.

It's a gorgeous place. A stately Queen Anne with a half tower, the tower forming a window seat in my bedroom. In the past month, I'd been making the house mine. I'd lived in a Cainsville apartment for six months and never even added a throw pillow. Here, I had pillows, art, garden furniture . . . I still claimed I hadn't made up my mind, but I was feathering this nest as fast as I could.

We walked in the front door. I kicked off my shoes. Gabriel lined his up on the mat, which he'd bought last week. He might counsel me not to make a decision too hastily, but I wasn't the only one adding the little touches that turned this house into a home.

Gabriel headed straight to the kitchen to warm up the coffee machine. Even if we don't have coffee right away, he'll make that detour, as if the front door leads directly to the machine. Then he joined me in the parlor, where I'd curled up on the couch. He took the other end.

I shifted to sit sideways. "There's no easy way to say this. The woman who came to the office claims to be your mother."

His brows shot up. "She claims that my mother isn't Seanna Walsh? That's a first."

"This woman says she *is* Seanna."

He looked at me, those eerily pale blue eyes fixed on mine, and for a moment that's all I could see—those ice-blue irises ringed with a blue so dark it looked black. Then he laughed, and the sound was so unexpected, I jumped.

"I don't mean to laugh," he said. "Obviously, you were concerned about how I might react to this impostor. I appreciate that concern, Olivia. And yes, as much as I'd like to say that I don't care—*never* cared—the truth is that until six months ago this was indeed my greatest fear—that I'd walk into the office one day and Seanna would be sitting there with her hand out. I shouldn't say I was glad to learn she was dead. But I was. It lifted a weight."

"I don't blame you."

“My mother is clearly dead,” he said. “Dealing with an impersonator will not rattle me. Nor will it resurrect old memories.”

I wanted to leave it at that. Shove it aside until the DNA test came back, and once it was negative, I could breathe a sigh of relief. But Gabriel knew me too well.

When he saw my expression, he said, “You don’t honestly believe there’s a chance she is Seanna, do you?”

“Of course not. I saw the coroner’s photos. Yes, this woman looks like her, but she’d need to, in order to pull it off. And her story is preposterous.”

“What *is* her story?”

“Oh, some crap about a bargain with a cop.” I rose from the sofa and headed for the kitchen. “Do you want coffee? Rose brought over fresh chocolate chip cookies. Your favorite.”

I grabbed two mugs and stuck one under the coffeemaker as I hit the button. I was taking out a plate for the cookies when a form darkened the kitchen doorway, shadow stretching across the sun-dappled floor.

“What exactly was her story?” he asked.

“Like I said, some bullshit—”

“I’d like to hear the whole thing.”

I told him. When I finished, he walked to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. Then he stiffly lowered himself into it.

“It’s ridiculous,” I said, bringing over the coffees, sloshing slightly. I put them down and crossed my arms to hide my shaking hands. “Fake her death to escape a bounty? Not even *actually* fake it, but only switch photos six months later and expect she’ll be legally declared dead? There are a million easier ways to disappear. It’s a preposterous scheme.”

“Seanna’s always were.” He took the coffee but only placed it in front of him. “She was a petty thief who fancied herself a con artist. That was her idea of career aspiration. Unfortunately, she lacked the intelligence—or the patience—to carry out a proper con. This is exactly the sort of thing she’d come up with and then be shocked when the officer didn’t hold up his end of the bargain.”

“It isn’t her.”

He ran his thumb over the coffee mug handle.

“It’s not,” I said.

“Of course it isn’t,” he replied, but a little too slowly, his gaze still fixed on his mug. “It can’t be.”

He turned the mug. Still didn’t take a sip. Just turned it. Then he straightened and took out his phone.

“We’re going to need to deal with it, though,” he said. “I don’t have time to argue with this woman. We’ll jump straight to disproving her claim through a DNA analysis. That will mean you’ll need to find some way to collect hers.” He caught my look. “You already have it?”

I didn’t answer.

“You have it, and you’ve sent it in.” He nodded and put his phone away. “Dare I ask how you obtained it?”

“I shot her.”

His lips twitched. “You . . .”

“She pissed me off.”

He choked on a laugh. “I see.”

“She *really* pissed me off.”

“Dare I ask what she said?”

He was still smiling, but my cheeks heated, and I walked to the counter to fetch the cookies. “It doesn’t matter. She pissed me off, so I shot her in the leg. It was just a graze, but I got enough blood for Lydia to send off for a DNA analysis.”

His smile evaporated. “Lydia was there?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking clearly or I’d never have shot someone in front of her. I got Lydia out after that, though, before the woman gave her story.”

He relaxed. “All right, then. The DNA analysis is under way. While I doubt this woman will return to the office today, I will call Lydia with instructions. We’ll also need to tell Rose immediately, should this woman attempt to contact her.”

“Do you want to call Rose?”

“No, this must be done in person. It is a complicated situation, as I’m sure you’re aware. I’d like to tell her in person.”

Seanna was the connection between them, yet to Gabriel, she was the nightmare who didn’t deserve the name of mother, while Rose remembered the beloved niece whose life had gone horribly wrong. For Rose, it had been difficult to see the monster her niece had become and not want to say, “But she isn’t really like that, it’s the fae blood, the drugs, the alcohol . . .” The one person she can never say that to is Gabriel, because it trivializes his own experience.

Gabriel sipped his coffee, his gaze fixed on a spot across the kitchen.

“I have laundry I could fold,” I said.

“If you’re offering me time alone, just say so, Olivia. Unless your laundry is in urgent need of folding, I do not require time for myself. In fact, I’d prefer to do just about anything else right now, including laundry.”

“Let’s work, then.”

I fetched my laptop bag from the front hall. TC followed me into the kitchen and hopped onto the table to sit in front of Gabriel. They stared at each other. It wasn't a territorial stare-down. It wasn't even TC hinting he'd like a pat. It was, I think, their version of a greeting.

I see you're back.

Yes, I am.

All right, then.

TC hopped off the table, walked to his bowl, and waited. I filled it, and by the time I was finished, Gabriel had relocated to the parlor. I sat beside him on the sofa, my back resting against his shoulder as I opened my laptop.

"I'm going to put aside my parents' appeal for today and clear a few others," I said. "First up, Monty Miller. I'm stalled at—"

My phone chirped with a text. When I made no movement to answer, Gabriel fished the phone from my pocket and checked. The possibility that might be considered rude never occurs to him.

"Ricky," he said as he passed it over.

Ricky Gallagher is my ex. I don't call him that, though. An ex is someone you've left behind, usually with the associated nastiness and pain of a breakup. I won't pretend there wasn't pain in ours. No nastiness, though. Ricky had decided we should step back, for very good and very selfless reasons, and I'd had to agree. Which doesn't mean it was easy. Or that I don't light up, seeing his name on my cell-phone screen, before I remember that things have changed. The fact we texted about twenty times a day meant there were a lot of those little stabs of grief. But that constant contact also meant we were navigating the transition from lovers to friends better than I had dared hope.

He'd texted: *I thought hurricane season was over.*

I chuckled and replied: *No hurricanes here.*

Him: *Rub it in.*

Me: *Florida's a bit windy, I take it?*

He was in Miami doing work for his father. I had no idea exactly what kind of work. That's for the best, considering I work for his family lawyer . . . and Ricky's family business is running a biker gang.

We texted for a few minutes. Gabriel read over my shoulder, presuming if it was private, I'd have moved away. After a few back-and-forths, Ricky said: *Got a favor to ask. You busy?*

When I hesitated, Gabriel leaned over and typed: *No.*

Ricky: *It's Lloe. Ioan says she isn't eating.*

Lloe was short for Lloergan, Ricky's hound. A fae hound. "Cŵn Annwn" literally translates to "Hounds of the Otherworld." Lloergan was a badly damaged *cŵn* Ricky had rescued. She lived with his grandfather, Ioan, who was the leader of the local Cŵn Annwn. Yes, Ricky was descended from the Wild Hunt. He wasn't just any human descendant, either. He was the living embodiment of Arawn, legendary lord of the Otherworld. Which meant Lloergan was absolutely devoted to him. But, being a biker and part-time MBA student, there was no place in his life for a dog right now, so she stayed with Ioan, and Ricky took her when he could.

It had been three days since Ricky left for Miami, and we'd hoped Lloergan would be fine. Obviously not.

Ricky texted: *Can u stop by? Take her 4 a run? That might help. Or if u could dog-sit . . .*

Of course, I had no problem looking after Lloe. Given the circumstances with this Seanna impostor, though . . .

Gabriel took my phone. He typed: *That's fine.* Then he erased and rephrased it in Olivia-speak: *Sure, no problem.*

“Otherwise, you’ll worry about her,” Gabriel said as he sent the message. “And with this woman coming around, I’m not averse to the idea of you having a supernatural guard dog right now.”

Thx! Ricky texted back. *I owe u.*

I signed off with Ricky, and I was putting away my phone when TC slunk past, heading for his spot in the front window.

“Hey, cat,” I said. “We’re bringing home a friend for you. A doggie big enough to devour you in a single gulp. Is that okay?”

He turned a baleful stare on me, as if he understood. I’m convinced TC isn’t just a cat, no more than Lloergan is just a dog. Maybe someday, when I’m moments from perishing at the hands of an intruder, TC will save me in a sudden and awe-inspiring display of supernatural power. Or maybe he’ll decide I haven’t given him enough tuna that week and leave me to my fate. He’s a cat, so I figure my chances are about fifty-fifty.

When footsteps sounded on the porch, TC hissed. I glanced out the window, saw Ida, and groaned. TC hissed again.

“Excellent instincts,” I said to the cat. “Now can you make her disappear?”

He tore off up the stairs.

“That’s not what I meant!” I called after him.

Like the other Cainsville elders, Ida is fae. As for why she was on my doorstep . . . Well, it begins with Welsh lore. The story of Mallt-y-Nos. Matilda of the Night. Matilda of the Hunt.

According to the myth, on the eve of her marriage to a fae prince, Matilda begged her betrothed to let her ride with the Cŵn Annwn one last time. He said that if she did, the world of the fae would close to her forever. She still couldn’t resist and ran to her old friend, leader of the Cŵn Annwn, and there she was trapped, forced to lead the Wild Hunt for eternity.

The truth was a little more complex. That story starts with two boys and a girl. A Tylwyth Teg prince: Gwynn ap Nudd. A Cŵn Annwn prince: Arawn. And Matilda, a *dynes hysbys* girl, half fae and half Hunt. The three grew up as best friends, and the boys agreed that to preserve their friendship—and peace between their people—they would never court Matilda. Of course, they forgot to tell *her* that. She fell for Gwynn, who promptly abandoned his promise. When Arawn found out, he was furious and the two young men made another pact: if Matilda went to Arawn the night before her wedding, she was his.

Again they didn't inform Matilda because, you know, she might have told them they were idiots. The big night came. When Matilda ran off for one last Hunt with Arawn, the world of the Tylwyth Teg closed in a ring of fire.

As soon as Matilda saw that, she raced back to Gwynn, and both young men tried to save her, only to watch her perish in the flames. Cue centuries of animosity, the princes becoming kings, each blaming the other for the loss of their beloved Matilda.

The story didn't end even on their deaths. The three actors are continually reborn. Not reincarnation exactly, but some essence of the originals living on in new players. It is said that if a new Matilda aligns herself with one side over the other—Tylwyth Teg or Cŵn Annwn—she brings unfettered access to the elemental resources that keep the fae alive. In the modern world, those resources—clean air and water and earth—are in ever-diminishing supply, so for both fae and Huntsman, getting a Matilda meant winning the survival lottery.

As might be obvious, I am the new Matilda. I had yet to declare an alliance. I had no idea how to even *make* that choice.

While there was no reason I couldn't choose Arawn as a lover but support the Tylwyth Teg instead, that's not how anyone presumes it will work, so both sides hope if I choose their "champion," it will seal the deal. And those champions? Ricky as the new Arawn. Gabriel as Gwynn.

Ida banged the knocker. I groaned again. Gabriel shook his head and went to answer the door.

“I thought you were over the fae compulsion thing,” I said.

“I am. But either we answer or we remain trapped in this house until Ida and the elders decide to leave town.”

“I don’t think they ever leave.”

“Exactly my point.” He opened the door. “Hello, Ida.”

“We’d like to speak to Liv.”

I walked into the hall and saw that “we” meant Ida and her consort, Walter. There was no sign of Veronica, which suggested they were going behind her back for this visit. Veronica had a habit—terribly annoying to Ida—of insisting I not be treated like a lottery ticket found on their doorstep.

“I know why you’re here,” Gabriel said. “By contractual agreement, you have one week before you can begin your campaign to win Olivia. You are hoping to open preliminary talks, so on that date you may begin full negotiations. The answer is no. You will wait another week.”

“It’s a ridiculous contract.”

“Then you ought not to have signed it.”

Ida glowered at him. The problem with having humans as the living embodiments of Gwynn, Arawn, and Matilda? It’s like trying to draft all-star quarterbacks who don’t give a shit about football.

“If you’ll excuse us . . .” Gabriel said, waving me to the door.

I grabbed things and squeezed past Ida and Walter with a quick, “Hey, how’s it going? Sorry to run. Gotta pick up a hound.”

“A what?” Ida said, following me down the front steps.

“Hound. *Cŵn*. Ricky’s. With him away in Miami, she’s not eating, so I’m bringing her here.” I walked backward. “That’s okay, right?”

She gave me a look. A *cŵn* in Cainsville meant a spy in enemy territory.

“We could do an exchange,” I said. “Make Ioan take one of Cainsville’s owls. Or a gargoyle. I could insist that Ioan prop one up by his door to keep an eye on him while I have Lloergan here. They’re stonework spies, right?”

“There’s no point in fishing regarding the gargoyles,” Ida said. “We will be very happy to explain everything . . . as soon as you lift the terms of our agreement.”

“Oh, fine. One last thing,” I said. “If a woman shows up claiming to be Seanna Walsh, can you give her something to drink? Whatever it is you guys use to send someone into permanent la-la land. That’d be swell.”

“Seanna—? Did you say Seanna Walsh?”

“Gotta run,” I said, hopping into the car before she could reply.

Four

Ioan wasn't thrilled when I showed up with Gabriel in tow. He was gracious enough, though, having learned that anything else makes me surly. Gabriel, Ricky, and I fight against our roles as pawns by sticking together. That's where the original three failed. We will not repeat their mistakes.

On the return drive to Cainsville, I sat in the back with Lloergan. *Under* her mostly, given her size. I had a bag of her food, and she was taking pieces from me. As she ate, I rubbed her good ear. The other is little more than a ragged stump, and she's partially blind in one eye, old injuries from an attack that killed the rest of her pack.

After that attack, Lloergan had been found by a twisted bastard who didn't deserve the name of Huntsman. He'd helped her recover from her injuries . . . but only so she could serve him. When we took his hound, he'd fled to parts unknown.

All of that left Lloergan a bit of a mess, maimed from the attack and suffering from years of psychological abuse. She was improving, though. Her coat gleamed. Her ribs no longer showed. Perhaps more importantly, she didn't cower before the Huntsmen and their hounds. Her psychic bond with the Cŵn Annwn had been severed in the attack, but we'd seen hints of it reforming with both Ricky and me.

Gabriel drove along a back road. Snow had begun to fall, and people hadn't yet remembered how to drive in winter, so it was safer staying off the highway.

As I traced a flake down the side window, I said, "Solstice, right?"

"Hmm?"

"Cainsville celebrates Solstice, not Christmas."

"They acknowledge Christmas. They decorate the trees and whatnot, but yes, Solstice is the big day. Or night, as it were."

"And you'll show me your gargoyle then?"

He gave an uncharacteristic, “What?”

“You found your last gargoyle on Solstice. That’s the only time it appears. With that, you won the contest and had a gargoyle made in your likeness. Ergo, you’ll show yours to me on Solstice night.”

“I fail to follow the logic of that explanation.”

“It’s Liv-logic. I’ve decided that’s what I want for my Solstice gift. To see your gargoyle.”

“I don’t believe anyone said anything about a Solstice gift.”

Lloergan growled.

“Be nice,” I said to Gabriel. “You’re upsetting the puppy.”

“That ‘puppy’ is nearly as big as me.”

Another growl.

“Careful,” I said. “You might be bigger, but her teeth are a lot sharper. You—”

Lloe scrambled up, growling and snapping.

“Whoa, girl! Down!”

A shape darted onto the road ahead.

“Gabri—!” I began.

He’d already hit the brakes. The car went into a slide, the road slick with new snow. I wrapped my arms around Lloergan and braced for impact. A thunk as the car went off the road. Then the clatter of wet gravel hitting the underside. A crack, and a jolt slammed me back in my seat, Lloergan scrambling, her nails digging into my leg.

One moment of absolute silence.

Then, “Olivia?” A pause and the clack of a seat belt. “Olivia?”

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice muffled. “Just buried under a hundred and fifty pounds of fur. Lloe? Are you—?”

A very cold nose snuffled my neck, and her nails clawed my legs as she tried to stand on my lap.

“Oww . . .” I said.

More snuffling, now with an edge of worry.

“I’m fine, girl,” I said. “You make a wonderful air bag, but can you please get—”

The door opened, and Gabriel tugged Lloe out. I started to follow, but he insisted on a quick once-over—*does anything hurt? how’s your neck?*—before setting me free.

I wobbled from the car, and I was sure I’d be stiff in the morning, but otherwise I seemed fine.

The car had slid onto the shoulder and struck a rock. It wasn’t a big rock. Just enough to stop the Jag and set off the air bags, which left the car non-drivable.

“You’ll need to call for a tow,” I said.

He took out his cell phone. “No service.”

“Naturally.” I checked mine. “Same.”

“I should hope so, considering we’re with the same provider—the one Ricky set us up with. Which I’ve noticed has substandard coverage. I’m sure it has unlimited texts and calling, which is a benefit . . . to *you* two.”

“Um, the guy replaced our ruined cell phones after we both almost drowned, and you’re complaining?”

“No.” He looked at his phone again. “Not exactly.”

“Get a new provider if you don’t like that one. Right now, we have a disabled car in the middle of nowhere. On an empty road. With a winter storm whipping up. Can you see any sign of . . .” I squinted against the endless white. “Anything?”

“No.”

“All right. Come on, Lloe. We’re going for a walk.”

She sat on the roadside.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “It’s snowing. It’s cold. You haven’t eaten enough to ‘need’ a walk. But we really don’t have a choice.”

She lay down.

“Lloergan,” Gabriel said firmly. “We are leaving. If you wish to remain here, you may.” He opened the door. “It will be warmer in there. I’ll turn on the emergency flashers.”

“How much of that do you think she really understands?”

His look said it didn’t matter—the point was that he had explained, and if she lacked the mental capacity to comprehend, that was hardly his fault.

I waved Lloergan toward the open car door. “Go on. We won’t be long.”

She laid her head on her paws. Gabriel closed the door and started walking away. Lloe rose, growling.

“I think she’s telling us not to leave,” I said. “She did warn us that something was about to run across the road. Did you see what it was?”

Gabriel looked around as if—like me—he’d forgotten all about the cause of the accident.

“I presumed a deer,” he said, “but I couldn’t tell.”

“This strikes me as a little too familiar.”

“If you mean the last time we were run off the road, I believe you’d swerved to avoid one of those.” He waved at Lloergan.

“Yes, but *that* didn’t cause me to drive your car off the embankment.” The hound had been a warning, one that came too late for me to avoid getting run off the road by a killer.

I continued, “Something darted in front of the car after Lloergan warned us. It disappeared, but not before we went off the shoulder. Now we’re stranded on an empty road in a snowstorm, forced to go looking for help.”

“An omen, then. We’re supposed to search for something.”

“Or it’s a trap. But the possibility we’re stranded here by accident is about zero.”

He peered into the falling snow. Then he turned to the hound. “If there’s something out there that bothers you, this car isn’t going to protect us. We need to find out what it is.”

Lloergan grumbled and glowered at Gabriel. She walked over and nudged his leg, none too gently, as if to say, *Well, get on with it, then. It’s your funeral.*

As we headed down the road, I said, “What’s the last movie we saw together?”

“We’re never seen one together.”

“Last one you saw?”

Silence, as he struggled to remember.

“Good enough,” I said, and he nodded. He knew I was trying to determine whether this might be a vision, and I was zoned out in the Jag’s backseat as it roared along.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. We hadn’t officially hit winter yet, so I’d still been dressing for fall, expecting to spend maybe five minutes outside. My cropped leather jacket was more fashionable than practical. Same went for my footwear: Louboutin ankle boots with three-inch heels, which threatened to slide out from under me with each step.

Gabriel kept pulling ahead and then having to slow for me. When I got a particularly severe look, I broke into a jog . . . and landed on my ass.

Gabriel put out his hand to help me up, but I motioned for him to wait, gritting my teeth against the pain throbbing through my tailbone. Lloergan nudged me and whined concern.

Gabriel glanced at my footwear. “Aren’t those boots?”

“Technically, yes. But for women, boots do not necessarily mean winter wear.”

I took his hand and he tugged me up, saying, “You’re freezing.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He started taking off his coat.

“No, seriously, I’m fine and that would just weigh me down. We must be getting close to a farmhouse or something.” As if on cue, the snow cleared enough for us to spot a laneway. “There. Now let’s just hope someone’s home.”

His look said that was inconsequential. Locked doors don’t stop Gabriel. As a teen, he’d survived on the streets using the only thing Seanna ever gave him—her talent for pickpocketing and burglary.

Gabriel patted his pockets and handed me a pair of gloves, which he apparently hadn’t been bothering to wear himself. Then he said, “We’ll walk slower,” and put his arm around my shoulders. I wasn’t sure if that was meant to keep me steady or warm, but I appreciated the gesture. Lloergan moved to my other side, sticking close enough to block the wind.

The snow whipped up, driving hard now, and we had to trudge, our gazes fixed on the gravel driveway, as we walked between twin rows of overgrown shrubs. The lane seemed to go on forever. Then those shrubs vanished, but there was still gravel under our feet, with weeds poking through the dirt and stones.

When something rose in our path, Gabriel yanked me back. It was a car rim with a metal pole sticking out of the center. Coated wire ran from the pole to a destination hidden by the snowfall. I put one gloved hand on the wire and followed it to another car rim and post.

“We’re in a parking lot,” I said. “These are row markers.”

I called, “Hello!” and my voice echoed. “Hmm. Empty parking lot. Weed-choked gravel. That isn’t very promising.”

I checked my cell again. Still no signal. Lloergan nudged my hand. I crouched beside her.

“Any ideas?” I said.

She stared across the lot. When I squinted, I could make out dark shapes behind the curtain of snow. Lloergan took a deep snuffling breath and snorted, condensation puffing

from her nostrils. Then she cautiously started forward. I did the same and nearly bashed into a sign—a wooden one, shaped like an arrow with peeling white paint and multicolored letters reading “Tickets!”

We changed course slightly, and after about a dozen steps we stepped onto concrete. Gardens bordered the walkway, the bushes gnarled, beds blanketed with dead weeds. When a giant rainbow appeared overhead, I stopped short. Then I realized it was a wooden arch, painted as a rainbow.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” I said.

At eye level, a crooked sign read, “You’re almost there!” Below it, a downward-pointing arrow proclaimed, “This way for fun and adventure!”

Gabriel straightened the sign so it pointed forward.

“Well, that makes more sense,” I said.

I took another step, and my boot slid on the snow-slick concrete. Lloergan saved me the humiliation of another pratfall, as I fell against her. Gabriel tried to get a grip on my snow-covered jacket. I reached for his hand instead. He didn’t hesitate, just took it, his fingers engulfing mine.

I looked up, the midday sun blazing though the light snowfall as it lit the scene ahead.

A row of booths stretched across the walkway. On the asphalt, multicolored painted arrows divided the crowd to funnel it through ticket booths. Each booth had been painted a garish primary color. Now that paint had peeled, leaving tiny speckled buildings, the Plexiglas scratched with hearts and obscenities.

Leering from the top of each booth was what had once been a clown head. But now, between the peeling paint and the vandalism, that row of grinning clowns looked like an army of escapees from a leper colony.

“Oh! It’s Funland!” I said. “My dad brought me here once when I was little. It was terrible.” I called, “Sorry!” as if to ghosts of employees past. “It was a cute little amusement park, just not really . . .”

“Your speed?” Gabriel said.

“Exactly.”

My Cŵn Annwn blood means I have a need for speed. As a child, I’d snuck onto grown-up rides with heeled boots. If I still came up short, most operators ignored it, figuring if I was with my father, it was his call. Dad had indulged me in this, as he indulged all my passions. If roller coasters fed some unfathomable need in my soul, then roller coasters I would have. Funland, though, had been sadly bereft of thrills.

“There’s only one coaster,” I said. “A wild mouse, with a ridiculous height restriction. But it was— Oh, there it is! See it?”

We could make out the top of the tracks over the buildings.

“It’s abandoned,” Gabriel said.

“Hmm?”

“The park. It’s abandoned.”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “This isn’t just its ‘closed for the season’ look. It’s been shut down for, oh, nearly ten years? In high school, my friends and I planned to sneak in on prom night. But it closed the year before we graduated. I tried to get my friends to go anyway—it’d be even cooler to break into an *abandoned* amusement park. Two of the guys agreed, but only if I picked one of them as my prom date. So . . . no.”

“I mean, it’s an abandoned *place*. Which is significant.”

“In light of the fact we’ve been lured by fae to several abandoned places? Right. Sorry. Frozen brain.” I looked up at the park gates. “We weren’t actually led here, though. Nothing *compelled* us to come down the laneway.”

“Except that it was the first one we reached, after my car broke down.”

True. I looked at Lloergan. She stared intently through the park gates. I took another step. She stayed at my side, making no more effort to hold me back.

If we'd been lured, there was little point in ignoring the summons.