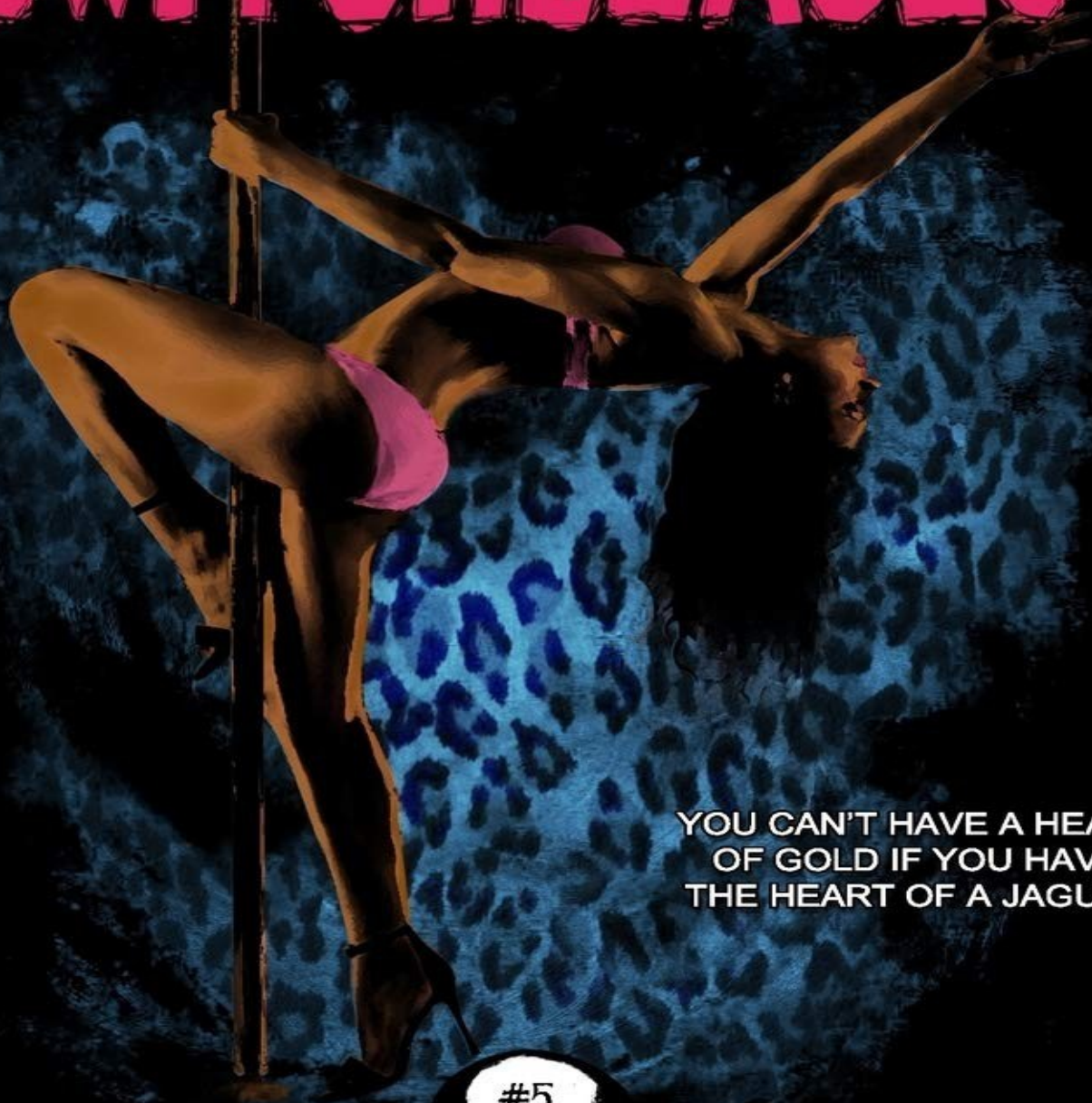


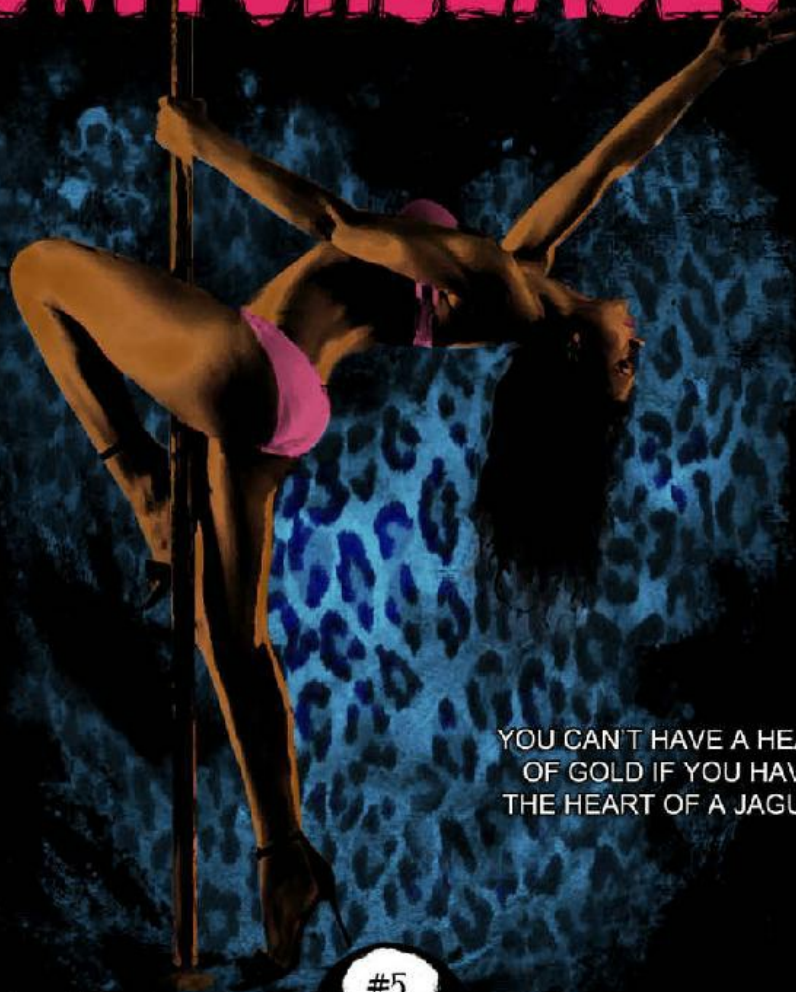
V. CASTRO HAIRSPRAY AND SWITCHBLADES



YOU CAN'T HAVE A HEART
OF GOLD IF YOU HAVE
THE HEART OF A JAGUAR



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AND
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HAIRSPRAY AND SWITCHBLADES

V. Castro

Prologue

The gooey pile of chocolate cake topped with multicolored sprinkles sat lopsided on its stand. It threatened to topple over with the force required to blow out eighteen candles. Magdalena's face beamed as she presented it to her sister with a missing tooth smile.

"Happy Birthday, Maya! You're the best sister in the whole world.

I love you!"

Maya wanted to burst into tears because although they were a small family, there was a lot of love between them. But she also cried because in a few hours she would venture to the backyard shed with her mother and grandmother to accept the family gift. Some might call it a curse, but from the stories her father told her, it was a gift.

Their ancestors had survived because of it.

"Since you are my best friend and the best little sister in the whole wide world, you can have the first slice!"

Magdalena jumped up and down in excitement. Their father, Miguel Jr., walked into the kitchen, fresh from the shower, hearing his daughter's fit of laughter and squeals. "Is this a party or is it a party!" He turned on the CD player that sat on the breakfast nook table. Santana's *Maria Maria*, his wife's favorite song of late, filled the room. His hand reached for his wife's waist, pulling her close to sway to the music. "Thank you, Señora, for my beautiful daughters."

As one hand touched the small of her back, the other brushed bangs across her forehead. She tried to look happy, but there was no mistaking the anxiety on her face. It had been there all day like the surface tension of water. Her forehead touched his before she glanced at Maya.

This display of affection between her parents gave Maya hope she would eventually meet others that would see beyond her skin, and her gift.

Magdalena continued to eye the cake while dancing in place in her Power Puff Girls nightgown. "Can someone please cut it already? I'm hungry and

it's almost bedtime."

Maya grabbed a knife from the wooden block on the kitchen counter. "All right, here you go." She kissed her sister on the crown of her head before heaping a slice bigger than her mother would normally allow onto a plate. Maya didn't feel like eating, her stomach rumbling from nervousness. She fixed her gaze at the glowing numbers on the microwave. At midnight, it would be time.

—

"Are you ready, Maya?"

She stood with a towel wrapped around her, in front of her mother, Grace, and grandmother, Amparo. The cold cement floor against the soles of her feet made her legs shiver more than they already did from anticipation. A small space heater warmed and illuminated the shed. Outdoor toys and garden tools dangled from the walls and neatly sat on shelves. The scent of Amparo's cocoa butter lotion hung in the air, smelling sweeter than usual due to her proximity to the heater. Amparo also wore a towel; she would be the one to guide Maya that night. The old woman blinked watery eyes, full of memory and concentration, before standing to allow the towel to slip off her body. Her stretch mark-striped breasts sagged to the middle of her torso, the areolas thick from breastfeeding and dark brown like shriveled chestnuts. They covered most of the tips where the remaining breast tissue lay. Soft rolls of fat and skin folded around her midsection, thighs, and back. Only her hair retained any remnant of youth. It was a coarse, deep shade of black, and slipped to just past her shoulders and parted in the center.

Maya saw what she would look like at one hundred years of age, and she wondered what the animal transformation would be like.

A low growl escaped the old woman's creased lips. The age-spotted loose skin on her boney hands wobbled as the lines began to smooth and fill from beneath. With the help of Grace, she lowered herself to her hands and knees.

Maya watched black swatches of fur lengthen from Amparo's pores; an itching sensation began around her mouth. She lifted her

fingertips to her face, feeling around. The small—much hated and regularly plucked—hairs on the corners of her top lip sprouted in a plume of fire. They were thick wires that tore the delicate skin as they pushed through. Her small, brown, rose-petaled nipples, not yet tough from a baby's mouth, tightened and ached as the sparse fine hairs surrounding the areola swirled in length and silkiness.

Beginning from her breasts, pores opened wide to allow fur to grow rapidly across her entire body. The fur above her lip now covered every inch of skin. Her eyes were wide, watching the transformation that seemed like a dream but was real. How was any of this happening?

Her shock in this moment overrode trepidation until she buckled to a twisting pain. She squeezed her eyes shut, her mouth salivating uncontrollably with sharp bone breaking tender gums. Saliva and blood pooled at her feet. She tried to scream. The only sound to escape was a growl like her grandmother's. She managed to look to her left through tear-filled eyes, there was no longer an old woman.

How did that happen so quickly without her noticing? A large black cat with gold eyes shimmering in the glow of the heater, a mighty jaguar, sat licking its paws.

“Stay strong, mija. The outside change is not as painful as the one that happens on the inside.” Grace kneeled before her daughter with a tissue to her nose, tears streaming down her cheeks, her emotional torment just as great because there was nothing she could do to ease the agony of the first transformation.

Maya panicked; this was it. The bottom of her spine throbbed, the muscles stretched and pulled as if each individual strand was being reconnected to some other bone or ligament. A crack and clap, Chinese poppers hitting the floor surrounded her—the sound of her joints and spine elongating. The pain reminded her of the day of her first period, but the ache was not isolated to her uterus; every fiber was experiencing an inevitable change, a change it was born to endure.

“Mama!” she tried to scream as she reached a paw and a human hand toward

her mother. On the inside, she was sobbing. She collapsed to the floor, its coldness now a relief as she panted from

the internal heat, blood rushing in and out of a larger, stronger heart.

All she could do was lay, squirming alone, allowing it to happen. She kept her eyes closed as she rolled onto her back and then again to her stomach, the sound of her insides breaking and healing as close as a dentist's drill and just as ear-piercing. It all stopped except her panting, a heartbeat thudding. There was pressure on her shoulder.

Something wet on her hand.

"Look at me."

She lifted her head. Through sepia vision, she saw her mother stroking her coat and Amparo licking her paw.

"It is done. It is time to go," her mother said with a reassuring look.

As soon as her mother unlocked the shed door, her grandmother sprinted out. Instinct drove Maya to follow suit. Miguel Jr. sat in his car with the backdoor open. Amparo hopped inside and Maya did likewise. Grace closed the door behind them. She nodded to Miguel Jr. before he started the engine and reversed into the empty street.

Maya's vision was blurry, in and out of focus as they drove.

Streetlights flashed by like the tails of sparklers on the Fourth of July.

The noise of the outside world rang between her ears in a mangled din she couldn't understand. She turned to Amparo curled on the seat with eyes closed, whiskers and ears twitching. Then the car stopped. Amparo's body bolted upright.

The form that had to be her father opened the door next to Amparo. Without hesitation, the old woman bounded out with her hind legs. She galloped into the night, kicking pockets of grass and dirt behind her. Maya couldn't believe this was the woman that said

“Aye” after every step she took with care as to not aggravate her bowed arthritic knees.

“Be what you are born to be, mija.” The garbled words of her father became clear, shaving off the confusion as he repeated them.

Maya stepped out of the car, now able to see through the dark that her grandmother waited for her. The glow of the moon, its dark spots on show, shined brightly upon her lustrous coat. Maya let out a Jaguar cry, then ran in her grandmother’s direction. The speed, the heat invigorating her muscles, the freedom of running and knowing

there was nothing in her way—all the disorientation of the car ride vanished the harder her blood pumped through her transformed body. There was no pain, only power. She panted as she felt her muscles propelling her deeper into the open grounds of Espada Park.

Maya and Amparo frolicked through the stone buildings, jumped over exposed roots of hundred-year old trees, and explored the physical limits of her new self until just before dawn.

—

Amparo slept most of the day, but Maya’s hunger clawed at her belly.

The sizzle of bacon and eggs cooked in leftover pork fat wafted from the kitchen. She needed to eat.

“Good morning!” Miguel Jr. plated breakfast at the stove before placing it in front of Maya. “You will start with this and probably eat all day.”

Maya rubbed her neck; it felt like she’d slept on it wrong, the muscles kinked and sore. “We need to talk about all of this. I have so many questions,” she said as she cut into runny yolk.

He waved her off with a spatula dripping in animal fat. “There is so much for you to know, but if it’s one thing our kind have, it’s time.”

Magdalena walked into the kitchen rubbing her eyes with her little fists and holding a Power Puff Girl doll and a Britney Spears CD.

“Time for what?”

Chapter 1

The pole was cool between her thighs as she slid to the floor. Maya stretched and flexed her limbs across the stage on paws and neon painted claws, stopping in the middle to spread her legs wide enough to give everyone a money shot. Assholes and pussies are like switchblades and hairspray, a hustler never leaves home without either when doing this gig. She lifted herself to her knees, grinding her hips hard like a vaquera to the beat of DJ Khaled’s and Rihanna’s *Wild Thoughts*.

This remix sometimes made her want to cry because it reminded her of Santana’s *Maria Maria*. Now was not the time for tears that

would slice through bronzer and loosen fake eyelashes.

Fingertips toyed with the strings dangling on either side of her hips, ready to make a heart-shaped noose that fit every neck in the house. The way she moved made it hard not to imagine how it would feel if that body was making a meal of you.

The more she sweat, the more intoxicating were the pheromones released from her pores. Tendrils of invisible animal musk of sex and desire rose from her skin like a mist rising from a body of water in the early hours of the morning. This kept her audience captivated, compelled to give the dark woman in the leopard print G-string whatever she wanted.

It was a Saturday night. The beats would be hot because Jimmy was at the turntables offering real music and not that shit the lazy day shift DJs played, unfit for even a spin class. Jimmy was all about those old school sexy sax and guitar solos made for thinking about fucking. All the dancers tipped him good to keep those beats pounding.

The air-conditioning, always a few degrees too cold, held nipples standing at

attention. Once you were in, it was impossible to know how much time had passed, a place where there were no windows or clocks. What the dancers really loved about Jimmy was Jimmy had no interest in any of them. Everybody wants to brag they fucked a dancer; rarely do they want to announce they are dating the dancer. You don't bring that freaky girl to mother—Rick James said that.

Jimmy's partner, Tyson, was the house mom, backstage making sure everyone was waxed and spritzed before they got their hustle on. Saturday was the day for big money with all the bachelor parties coming through, ordering shots by the dozen. Get a sucker drunk enough and like Tony Montana, the world is yours.

She reached between her legs to simulate masturbation because they loved that—really loved it. Maya licked heavily glossed red lips and made eye contact—charcoal liner, fanned out on the sides to accentuate the feline curve of her lashes. Make the fantasy as real as possible. The ecstasy wasn't difficult to feign because all that cash felt good. Cold hard cash was more satisfying than a hard cock.

Her sister's tuition would be paid, the fridge would be full, bills would be in the black instead of red, but more importantly, she would have enough green in her bank account to keep the judge satisfied to retain custody of her sixteen-year-old sister who was on her way to a full math and track scholarship.

Magdalena would be the first in their immediate family with a bachelor's degree, hopefully a doctorate one day.

Maya had the knowledge of hustle, which she put to work at night, leaving her days to iron school uniforms, do laundry, take business classes at the community college, or whatever else a parent needed to do. She was only twenty-six years old, but felt so much older. Once Magdalena had her degree, that would be it.

She scanned the room at the pre-evening crowd for potential dances, but right then it was mostly pockets of women chatting with drinks in hands. It was already a no from the dude at the front of the stage lounging in his seat like

he was in his own living room. This wasn't personal because he did the same with all the other wandering bikinis. There was a guy greedily dipping greasy hot wings in blue cheese sauce with two empty beer bottles next to the plate. That would be a fuck no because he was obviously getting more action from his snack by the way he slurped and sucked on each morsel of meat. That smell of cheese, buffalo sauce, and beer when she leaned in might cause her to puke. She could tell he was probably a mouth breather by the way he ate. The mere thought gave her heartburn and gas. It would be a waiting game until after the dinner crowd.

She needed to sit down for a minute and re-adjust the tongue in her boot that dug into her ankle. Laces too tight again. The friction between sweat and plastic left red welts that never seemed to fade before it was time to put those heels on again to walk from one horny wallet to another. She headed to the DJ booth to check the time and fix her shoe.

“What’s cookin’, good lookin’?” Jimmy, dressed in a red Kangol bucket hat and baggy tracksuit, like a Mexican LL Cool J, looked up from his phone when she poked her head in.

“What time is it?”

He tapped his iWatch. “Does it matter? The place is empty. Not even close to rain-making time.”

Maya unlaced her shoe with a groan. Only a few more years of aching knee joints that would surely be arthritic by forty from all the squatting, crawling, and kneeling. She hoped to retire those shoes that squeezed her toes into an impossible position. Bunions were already beginning to form. Besides all of this, it was becoming dangerous.

The papers called the killer stalking the streets *The San Antonio Stripper Ripper*, but this was only part of the story. The details were the stuff of trashy novels, or a *CSI* or *SUV* episode. The kill list included two dancers and two prostitutes, both bound with their lingerie then dumped in random locations across the city without witness or conclusive forensics leading the police to any known offenders on release. None of them sexually assaulted, however, the perpetrator had a penchant for flexing their knife skills; the mutilations

done with a steady, precise hand. The coroner's report stated the victim's blood showed traces of a drug to keep them alive but incapacitated while the killer removed parts of their anatomy.

One didn't have a scalp. The skin from the hands of another victim removed so delicately it appeared the murderer wanted them for gloves. Buttocks and breasts taken from a prostitute, cauterized with something the coroner couldn't determine. Everything pointed to premeditated murder with no clues.

Maya always kept a switchblade tucked in her pocket, but with this new terror lurking in the dark, she had an extra blade at hand.

Magdalena was too young to be left without family. The bouncers did their best to keep an eye out for dancers leaving after closing, however, they typically had their hands full with rowdy, drunk customers. Management didn't want to bring in extra security to

“spoil the experience.” Limited choices filled Maya with a bitterness she drank like that shot you didn't order on a night out that turns out to be one too many. It makes your head spin and that greasy junk food that was good at the time, just a toxic lump of pig snouts and rat tails in your bowels. There were times that were a complete blackout of anger at the world. Those nights, Maya cried herself to sleep

thinking about those whispered humiliating insults masked as dirty talk from men that smelled of beer and potato chips as she gave private dances. All she could do was play along.

At least Magdalena would have as many choices as she wanted, graduating from a Catholic high school with top grades. The world would be hers.

Maya tried not to think about it, but by this age her father had promised their own garage. He'd stopped college with an Associate's degree because his business was more than lucrative. As they worked together tinkering over a car or motorcycle during her summer breaks, listening to classic rock, he would recount his life.

They would've been partners until his retirement.

"You know, Maya, one day we are going to cross the border to find the rest of our clan. It will be the road trip of a lifetime." He'd shaken his head and squinted while he wrenched on metal guts. "We need to restore our former strength. I fear for the bloodline because together we are stronger."

"Why don't you pick up the phone or send an email?" she'd flippantly retorted.

He'd stopped and stared at her as if she'd blasphemed Christ, his face pained and sad at the same time. All the creases of his age came to the surface even though he was always mistaken for a younger man.

"Because our blood deserves better than that. Face to face. You see, before Texas was annexed, our people roamed this vast land. It is by our blood that our great, great ancestors in Mexico were immune to the diseases of the colonizers. We crossed the river, living in harmony with the indigenous tribes. There was no *pinch é border*. Then the Mexican-American War happened. It is by blood that we could hide in plain sight during the war, all the human wars.

But it is *that* war that tore our family apart. Your mother's and my ancestors stayed to fight with the Americans and the others fought on the side of the Mexicans. It is a wound we need to heal in person because now we are all that remain in Texas. When I retire and before you take over the business, we will go."

She'd shrugged it off, giving her father a pat on the back. They never took that road trip and the business would never be hers because it was financially impossible to do it all alone.

After stepping off the stage at around 10PM, Maya worked the floor, popping her double handful of ass as she walked. The more private dances she could squeeze in, the better. Tail in the air and tits squeezed, she leaned over tables giving potential customers a preview that showed she was worth every twenty. Want more? The Champagne Room was the bargain basement price of a Benjamin per hour. There she could laugh at your terrible jokes or listen

to your home and work woes while air riding your restrained erection.

Persephone was about to take the stage to Nine Inch Nails when Maya stopped dead in her black, five-inch, patent leather ankle-booted tracks. Her entire body broke out in goose flesh as if someone had tossed a towel drenched in ice water over her back.

Her nipples ached as they puckered and shrank.

Someone, something was there.

The last time she felt this was as a child when she got lost in Chucky Cheese pizza parlor. As she'd waded through the ball pit and maze of arcade games to find her cousins, a shadow not her own, or of this world, watched her. Maya had the exact same feeling now.

She looked around. Nothing but Halloween decorations and naked women. She looked around again. There in the corner. A figure sat at the darkest table, the one usually occupied by dealers who'd slip customers or dancers a bit of what they craved.

This was no dealer. The vibrations emanating from the darkness were that of a predator filled with psychotic, lustful rage. There was a hunger. Whatever sat in the dealer's corner—beneath a baseball cap and baggy, dark clothing—wanted her, craved her flesh and essence. Slowly, it would peel her layer by layer from the inside. She envisioned it pulverizing her bones to dust after all the marrow was sucked out. Her ligaments drawn and dried to use as thread. Every last drop of her blood drained to use as varnish. Her body would no longer be her own, but some type of abomination, suspended like Pinocchio by invisible strings.

Suddenly the Nine Inch Nails song, *Closer*, sounded like a funeral dirge. The full moon wasn't for another few weeks. All she had for protection was her switchblades. She needed to see who this was, show it she wasn't scared. As she began to approach, the figure rose. Maya tried to make her way through the thick, boisterous Saturday night crowd before the figure exited.

It was too late. That rhythmic thumping that took everyone closer to god was

dull through the wall, but steady as her 808 heartbeat.

The music switched to erratic house, the pulsating electronic beat matched the pace of her breathing. A pang of worry struck, the fear of loss blinding her to the group of five waving her over with a stack of ones on the table. She spun on her heavy heels and hurried to the DJ booth.

“Jimmy! I need your phone!”

He nodded his head and lifted a silver ringed index finger as he leaned over to the sound system. “Gentlemen, that was Persephone on center stage, be sure to tip her well and let her give you a private dance all the way to heaven.”

Maya adjusted her weight from heel to heel. The boot tongue was digging deep into her skin again as she practically ran to the booth.

“You okay, Mami?”

“Yea, I need to make an urgent call.” He pulled out his phone and unlocked it. Maya pressed the phone to her ear and plugged the other tightly with two fingers. Each ring stretched time with polyester elasticity.

“Who is this?”

Fuck. She forgot Magdalena wouldn’t recognize the number. She was at her girlfriend Samantha’s house as they prepared for the math competition the following week.

“It’s Maya. Everything okay? You still hanging out at Sam’s house?”

“I’m fine. Why are you calling now?”

Maya exhaled a heavy breath, “Dios, baby girl. Please don’t go anywhere. Don’t trust anyone but her parents. Love you, and good luck studying.”

“Are *you* okay, Maya?”

Maya’s breathing and heartrate returned to normal as she paused before

answering. “Just checking in. Love you.”

Maya hung up and handed the phone back to Jimmy. Her body trembled when she thought of the dark corner table.

“What was that all about?”

“It was nothing. Thanks.”

She bent down to readjust her platform boot before facing the noise, the music, the rest of her night. The group of five found another girl that twerked on their laps one at a time. She hadn’t noticed her G-string ride all the way up her ass while she rushed to make the phone call. It now felt uncomfortable pinching her hips, tangled in places it didn’t belong. She pulled it away, not caring if Jimmy saw this or not. Time to breathe and hustle.

Chapter 2

The Weaver dipped the ligament thread in a white and blue porcelain bowl, a relic from the Ming Dynasty that had belonged to an oracle of the Emperor’s court. The white was permanently stained from cradling blood, the chosen dye to create a garment never achieved before; it would be a means of transformation for the one that managed to harness enough hide and pull together the skin so carefully, only the slightest of stitch could be seen. Many had tried.

All had failed.

The Weaver had ripped a thousand hides from the backs of those who had what she needed. So many things had been taken from her without consent. That was the way of the world. Dog eat dog and not every dog has his day. God, she hated people. If she had a clone, she would probably hate it too.

Every twenty years she shed the skin, stripped off the old identity that would begin to peel away from her flesh like a rotting orange skin, whitening from mould and hardening in places where it was detaching from its insides. Her wrinkled, frail body had to quickly dress in another garb of patchworked flesh. For five days, she waited for the new exterior to anchor. Nerves and

capillaries knitted together

until they were one. Her lips were in constant movement, chanting the dark rites, pleading to the dark energies of this world and the other worlds to revive her again.

That was before she discovered the magic to a perfect body for all eternity. The ritual was long, painful even, however, no price was too large a sum to pay for eternal beauty—life.

She believed there was nothing after death, only the energy of the cosmos. Life energy could never be destroyed, but it could be collected. Hell wasn't a place; it was a concentration of matter, like a black hole. The more you fed it, the stronger it became. The same principle applied to the things considered evil. There were no ghosts, only vibrating particles of pain and rage. If there was nothing after death, why bother dying?

She'd had her eyes on two shifters for a while, sisters. One was a mere Catholic school girl in her plaid blue skirt, white ankle socks, and starched white shirt with *Holy Cross* printed over the breast. The other was like the ones she already used for her flesh harvest.

The difficult part was arranging for their parents to be removed.

Murder for hire had lost its appeal over the centuries. She'd paid thugs to fake a home invasion. The girls should've been separated.

But the older one took on the role as parent.

The Weaver thought of her own parents with murderous contempt. Forgetting manners, she grabbed her champagne flute and downed the contents in one gulp. Pouring another, she watched the tiny bubbles float to the surface and gather like suppressed memories. Those pigs, so desperate to keep their aristocratic status, they'd sold their souls and her flesh to a demon.

—

She stared at the hem of her skirt, far too heavy for the weather in that part of

the world. The tight corset took her breath away with the hot breeze blowing in from the sea. Never mind her sweaty undergarments sticking to her like a second skin. The mountains of the Basque country in Spain never felt this oppressive. The sugar plantation was as heavy as her late husband's body smothering her beneath his grunting bulk even when she begged him to stop.

Whispers from their so-called friends standing around the pit of dirt

where he lay carried in the exhalations from their mouths to her ears.

She pinched one of her finger's trying to stifle a giggle. *She* was victorious, but not without great sacrifice. Her pelvis burned from the disease he gave her from his whoring that left her barren. The remedy, mercury, was a malady in its own right.

The whispers said, "Who will want her now? Not a real woman if she can't bear a child." Isabella flashed a feigned, mournful glance to the women across from the grave. They tried to hide their gossip, looking away, patting their brows with embroidered handkerchiefs.

She moved her hand to the side of her thigh, feeling a lump beneath her skirt. Another smile crossed her face. Below the fabric was one of her dolls, made by hand from flesh stripped from the oversized belly of her dear late husband. No, she didn't want anyone else, only to gain more power through the dark side of faith she had discovered on this island. Power. It was the only lover she would ever want in this life.

—

Today she worked on the finishing touches to the scalp from a woman with a luxurious head of hair. The tight curls bounced with life as she ran her fingers through the strands with moisturizing oils. The seam around the hairline had to be perfect. She did every stitch by hand. Only a complete amateur would attempt to sew skin with a sewing machine.

A waltz by Chopin played softly as she sipped on a glass of Salon vintage champagne long thought to be out of circulation. This moment was reason to celebrate after all. The last and most important element would be the

sacrifice: the two females from the Jaguar Clan bloodline only found in parts of the Amazon.

Chapter 3

Jackson gave himself a numbing pep talk as he sat in his car before entering the crime scene: *Bad things happen. Bad people exist. It is up to you to not let them get away with it.*

He scanned the missions, cleared of tourists for the next few days. Police tape flapped in the chilly breeze beneath a clear blue

sky and blinding sun. White-suited forensic officers scoured the cordoned off portion of the park where the body was discovered. At some point, serial killers all got sloppy. So far, not this one. This one was near perfect in execution and stealth.

Jackson left the warmth of his car and thermos of coffee for the gurney that held the victim. *It is up to you to not let them get away with it.* He lifted the reflective Ray Bans from his nose to his scalp before unzipping the body bag to have a look. She appeared at peace, without a single scratch or bruise on her face. He unzipped lower. The chest cavity was a torn and deflated bag of skin with half of her ribs removed. The bowels had also been removed, their contents spilled inside the empty chest. The stench roiled in his nose and in the pit of his acid-filled stomach. The coroner said all the victims felt everything, based on the drug combination in their systems.

Murdered women and children gave him the same visceral reaction as the stench of the bowel contents he saw and smelled now. He'd grit his teeth, punch the earth, but he'd use all the fuel it offered. There were bad people in this world with pure evil in their hearts; he should know because he'd lived with the devil for half of his life.

It was the last day of elementary school; the following year he would be in middle school. The house felt welcoming with the heat of the oven and smell of brownies. Before he could shout for his mother, his eyes dropped to a trail of blood that dotted the carpet.

The sound of leather cut through the air, then smacked at soft flesh.

A scream that could only be his mother's lashed his heart,

"Dennis, stop!"

He turned the corner, his bladder on the verge of emptying from fear, anger. She crouched against the refrigerator with an oven mitt in her hand. Her face a red and wet mess, eyes puffy from crying.

The man he despised towered over with blackened rage-filled eyes.

"Leave, Son." His tone was deep, a throaty rasp straight from the basement of hell where the worst things are formed.

With an angel's whisper his mother said, "Go."

He stood dumbly, afraid that would be the last time he would see his mother alive. The belt raised in the air again, until his father unleashed it against the refrigerator door. He jumped, running out the door to sit on the curb of their driveway. With his head hung between his knees, he cried until hearing the creaking yawn of the front door open. To this day he could not stand the smell of brownies.

She took the blows for her children. It ended once and for all with a fight about beer. He'd sat at the plastic tablecloth-covered table doing his geography homework.

"Bitch, I said I wanted enough beer to last the night."

Numb from obscenities, he didn't stop writing. Then a sucking in of air and gurgled strained cry. A heavy thud made him look up from his homework to see his mother standing in the kitchen doorway with a bloody barbeque fork in hand. The smile that always comforted him as she said goodnight spread across her face. "I might be going away for a while, but it will be better now. I love you, Jackson, baby."

A wave of relief flooded his being like a hot shower after a game of football. He didn't have to go into the kitchen to know what he would see. She walked

over to him and pressed his head to her breast. The faint scent of Shalimar perfume eased his worry for what would happen next.

“Don’t ever forget, Jackson baby, there are bad people. Bad things happen. Promise me you will be the one to do something about it.”

Minutes later, which could have been hours, the increasing sounds of sirens wailing down the street stopped in front of their home. She kissed his forehead and walked in complete calm to open the door. Jackson felt no sorrow. His father was beginning to look at his sister a little too long in a way that made him feel uncomfortable for reasons he was still too young to articulate. It would have been only a matter of time before he killed the man himself. The women in his family were the only ones that were ever worth shit.

Brownies, shit, blood, and an angel at peace. Jackson zipped up the bag slowly, allowing the image to sear the back of his eyelids.

The sick murdering fuck causing trouble in that jurisdiction was all his. What was damn frustrating was that none of these murders

made sense. How there was no evidence left behind was a mystery.

All the locations of victims seemed random so they couldn’t even put out decent surveillance. The only thing they could do was tell sex workers to be extra vigilant.

Jackson pulled down his sunglasses again. If they didn’t get a lead soon, it would go the FBI and the chief would hear it from the mayor, and shit only flowed one way from there. There had to be something.

The only thing this woman had on her besides identification was a card for the largest gentleman’s club in San Antonio, AllStarz. On the back, a handwritten name, Tyson. Underneath the name it said, *Sat-Tues 4-12. Free pack of hair when you pay and book another appointment!* Didn’t sound like a boyfriend or a pimp, but you never knew. This victim wasn’t a prostitute, which was a scary deviation. At least with a target group, he knew where to watch. Poor woman had a flat tire. The last number on her phone was for a

tow company that never picked up.

Finally, 3AM. Exhaustion from patrolling the floor weakened Maya's mind and body. Her ankles wanted to snap from the boots she'd kept readjusting. It would be straight to her bed after a profitable night with two thick rings of cash wrapped in rubber bands in her bag. She wiggled into cotton underwear that covered her entire butt, the kind some called granny panties. Right now, they felt like a vacation. Her baggy sweats felt equally as comfortable. With everything packed up, she placed one switchblade in her pocket and the other in a hurried scruffy bun pinned to the top of her head. "All right, kids, I'm out."

Tyson cleaned his brushes while he waited for Jimmy. "You want me to walk you, babe?"

She paused by the door, remembering the shadow from earlier that evening. After calling Magdalena, she had focused on the job and not the thing that frightened her. "Nah, I'll be fine. I don't think the killer is that stupid."

People milled about the club, talking loudly as they made their way out the entrance as the bouncers continued to clear the tables

of those too drunk to notice the party was over. Her heart boomed out signals of worry as she made her way to the back exit. Maybe she should have taken Tyson up on his offer.

The rear parking lot was empty except for a few cars. A frigid wind blew, scattering dead leaves across the asphalt that was only illuminated periodically from the light of orange-tinged streetlamps. A sudden gust swept stray hairs across her face and into her mouth.

Having any amount of visibility interrupted for even a moment caused her to panic. She spit out the hair stuck to her tongue and secured it behind her ears. Before taking a step towards her car, she placed her keys in one hand and the other in her pocket, fingers wrapped around the switchblade. Eyes darted around for one last look into the dark shadows surrounding her car.

Two large rats ducked between two dumpsters at the edge of the lot. It seemed okay. The belief someone would hear her human scream if some killer tried to grab her from behind was a silent prayer on her lips. It dawned on her a little too late that no one heard the screams of the other victims. She power-walked towards the Toyota Corolla only a few feet away.

She felt it before she heard it, the sensation of a total body strip wax with each hair pulled out one at a time by the root. “I know what you are, Jaguar-blooded one.” It was the voice of a woman. She grabbed the arm Maya had in her pocket. Maya dropped her keys, then the switchblade from her hair was in hand faster than she had ever pulled it out before. Her heartbeat that was a war drum now pumped adrenaline through her veins.

Maya spun and slashed into the shadows. “Come on, bitch. Let me see you.”

“How about you come to me. I am a friend. Let me show you more about your people. Let me help you find a better life. I know you are curious about the other side. Don’t you want to know if your sister will change? She doesn’t know, does she?”

Magdalena didn’t know.

She didn’t know it was one of the reasons she was so good at track. This wouldn’t be a period or sex talk; it was you are a mythical creature talk. Whoever this woman was, she knew about them.

But Maya *did* know her sister would change. The older she got, the more she could smell it on Magdalena. This woman was trying to lure her out. It wouldn’t be the first time she was underestimated.

“Like I said, you first.”

The Weaver stepped out from behind shadow to the light of the parking lot. She was small—couldn’t be taller than five foot, olive-skinned, with hair that was completely white. She dressed in a fluffy fur coat, black jeans, and a black turtleneck with suede stiletto boots that had a heel as sharp as Maya’s switchblade. She pulled the fur closer to neck, the tresses caressing her cheek from the cold breeze,

“Do I look like someone you should fear? My name is Isabella, darling. Some call me The Weaver, but you can call me sister, if you like.”

This woman scared Maya to the marrow, yet there was something stuck up about the woman that took her back to the days of high school. There was no masking that condescending tone—

same one she got when she took her envelopes of singles to the bank for deposit. Mother always said listen to those jungle instincts.

It was what kept their ancestors alive and it would do the same for her. This gift skipped her parents, but not the knowledge.

“The Weaver. Really? Like The Mandarin? Get the fuck out of here. I don’t know who you are, lady, and I don’t wanna know. Don’t follow me, stay away from my family, or I will cut you so fucking deep you’ll need more than stitches.”

The Weaver’s tranquil expression changed. Suddenly the shadows that blackened her eyes also weaved across her face. Tiny sutures formed around her mouth and hairline. In that moment, she could have been a walking, talking rag doll brought back from the depths of hell.

This was the person murdering all those women. It was just a feeling, but based on what they were saying in the papers, something in Maya’s gut said it was true. *Another woman?*

The Weaver turned her hand over to reveal a syringe falling from beneath the long sleeve. Her stance poised to attack. Maya took a step forward to receive this woman’s blows. She wanted to change so badly, her joints ached to pop out of place, to shed skin for fur and

fangs. A loud bang of the back door opening startled them both. It was Tyson and Jimmy with two other dancers, laughing and talking amongst themselves. Within seconds, the woman disappeared into the dark. Maya propelled herself forward, then stopped before she was overcome by the night. Maybe this is what this woman wanted.

She parked across the street of the house where Magdalena was staying. Carved pumpkins already sat on the porch with a harvest wreath made from plastic ears of corn and different shades of orange leaves hanging from a door.

The rest of the neighborhood was quiet with only the wind breaking against bare branches of the trees and the occasional barking dog. Cars and homes, all dark and still. It was safe, for now.

When the family awoke, she would have a long, difficult talk with her sister. It was an excellent Saturday night, despite the strange turn of events, so they would go to Shipley's Donuts for breakfast. Anything and everything they wanted on the menu.

She caught her reflection—what a damn hot mess, her hair out of place and stage make-up not quite wiped off. God, she was tired.

Needing something to keep her awake, Maya fished into her bag for two leather garters. She would make something special for Magdalena instead of sleeping, in case that woman decided to make an appearance. She knew about them. What else did she know?

It was too early for the diner to be busy, which was good. They needed privacy. Home would have been better, but Maya wanted to treat her sister. Hell, she also needed a treat.

The end table near the bathrooms would keep them at a distance from those already seated, and the flushing and whirring of hand dryers would mask their conversation. The waitress handed them menus with a sleepy half smile and walked away. Maya shifted in her hard pleather bench with the phantom feeling of the G-string riding up high again.

“Magdalena. I’ve been trying to do my best since mom and dad been gone, but I need to be honest with you now. We aren’t like other females.”

Oblivious, her little sister read the menu with delight. “No shit. I still love you though.” Magdalena put the menu down and took Maya’s manicured hand into her own. “What you do for us, for me.

I’m doing my best to make good on it. I miss Mom and Dad every day.”

Hearing this from a sixteen-year-old kid nearly broke Maya. No, she had to be strong, alpha. She was mother, father, provider, protector. Before she could speak, the waitress returned to take their order. Both always had the blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon.

When the waitress left again, Magdalena returned to her intended speech.

“I think someone is watching us and they can’t be trusted. I think they want to hurt us. I need to know you will always be alert. Run like hell, but just in case, keep this on you at all times.”

Maya took a switchblade and a leather garter fashioned to hold the weapon from her bag and slid them across the table. “I’m going to show you how to use it. For now, you first and foremost run as hard as you can if trouble finds you. Use this as a last resort. Okay?

If a woman approaches you with white hair... No, any woman we don’t know approaches you, don’t listen to her. Just run. Promise me to avoid anyone we don’t know. Remember the name, The Weaver or Isabella. I know the first one is stupid. Just keep eyes and ears open.”

Magdalena looked scared, confused. She took the switchblade and garter off the table and placed them in her backpack. “What is this really all about? Is it that stuff in the papers? The nuns keep saying you reap what you sow. But you know I don’t believe that.”

Maya’s cheeks went red with anger, not shame. What would those women have to say about her other identity, the big, wild cat inside? “We will have another talk later. I need time to think. I have to work tonight, so stay with a friend again, if you can. If not, I’ll take time off.”

“No, it’s fine. Me and Samantha were going to... Also, no offense, Sis, but

you look terrible. You need some sleep.”

Sleep sounded great before Maya had to slip on those heels, put on her face, then crimp her hair, teased real high. Extra hairspray

tonight to hold it all together. Maya spent the rest of the meal listening to Magdalena update her on school.

Maya was out as soon as she pulled the comforter over her body.

She dreamed of her grandparents roaming the land before immigrant was even a word.

Her dream became a memory of her father working next to her, bopping his head around to *Low Rider* by War when it popped up on her playlist. Their garage was an altar of car parts and American sports paraphernalia.

Maya awoke to her alarm, crying into her pillow, feeling more alone than she had in months. She couldn't remember the last time she'd shared a bed with anyone. But tears never got anyone anywhere. The back of her hands wiped the dampness from her face. Time for another day of hustle and coffee, maybe a shot of tequila during hair and make-up. But first, Magdalena better be done with homework because it was time for her first lesson on how to use a blade.

Maya held up the knife—about the size of an iPhone. The handle was polished wood from a ceiba tree. Maya and her father kept the blades in top condition, always sharpening them on a whetstone and oiling the handles. If you couldn't shave or trim your split ends, it wasn't sharp enough.

“This switchblade has been in our family since Papa was a kid.

It's from Mexico. He said he carried it around because he was always getting hassled for speaking Spanish and English. Don't lose it or break it. See this button? This is where you release the blade.”

Magdalena watched, wide-eyed. Her sister manoeuvred the knife from her pockets like a ballerina gliding and leaping across some fancy stage. This was a dance with danger that could end in death.

Maya closed the blade and handed it to her sister. “Now your turn.”

Magdalena reluctantly took the knife. It was awkward to hold, much heavier than a pencil. She didn’t like weapons. Books and

sneakers were the things that made her happy, but this was important.

She couldn’t blame Maya, feeling scared, doing this all alone.

There were times she felt guilty for being a burden. Magdalena wasn’t a baby; she heard her sister’s muffled cries. She knew men never called or came around. Magdalena did notice once a month her sister would leave overnight. She prayed her sister had some sancho waiting for her somewhere, loving her. It was highly unlikely, but it was a nice telenovela fantasy she wished for Maya.

Every second of Maya’s life seemed to revolve around Magdalena’s success, leaving nothing for herself. Magdalena would learn the art of the switchblade to give Maya some peace of mind, to show her she could take care of herself. She would never waste a second of her sister’s sacrifices. Maybe after this, Maya would show her how to do her hair so fierce it didn’t dare to move.

They practiced for an hour, concluding with throwing at a bullseye attached to the tree in their backyard. Magdalena’s right shoulder felt sore from the repetitive action. But she was used to a little pain during practice. The day went quickly and ended with Maya pulling herself up by the sides of her string bikini to head to work.

Chapter 4

Maya sat at the bar chatting with a regular because Sunday was the slowest day of the week. The regulars didn’t always go for a private dance, but they still tipped her for time while they spilled their life worries on the counter for

her to mop up with a cocktail napkin. It was the same price as therapy after a few hours, but she assumed this was easier.

It was almost time for her break when a tall, solidly-built man looking like a gringo, vaquero bull rider walked in. He was some Marlboro Man. Maya couldn't help to notice his polished brown boots and wranglers that snugly outlined his ass. His shirt was a pristine shade of white, starched as stiff as her hair. But mostly she noticed because he looked out of place. He was having a heated conversation with the bouncer, his eyes searching for somewhere to

look that didn't include women in various states of undress. Definitely not here for tits. He wore his badge on the outside of his jeans next to an exposed gun.

Maya's stomach seized.

Was someone from the club dead? Did something happen to her sister? Maya thought her sister would be safe at a friend's house.

From what happened last night. it seemed the stitched woman liked privacy. This killer was smart, discreet, as cold-blooded as they came.

Maya had never been sky diving, but she imagined being tossed out of a plane without a parachute was the closest thing to finding out someone you loved was gone forever. The same feeling when a doctor told them their parents were dead. Maya had to know. She strode over to the bouncer and the cop.

"What's going on, officer?"

He looked at her, then immediately turned away. His expression revealed slight embarrassment, not wanting to appear unprofessional by ogling. The slight flush of pink on his freshly shaven face was turning to a splotchy crimson. His lips had a natural pout that looked supple with a smearing of chap stick. She wondered if it was the flavored kind.

"Uh. I'm looking for Tyson. Nothing to be worried about. I just have

questions.”

“Yea, you all have questions, then when you get the answers you don’t like, your questions become charges, or worse. I can vouch for Ty. He’s legit.”

The bouncer didn’t want any part in this. “Will you take the detective to the back, please, before management sees?”

Maya looked the detective up and down. More up because even in her heels he towered over her. He seemed okay.

“Come on. Let me go in first to let the ladies know you are here.

It’s a regular sorority house back there.”

He looked at her face and nowhere else. She could tell it wasn’t an easy task, but she appreciated the sentiment. Not a single man that walked through that door had excited her until now. Maybe it was because she knew he wasn’t here for leisure. She could swear

the Jaguar inside purred when she looked into his pale blue eyes.

He was like prey stopping for water while she readied to pounce from behind thick ferns and vines.

“Thank you. I appreciate the introduction. I’m Jackson. You are?”

“My real name is Maya. When I’m working, it’s Layla. You know, like the Eric Clapton song?”

She led him through the near empty club in silence until they stopped before entering the dressing room. “Wait here.”

Maya told everyone the police was there, so be nice and cover your pussies and tits. Hide all the drugs, too. She’d said this loud enough for the cop to hear and came back waving an arm. “Come on.”

He walked in and immediately dropped his eyes to his shoes.

The dancers continued with their preparations or sat around chatting while they took a break, not paying him any attention. What was another set of eyes?

Jackson winced at the smell of hairspray and clashing perfumes.

There were hairdryers going, music from the club piped through a speaker, laughter.

“Hey, boy scout. Over here.” Maya stood next to Tyson: fishnet tank top, twice Jackson’s size, and fine as a model. Tyson’s manicured nails were quickly weaving a woman’s dark brown hair with electric blue extensions.

“How can I help you?” Tyson didn’t release his gaze from the hair.

Jackson extended a hand that went ignored. “Hello, I’m Detective Jackson Barnes.” When he saw his hand not welcomed, he opened a soft, black leather folder protector with his initials embossed near the handle. He pulled out a copy of a driver’s license. “Do you know this woman?”

Tyson glanced at the photo, paused, then looked a little longer.

“Yea, but through my neighbor. I’ve done her hair before. Why?”

Maya didn’t need to wait for an answer by the look on the detective’s face. He was trying to find a way to give them as little information while hoping to retrieve as much as he could from Tyson.

There was also sorrow.

“She was the victim of a crime. We are just trying to...”

Tyson put the hair down and two fingers on the bridge of his nose. Tyson was usually one stoic dude with not much bothering him. This cut him deep. Maya put her arm around him. The entire dressing room went silent with all heads turned in their direction.

“This has to stop. Was it a boyfriend or just an intolerant asshole? Because that shit is rampant. Being trans isn’t a fucking crime.”

The crimson returned to Jackson's face with his eyes darting back and forth. He opened the folder, flipping through loose papers. "I didn't... That wasn't in the report. The autopsy hasn't gotten back to me yet. This is part of a bigger investigation."

Both Tyson and Maya looked at each other, whispering the name, "The Ripper."

Maya shivered thinking of the woman's face from the previous night.

Jackson looked up from paperwork and nodded. "I came here because I found a card from this club in her bag with your name.

Nothing more. Sounds like you've been following the story, so you might know we got very little to go on. Have to follow every bit of information we get."

Tyson straightened his back and was composed again. He wasn't having any of it. "Well, I was here. There are surveillance cameras and all these beautiful, naked women to tell you so."

"I'm sorry if I bothered you. I'd like to give you my card, if you think of anything."

Tyson returned to the hair, visibly fighting back tears beneath lashes he'd designed himself. The detective needed to leave. Maya gently put her hand on Jackson's arm to signal it was time to go.

"I'll show you out, detective."

Jackson gave a final, lingering look at Tyson before turning to leave.

"Your card, detective?"

There was a glimmer in the detective's eye when he heard Tyson's voice. He flipped back to the leather case, taking out a card.

"Thank you." He placed the card on Tyson's workstation then turned to leave with Maya again. When they were out of earshot of the dressing room, she

felt comfortable enough to press for more information. “So, what do you know so far?”

“I can’t talk about it. Why? Something you know?”

Maya needed a second opinion. She had done everything on her own for so long, but this was dangerous, scary. “It’s time for my break. You want coffee? I’ll meet you outside in fifteen.”

Maya pulled gray sweats over her bikini and slipped Adidas sliders over socks before meeting Jackson in the parking lot. He stood next to a black jeep. Maya looked through the window, noticing it was spotless, save for a scattering of cracked books that looked like crime and horror novels. She wondered what he looked like naked reading in bed beneath fresh sheets.

Those thoughts vanished when he spoke. “Do you have a preference of where we go? Anything you want, just lead the way.”

They walked to Jim’s Diner on the opposite side of the club parking lot. He either didn’t notice or pretended not to notice the stares when they entered. Her hair was a stiff, teased mane and her face was heavy with make-up. It was no secret where she was coming from. The waitresses were always cool because the dancers never forgot to tip an appropriate amount.

She chose a private table in the back. “Look, it could be nothing, but last night someone I had never seen before was in the club. In fact, I could hardly see their face. Before I could get close, they were gone. After my shift when I walked to my car, a woman approached me. I think I’m being watched, or whoever is out there is looking for another victim. She had a needle in her hand.”

“What did she say?” Jackson looked hungry for more information.

Luckily the waitress showed up to take their drink order. It gave Maya time to think because she would have to lie to avoid sounding like a nutcase.

She was ignoring the fact Jackson was good looking. She saw so many faces of men day after day but never really looked at them, even when she was staring

into their eyes. They were apparitions, ice sculptures she had to melt with her sex. Looking at Jackson, talking

to him fully clothed, with just a cup of coffee felt good. She appreciated his sensitivity towards Tyson and the victim. His large hands, like his ass in jeans, were difficult to ignore. On one he wore an A & M graduation ring, the bulky kind with an obnoxious colored stone in the center. Either he was the first to graduate in his family or came from a long line of graduates from that school. No wedding ring on the other, but she wasn't naïve enough to think that meant anything. Still. Her mind wandered off thinking what those hands might feel like on her hips as they guided her body to a rhythm that would bring her to climax.

"She didn't say anything."

"You have a gun?"

"Fuck no! You are more likely to get killed by your own fucking gun." She gave him a sour expression.

He tapped his ring against his mug while he looked off in thought.

"Can you take time off until this blows over?"

"Can you take time off? I have bills to pay and a mouth to feed.

Don't you have a family to provide for?"

Jackson's mouth tightened. "Sorry, that was a stupid thing to say.

It's just me, by the way. I take care of my mother. She is a... Would you mind coming to the station and describing this woman?"

Maya frowned at his quick change of the subject.

"Also, I'd like to hang around the club. Not to look at you though.

Not in that...way. I'll bring a book." He blushed.

Maya had to laugh. “A book? To a strip club? You trying rat yourself out? You need to talk to management. Let them clear some space for you. Sometimes people don’t appreciate cops around. Bad for business, you know?”

“Thanks for the heads-up. I’ll do that.”

She didn’t want to leave. “Hey, I got to look out for my sister. It’s just us now.” There was a silence between them. Maya felt like he got what he wanted and was probably eager to get on with work elsewhere. “I’ll get the coffee. And I guess I’ll see you around.” She stood to leave, but he remained seated.

“Wait, do you have to go? I mean we haven’t finished the coffee.

Are you hungry? I mean, if you want. If you have time.”

He had a perfect set of teeth that would have looked great with her G-string between them. His desire to want to talk was a surprise.

This was unrelated to her jaguar musk. Her temperature didn’t feel elevated, even with the dirty thoughts playing like ‘70s porno in the back of her mind; she couldn’t sense the pheromone secretions making her skin slick, which it would have in a sweatshirt.

She came down quickly, knowing what was coming. The next question would most likely be how such a nice girl got dancing. They all wanted to know that down to the smallest detail. Was she abandoned? Daddy issues? Addictions?

“I don’t mean to pry, but you said you take care of your sister.

Can I ask what happened to your parents?”

She had never spoken to anyone about that. Ever. Maybe she needed to. Before she would tell him about the moment that changed her life, they both ordered omelettes with home fries.

—

Magdalena had a track meet in New Braunfels after school. It wasn't far, but both their parents couldn't leave work in time to make the warm-up. Maya agreed to go. As always, Magdalena was the star.

The coach pulled Maya aside to inform her they should really start thinking about colleges, she was sure Magdalena was good enough for a scholarship, but there were all the other expenses they should plan for. That girl was special. Maya knew this. She also knew at the age of eighteen she would endure pain like she had never experienced before. It was an agony her grandmother said was like giving birth, but without medication, to five babies in a row.

Maya didn't know about birth yet, but the pain of that first transformation was indeed excruciating. It brought both her and her mother to tears as it happened the first time. The plan was to tell Magdalena as a family when she turned seventeen. She would have a year to get used to the idea that she was more than a woman.

They would allow her to watch Maya transform.

As they drove back, just after 8PM, both of their phones began to ring. It was their neighbor followed by another number they didn't recognize. They were told to go to St. Mary's hospital where the police were waiting. Their father was shot four times and their

mother twice. She was alive and they could speak to her, however, they had to hurry because she was not going to make it.

Her mother lay in the hospital bed attached to noisy, blinking machines. She looked like an apparition just passing through this realm. Her eyes filled with tears upon seeing her daughters. "Mijas, come here. Tell me all about the competition."

"Mama, we don't have time." Maya was angry she wanted to talk about sports and not something important. Last wishes, anything.

"Nonsense, tell me." She tried to say cheerfully to conceal the strain beneath.

Magdalena sat next to her mother, recounting every detail of the competition. She ended with pulling out the winning medal for her mother to touch.

“You both make me so proud. I want you to always stay close to each other.” She turned to Maya with a stern expression and a choked voice from withholding tears. “Keep her safe. Survive. Do whatever you need to do to survive. God will understand and so will I. I love you both. Find others. I’m very tired now. Let me rest, then we will speak more.” She never opened her eyes again.

Magdalena was too distraught and young to understand her mother. Maya understood every word. When DPS arrived, they separated them, questioned them like they were criminals. They had distant family in Mexico, but the girls were citizens. There would be a hearing and if Maya wanted custody, she had to prove she could provide. She had one month. Maya didn’t hesitate to do what she needed to do...the memory was broken by Jackson’s voice.

“Did they ever find out who did it?”

“No. Home invasion gone wrong. My mother’s jewellery was gone, but none of it was worth anything significant. My father’s gun was used on him, and was left next to his body as well as the car keys. They didn’t bother with anything else in the house. I can’t even remember the last time there was a break-in in our neighborhood. It felt off. Lazy detective work. No offense. The guy assigned to the case stopped returning my calls.”

“No offense taken. This job burns you out after a while. I’m sorry you went through that so young. You are doing great by your sister.

Be proud.”

Maya tried not to blush. No one ever said she was doing a great job. There was no one to tell her well done or offer encouragement when she lacked the will to get out of bed. The few friends she had before had either stopped coming around or moved away. There was no time for friends except the ones she made at the club.

“And Tyson? What is his story? He didn’t seem to like me at all. I thought he

was going to blind me with hair pins.”

“I think you would feel the same if you had a degree in chemistry, then one fine day were wrongly charged with a crime for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and kind of matching the description of the real criminal. Charges were eventually dropped, but he still has to put that down on every job application. He is smart as hell with the devil’s hands when it comes to hair and make-up. He makes his own stuff. Smart and good looks.”

“He’s not the only one.” His tone was soft, a little trembling, like an adolescent first kiss.

Maya looked away to get the attention of the waitress. As much as she wanted this to be more than panty talk, she would pretend like she didn’t hear what he just said.

Jackson lifted his finger to tap his ring against the mug. He stopped short and bit his lip. Instead his hand reached halfway to touching Maya’s slender, but muscular forearm. “Oh, no. Sorry. That wasn’t appropriate. It’s just, this has been a great date. Not date.” He squeezed his eyes and shook his head. “Conversation. And not that great because you told me something really personal and sad. But you’re great. Great company.” He said this to his mug.

She loved the awkward, shy guy thing. He liked to read, and his car was clean. It probably smelled like his cologne and carpet deodorizer. This was her cue to leave before she said or did a stupid thing, like give him her phone number. “Thanks for the food. I better get back. It’s been nice.”

He was now staring at her with a smile on his face, looking at the way her lips pulled away from her mug, it was the kind of smile that suggested they didn’t need to know more about each other because

the chemistry was as strong as the black coffee they drank. “Let me walk with you.”

Maya spent the rest of her shift avoiding mental images of Jackson. The thought of him made her crazy wet; no bueno, it would show through the white silky triangle she wore as she danced.

Chapter 5

Bad shit happens to good people all the time. You can't help natural disasters, but people were the worst kind of disaster, hands down.

Jackson's job was proof of that. The daily news was a video diary of that. He found the story Maya told him about her parents as very odd. As much as he couldn't stop thinking about her, he couldn't stop trying to fit the pieces of her parents' deaths together either, add the fact someone had followed her. Sure, it had been years since the break in, but sometimes reality was stranger than fiction.

No one gave him any pushback when he requested the files on a closed case. Maya was right. The neighborhood had no history of break-ins or car thefts. Families and retired folks living quietly near a strip mall: Barnes & Noble, Bed Bath & Beyond, and hipster coffee shops. Not far was an elite Catholic high school. Then there was the timing. It was early for a break-in. The incident occurred at around seven at night. The guys walked right in because the door was unlocked. You didn't keep your doors unlocked if it's a dangerous place. Most of the time these things happened in the middle of the night. The only people in the house were the parents. They'd left both cars in the driveway. The neighbors had nothing valuable to add. The only one to say anything was an elderly lady across the street. She said a fancy car she had never seen before passed by very slowly the week before. There was a strange woman inside, had *the eyes of a bruja*. The word unreliable was scrawled next to the woman's name. He would go speak to her if she was still there.

What tipped him over was a small, pink sticky note with the word deceased and a case number next to the detective assigned to the break-in. After requesting the case file on the unsolved murder of the detective, Jackson knew something was wrong. The detective was

found in a dumpster behind an adult peep show center with all valuables still found on his person. He was missing his eyes, tongue, and ears. The rest devoured by rats.

The peep show had lasted an hour, which put him walking to his car about

midnight. No cameras in the customer parking lot or the side of the building where the dumpsters were located. The area surrounding the warehouse-sized building was either highway or scrubland. Nobody heard a thing. He was only found when the trash was collected a week later. His widow didn't want the details released, for obvious reasons, and the dumpster was full of liquefied garbage, no evidence for the techs. They could only determine he was killed and dumped at the same spot.

Jackson called in a favor to have two guys keep a tail on the home of Maya and Magdalena Ramos. Maybe they would get lucky and this woman with white hair would show up again.

He loaded a steel travel mug from the bottomless pot at the station on his way out. Two Splendas, no milk. He nodded to the patrolmen doing him a favor—one he would repay with an open bar tab—and climbed into his jeep. The city was its usual hurried normal of backed-up freeways from maintenance that never seemed to end.

The city groaned with jackhammers and cement trucks as it expanded. Soon it would be Austin's twin. Nothing but big name restaurants, shops, and the giant ostrich skin cowboy boots at North Star Mall that greeted him every time he crossed the city.

Sometime soon he would take that vacation his mother and sister kept bugging him to take. When the temporary light turned red, he thought of Maya, their bare feet in sand, warm waves surrounding their ankles and both of her hands tucked in his back pockets. An extended honk broke his fantasy. He regained his focus to a construction worker giving him a dirty look. His foot pressed hard on the gas.

Get a grip, Jackson. This ain't no Harlequin book. You're in the middle of a real horror, he told himself. When he exited the freeway, to a quieter road, he pulled up the file and address on his dashboard computer. His first stroke of luck happened when he discovered the *unreliable* neighbor still lived across the street.

The woman sat on her front porch in a rusted two-seater glider with a ball of fluff on her lap. She wore a thin cotton dress that could have been a

nightgown, beneath a floral apron. Her hair was a wild, white mess, and matching wiry hairs poked from above a withered top lip. He could see why she might be dismissed as unreliable. She looked ancient. And grumpy. Her sight didn't seem to be affected by age because she hawk-eyed him from halfway down the block and then onto her property.

"Where are you coming from? You're not from here," she barked as he approached the stairs to her porch.

"Are you Consuelo? I wanted to ask you a few questions. It's about something that happened very long ago, so don't worry if you don't remember."

"The murder across the street?" Her eyes widened, flaring with memory.

Jackson offered a single nod.

"I remember and see everything here. I was born here, you know.

Yes. I am on my porch most of the day. But when it happened, I was inside. My stories were on. I can't miss my telenovelas."

He moved to sit next to her. "I'm listening."

"A peculiar woman was around here. I didn't like her at all. Her eyes could hack you like a machete. Hair just as white as mine, but a face far too young for it. This stranger drove very slow past these houses twice. Who does that except the delivery guy? No, something was wrong."

"Anything else?"

Her lips smacked gently as she sucked at her teeth before she shrugged. Wrinkled fingers with bulging blue and purple veins stroked her little dog that stuck its tongue out with affection.

"Thank you. I appreciate you speaking to me." When he stood to leave, the little Pomeranian jumped from his owner's lap to happily hump away on Jackson's ankle. He didn't want to be rude and kick the puffy thing away.

“Cheech. Come here! Bad boy. See, he likes you. You seemed okay when I first had a look at you.”

Jackson didn't need to hear anymore. There were far too many coincidences. The only questions were, why did a strange woman have such a vested interest in the sisters and was it the same woman both times? They were stalked and their parents murdered when the killer knew the girls wouldn't be home. That was the only explanation he had for any of it. Why them? The other victims were the kind of women that people seldom acknowledge are missing, and with little family, and two being illegal. It only made the headlines because the bodies were piling up. That and the papers were selling out by sensationalizing the grisly murders. There hadn't been an infamous serial killer in a very long time.

He said goodbye to Consuelo, leaving his card with her. She gave him two Mexican wedding cookies to eat on the road for being a kind man, *unlike the one years ago*.

His heart ached for Maya and her sister living such an idyllic family life one day and having to be completely uprooted the next by a senseless tragedy that was, in reality, not senseless.

Before he pulled away, bite of cookie between his teeth, he picked up his phone. He had a message from his mother inviting him for dinner. It was almost as if she had ESP. He would accept the invitation because suddenly he wanted to see her and tell her he loved her.

—

Maya only worked the worst day of the week, Monday, because Christmas was in two months, and no way in hell she wanted to work on Halloween night. The club held a party every year that brought out the worst in the customers, as if the night was a free for all for possession. The customers were always drunker, louder, and more aggressive. Even worse, they were cheap as fuck, watching the costumes on stage like it was ComicCon instead of a place of trade.

It was going to be a full moon, too. She would rather get drunk alone

watching horror films, followed by a run in Espada Park in her Jaguar skin.

Jackson sat at the back of the club to get a good view of the entrance. The poor guy's discomfort was obvious with one leg bobbing up and down quickly in place. Both hands resting on his

knees. Head up but his gaze on the door. She couldn't help going back to peek at what he was doing before her shift. Maya never thought about what she would wear to work because it really didn't matter if her G-string was made of toilet paper or banana skins, as long as the customers got a get off shot for later. Tonight, she inspected every single combo, hating everything. Why did she even care? Knowing he was there made Maya nervous, self-conscious.

And excited.

Between lining her lips and blending lipsticks in front of the mirror, her mind wandered into a daze, wondering what he would think after seeing her work for hours in nothing but skin—never mind the other skin she had in this life, the skin that defied logic and science but still existed. She wished she could sit at a table next to him somewhere else with a wine glass in hand, talking the late afternoon and evening away.

Her mouth tightened at the thought: you fuck the dancer, a nice college graduate with a respectable job don't date the dancer.

"Maya!"

She looked to see Tyson handing her bottles of hairspray and deodorant. "Woman, you need to stop fantasizing about that detective and do something about it. Ask him out!"

"I'm not." She turned her attention to her eyeliner. Nice and thick.

Tyson was still standing behind her. He was not going to drop it.

"Ha! How was coffee that went on for over an hour? The boss came in here asking if you were back yet from your little date. Plus, I know that face. You

were smiling like I have never seen you smile...like ever.”

Tyson was right. It had only been grief and hustle since her parents died. There was never any room or time for anything else.

The last boyfriend she had walked in the club pleading for her to quit.

His pleas escalated to angry demands. He promised to take care of her. When she asked if that invitation extended to her sister, he shook his head and replied, “I’m not dating your sister.” That was the end of that. Like the Quarterflash song, she hardened her heart.

“He is cute, not as cute as my Jimmy, but don’t feel bad. That big-eyed country boy look. Nice skin. Strong arms. Maybe he will

take you line dancing. Pull you close...”

“I’m gonna be late for the stage.” She gave her hair a big once-over with the hairspray. It was teased high in the style of Lita Ford and Tawny Kitaen. Next was the deodorant and some of that rancid-smelling body spray from Bath & Body Works that was sweet enough to give you cavities through your nose. She wanted to see if he was as attracted to her as she was to him. All these extra chemicals would block her shifter pheromones. She would probably lose money, but this was more important.

Only a few bodies occupied tables or perched at the bar, leaving enough room for her to see him clearly with her cat vision. To her right, Jimmy gave her a thumbs up as he played *Sexual Healing* by Marvin Gaye. He then pointed to Jackson, giving her an air chef’s kiss. She grumbled to herself, thinking she would kill Jimmy and Tyson at the first chance.

The song has a languid beat the pace of sensual sex that is meant to last, like the second or third time you find yourself in someone’s bed. The excitement new enough for extended exploration, but comfortable enough to let those fantasies transfer from your imagination to your lips. She needed sexual healing, playful ass slaps, someone to turn her on, to get her off multiple times. Someone to ask her what *she* wanted.

She grabbed the pole, leaning out at a forty-five degree angle while she took slow steps around, giving the audience a complete view. Her head rolled back, hair caressing the top of her hips, dropping her ass low and wide as Marvin's yearning voice called out; a message to someone you ache for from afar. Your thoughts and body betraying better judgment, maybe even a partner, as you find yourself aroused. But you always return to what your fantasy would feel like once you got them alone. Her eyes focused on him as her hips gyrated against the pole like they were in his bedroom with only one place they would end up; his head between her legs, licking her clit like a kitten at a saucer of milk.

His gaze didn't stray from the stage even though he should have been watching the door. Beautiful bodies were like pitchforks of torture, knowing you could look but not touch. He was mesmerized.

Her body glowed beneath the colored stage lights from something slathered against her brown skin. That pile of hair that brushed against the small of her back was a curtain to take shelter under, listen to all her secrets.

What was behind those feline eyes? Her fingertips traced the curves of her body showing a trail to discover.

Maya's finished the dance on her knees with her back to the audience when the tiniest of hairs prickled over the entirety of her body. The sick feeling returned, clenching her insides. It was like a steak covered in maggots sitting at the pit of her stomach. From the corner of her eye, she could see the shadow with white hair pulled beneath a cap. There was only one way to alert Jackson of the woman's presence without alerting her. *Slow Hand* by The Pointer Sisters was up next. She scrambled to her feet, snatching the red bikini top off the stage. Before making any more sudden moves, she composed herself with a deep breath.

Maya approached Jackson like she would any other customer.

With her nipples only inches from his lips, she leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"I'm going to dance for you. When I tell you, look at the table in the right

corner of the room. Don't look now. Just look at me." She moved away far enough for their eyes to lock onto each other.

"I can't look anywhere else. I don't want to see anything but you.

Sweatshirt and sweat pants, or like this, I don't care." He gripped the sides of the cheap pleather chair, resisting any urge to hold the woman in front of him, kiss every inch of her body he was sure to crave after the first taste.

She didn't know what to make of his proclamation, but she wasn't going to tell him she felt the same. His interest in her, as a person, seemed genuine, she wanted this mutual attraction to be the real thing; however, life sometimes gave you the wrong impression and you end up ass and tits the other way around. She told herself to keep her cool and wait to see how it all played out.

For now, the fantasy.

Maya had one knee between his legs while holding the back of the chair. She rolled her hips closer to him, wanting to feel his mouth

on her breasts and his fingers slipping off this tiny bit of polyester that passed as underwear. A swatch of pink fabric was only thing that stopped her from screaming out his name. She would have him spell it with two fingers between her ass and pussy until she orgasmed.

Her skin prickled. The woman. How did she forget why she was here in the first place? They were so close he could probably smell her excitement. If this wasn't a cop, the bouncer would have told them to break it up.

"Get ready." She turned around and bent over to hover over his lap. Jackson looked towards the corner. A small figure in a baseball cap and oversized clothing sat looking straight at them. Tough to see anything in the darkness. When planning this little operation, he'd agreed with management to turn on the security cameras. He had to make a deal with the devil to drop parking tickets against the owner, but it was a small price to pay to catch a serial killer.

Maya flipped her hair, which obstructed his view. By the time he moved it out of the way, the stranger had disappeared.

“She’s gone.”

Maya froze upon hearing these words. “My sister.”

Before hysteria got her running out the door, damn her job, Jackson took her hand into his. “Don’t worry. I have two guys watching her.”

“You what?” Maya felt a sense of relief and disbelief.

“I looked at your parents’ case. I don’t think it was a home invasion. And the lead detective is dead. He was found in a dumpster with his eyes, tongue, and ears removed. As soon as I had that information, I had a tail on her.”

Maya didn’t know what to say. Her heart was a Texas thundercloud of pain and desire, a booming rush of darkness that always ended with slivers of sunlight peeking through again within minutes. She knew she was right to think it was all so fishy. Finally, some validation of her suspicions. They were murdered for a reason and not some senseless act. At the same time, this man did more for her than anyone in many years.

“Thank you.” She grabbed her bikini top from the table and ran to the dressing room to cry in the toilet alone.

Why? Why kill them? They didn’t have the gift, if that is what the woman wanted. Nothing about her parents was deserving of their execution. She was a ball of frustration and hair until Tyson came in to comfort her.

Tyson then told the manger Maya started her period and was in no condition to finish her shift. The manager, unable to carry on a conversation about female bodily functions, waved him off to tell her it was okay to leave. Maybe take the week off, or night, or however long the thing lasted. As long as she didn’t go scaring the customers away with a bad attitude and blood.

—

Maya returned to a dark home needing something other than sleep.

Her mind drifted back to the club when she danced for Jackson as she reached beneath her pillow. Bright pink silicone in the shape of a rabbit buzzed to life with the squeeze of the tail. The lowest setting massaged away the worry that would escape her body in the form of a moan, breathless sighs. Two ears straddled the engorged slick purse of nerves that made her ass clench with every stroke, tightening and pulling her in a game of orgasm tug of war. Hips winning as they pumped against the face of the rabbit, nibbling on the hidden folds that were often left undiscovered by a selfish lover.

Pleasure filled the cavernous places that usually felt empty with echoes of loneliness or grief.

Little relief soothed her frustration after she came twice with a fantasy that would probably never happen. The physical ache was gone but not the emotional one. She stared at the ceiling on damp sheets and wet thighs with the after-sex chemicals fading.

Her parents. That stitch bitch following her. What was she on the inside? Google would warm her bed tonight. She felt her only hope might be the Jaguar. There had to be something, anything about this subject, even if it was obscure and semi-unreliable.

After three hours, two Red Bulls, and wading through the pits of Google, she finally stumbled upon a raving blog entitled, *My Date With A Grizzly Bear*. The author went on and on about a magnetic

woman he met at a club in the desert, she turned out to be a grizzly bear trying to take all his money then eat him alive. It wasn't his fault she gave him mixed signals. His body still had a scar from her claws.

He put the club's information on the blog telling everyone to find these women and do something about it.

The comment section was nothing but people taking the piss out of him, but something felt true about this. Women that shifted in secret, living on the fringes of society, making money in dark ways to maintain anonymity and autonomy over their bodies. She pulled up the website. The club was in the

middle of the desert with the closest sign of life being a reservation. Vegas was just an hour east. The website had a member's only login with all the other information being pretty scarce. It was advertised as a place of entertainment for couples and men. She nearly dropped out of bed seeing the private preview cost just to check out the place for half an hour. It made the champagne room at her club seem like pocket money. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Instinct said yes, but her mind said no. A fucking grizzly bear?

She shut the computer and went to sleep.

Chapter 6

The Weaver paced in her bathroom, wanting to kill something.

Instead, she grabbed one of her miniature pain dolls made from flesh and ripped off the head. Particles of decayed organs flew into the air, covering her body. That stupid, bitch stripper had help. She wasn't as dumb as The Weaver had thought. This wasn't supposed to be difficult. These two insignificant, lonely creatures belonged to her.

The years of research, the cost, time spent to find sisters with the same enchanted bodies was all a debt that would be paid.

She glared at the mirror, hating her reflection, but tonight she wanted to look and feel good. With a make-up wipe, she dabbed the organ dust off her face. Her fingers brushed through her hair carefully as to not pull too much out by the roots; the scalp was dangerously loose. When the tube of red lipstick pressed against her lips, the skin around her mouth pulled at the once perfect seams.

Her hate returned at the painstaking lengths of retaining her beauty.

She didn't want to waste any of the skin she'd collected to change now. She had to think, act quickly. These were stupid girls, they didn't have the will she had. They were nothing but animals from a long line of animals. She would lure them and before anyone could investigate the cop's death, she

would be long gone and look completely different.

“Hello? Um...these ties are starting to hurt. I think my feet and hands are falling asleep. And your doll collection is creeping me out a bit.”

The voice broke her thoughts. She'd almost forgot she had company tonight, an escort with the kind of body that required a meticulous diet and exercise regime. He had to be in the best of health for what she planned for him. The website showed him in the tiniest of underwear, every chiselled curve on display. Dark eyes and hair with the same olive complexion were the cherry on top.

“Hey, sweetheart. My hands and feet are going numb. I won't be able to perform well if you don't loosen them a bit.”

The Weaver rolled her eyes at his boyish whines, thinking he wouldn't need either for what they were doing tonight. She would pay extra to shut his mouth with duct tape.

With her make-up reapplied, she entered the bedroom to a fine, young specimen waiting on the bed. A real stud, and tonight she planned on studding him until there wasn't a drop left. All his virility would be hers.

With the lights low, the escort wouldn't notice the heavy make-up concealing the jagged seams ripping away. The rest of her body was stunning. The cigar burns inflicted by her husband that had blistered her skin and turned to scars were long gone, but her infertility had never healed. That was a plague that would be gone, too.

“Wow, you look amazing.” His erection grew to a stiff rod as his eyes skimmed her body on show beneath a silk kimono left open.

This was a purchase she made in Japan years ago. It was also where she learned the art of tying beautiful knots.

“The knots have to be tight for the magic of the silk to work,” she purred, leaning over the man and cinching the knots even tighter.

This was no lie.

He gasped, not at all worried. “It’s not every day I get a client as hot as you. I was a bit worried when you made me cover my head before entering the house. What an awesome surprise.”

The Weaver took his cock into her hands. He let out a moan.

“Very good,” she said just above a whisper. When his cock was as hard as the handle of a whip, she took a syringe out of her pocket.

Without warning, she pierced his erection.

He bucked against the pain. “God! Fuck! What did you do?” He had tears in his eyes.

The Weaver giggled at the sight of his reaction to the pain. “I don’t have the time or the patience to explain. Think of it as liquid Viagra.”

His demeanor changed to one of delight. “Wait, I think I feel something tingly.”

She took his cock into her mouth, releasing enough saliva to run down the shaft and onto his balls. His body tensed in pleasure. As he writhed, the knots constricted tighter around his wrists and ankles.

“Holy shit. I’ve never felt anything like that. Should sell this stuff.

Could make a killing.” She stopped her sucking. He looked to his erection, then The Weaver. “Hey, why’d you stop?”

She slipped off the robe with a smirk on her face. “Because it’s my turn. Don’t be selfish.” The Weaver straddled the escort, taking him all the way in until she felt the dripping tip hit her cervix. Her hips moved slowly to start with her thighs lifting and lowering, squeezing him like a hungry predator with scales. He moaned and groaned like a humpback whale about to mate.

“I don’t know how long I’ll last! Wow!” He panted. Her hand reached back, softly massaging his balls. One finger gliding across the perineum.

She rode him faster, pressing her pelvis deeper into his, her nails digging into his chest. “Don’t worry, baby. All I want is your cum.

Every. Last. Drop. Until there is nothing left. Ever.” She rolled her head back, savoring this conquest, her cleverness and the girth of

his cock stretching her wide to the cusp of orgasm. A gasp and chuckle escaped her lips.

“What?” He barely registered what she was saying as she continued to smother him with her experienced body. She dropped her hands on either side of his face, bringing her lips to his ear, the tip of her tongue flicking playfully.

“I don’t want just pleasure tonight. I want your fertility. I’m taking from you what was taken from me.”

The Weaver’s cup would cummuth over.

By the morning, her lower back, wrists, and jaw ached. It was fun for the first few hours until it turned into a chore. This would be well worth it in the end. It was something she learned when conjuring a demon. She exchanged sex for its secrets. Best sex of her life, in fact. You haven’t fucked until you have sucked off a demon in the center of a pentagram in a haunted manor. Everybody is a whore for the things they really want in life.

The Weaver untied the sweaty escort. His eyelids hung half drawn, drunk-like. She stuffed a hefty tip of two hundred dollars in the pocket of his Saks Fifth Avenue suit for providing such a vast amount of the balm needed to restore her womb after so many years. She wondered how long until the guy realized he would be impotent for the rest of his days.

Chapter 7

Maya woke up feeling sorry for herself. Emotional hangovers hit her hard, as if she was starting the day looking at the world through a dirty, mud-splattered window with a handwritten note saying, ‘Clean Me.’ She went to the front door to wave off the cops. In her heavy heart, she felt they might not

be as useful as she hoped, but maybe this woman would be put off by the hassle of police involvement.

This couldn't be left to chance. As much as she needed sleep, she also needed answers. Doing nothing wasn't going to get her out of this mood.

Maya contacted the club, *Claws*, from the blog despite feeling like an idiot. She emailed the main address directed at the manager,

Ximena, who was mentioned on the blog as being the nastiest woman the author had ever met because she blamed *him* for the attack. Expecting nothing, she for hoped for answers. Not an hour later, there was a new message in her inbox. It read, *Skype me*.

A woman answered the video call. She wore her hair in a short bob tucked behind her ears with a bandana wrapped around the crown of her head, a lollipop stuck out of her mouth that she shifted with her tongue. The space behind her showcased Mexican antiquities. There was an atl, quetzal feathers, a sword.

“Well, hello, Maya. Your message was vague and strange, but enough to catch my interest. What do you wanna know about the story from that pendejo writing bad things about my club?”

Maya tried to appear serious. “Are the rumors true? That guy said you and all the women there are these types of beasts.”

Ximena listened casually while enjoying her sucker. She took it out to inspect her progress. “Why do you want to know? And by the way, he got what he deserved.”

Maya had to chuckle at that last comment, thinking about past customers that got thrown out of the club. She cleared her throat, not wanting to appear anything less than serious. “I’m sure he did.

Anyway, every full moon something happens to me.” Maya mentally shrunk as she prepared herself to receive the blows of laughter and ridicule.

Nothing but silence. Then a question from Ximena.

“What do you turn into?”

“I become...become a jaguar. And my sister, she’ll—”

The voice on the computer remained calm. “Only every full moon?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to change this?”

Impatience was rising within Maya. It was like she was a toy in the hands of a cat. “Yes. It is very important that I have control over this as soon as possible.”

“You need to make your first kill, then consume it. Not only can you change at will, but a lot of other cool shit happens.” The

bandana woman said this without the hint of emotion. The tone so nonchalant, she could have just told her to turn on the dishwasher.

This was not what Maya wanted to hear. To her grandmother Amparo’s dying day, she never killed as much as a mouse or an insect. Always catch and release. And other cool shit? Now she regretted the email. What was she, inside? “I can’t murder someone then eat them. No fucking way.”

“Did I say human? You like chicken? Frog legs? Crickets?”

Now Maya was just confused. “I like chicken.”

“Find yourself a chicken, kill it, then make arroz con pollo. Done.

You can change at will. Didn’t anybody tell you? Your family? Why is this so important?”

“Someone is following me. This woman with white hair knew about what I am and wanted me to come with her. My body reacted...”

The woman threw the lollipop to the side with a glob of saliva following behind. A few sprays hit the computer camera. “I gotta go.

Go kill and eat that chicken now. You and your sister.” The woman was looking through her phone.

“But my sister—”

“I said you and your sister at the same time. No questions.

Goodbye!” Ximena disconnected the call without looking up.

That didn’t go as badly as Maya had imagined, but it wasn’t exactly how she wanted it to go. Something told her she could trust this woman. Ximena was being one hundred with her even if it ended a bit rudely.

Maya would have to find a live chicken and kill it. The only place she could think of was a family in her old neighborhood. They kept chickens in their backyard. Her dad would curse their rooster every morning, shouting, “¡Callate, cabron!” However, when they passed each other on the street or Barbara brought the car to the garage for a tune up, he was always smiles and sweetness. Maya would have to find the courage to knock on their door and ask how to kill a chicken, all between seeing Magdalena to school and before she had to be in the club for her shift.

She threw on old black faded Fruit of the Loom sweats and drove to Barbara and Bob Jenkins’ house. The urge to look at her old home was so strong she sped down the street, willing her neck not to turn. She stopped with a screech because she almost drove past her destination. With arms wrapped around her body, she approached the door.

There were voices coming from inside that could have been a television or radio, which made her suddenly regret doing this because it meant someone was home. What would she say, *excuse me, can I murder and eat one of your chickens? Oh, and can you show me how?* She lifted her hand in a tight ball. *Just do it.* The sound of the rapping stopped the voices.

Barbara, a woman in her sixties, answered. “Hello Maya! I haven’t seen you

in ages, how are you doing?” She cocked her head and gave Maya a sad smile, the kind everyone gives you after a loss.

Maya looked around, not wanting to start a load of small talk, however, she also was about to ask for something. “We’re good. It gets easier. Hope you and Bob are well. But I’m here because I have a weird request.”

Barbara moved to the side of the door and waved to Maya, who was holding her arms close to her body from the cold. “Come in, come in! Look at you without a coat. Anything you need; your father was the best.”

“Thank you. Um...I wanted to know about your chickens. Do you eat them or just their eggs? I am sorry to ask. I know it sounds strange.”

The woman’s face remained in an awkward smile revealing her full set of teeth. The creases around her eyes and mouth suspended with her lips. “We have eaten them in the past. Why do you ask? I have plenty of extra eggs if you need some.”

“I want to learn how to butcher a chicken. I’ll pay you for it.”

Barbara looked towards the backyard at the clucking feathered beasts. “Well, I guess I could part with one of them. Doreen is not exactly the cooperative type with the others. You have time now?”

Her demeanor when answering the door resumed as she turned to face Maya.

Maya fiddled with a thread hanging from her pocket. She knew she had to try this. How difficult could it be, considering killing was in her DNA? “I’m ready.”

—

Every bite of meat made Maya’s stomach turn, remembering how the head had flopped to the ground with blood squirting in red arcs.

That was nothing compared to the plucking. And the smell. By the end of the entire ordeal, she was covered in blood, feathers, and chicken shit. Barbara had chatted with ease next to her, sometimes interrupting her stories to guide

Maya.

Eating was the last thing she wanted to do. But this was how nature worked. In the jungle, jaguars ate other animals to survive.

She had no clue how or why this released something within her DNA, but she didn't even understand how shifters evolved in the first place. Or was it magic? Ximena did say other things would happen.

What the fuck was any of this? It was the plot of films you watch late at night that went straight to DVD, their only redeeming factor being the gratuitous sex and titty shots.

She swallowed the dry lumps, waiting for something to happen.

Maybe there was some straight to DVD stuff on TV. Magdalena and Samantha were in her room eating their arroz, listening to music.

She wasn't about to disturb young love.

After flipping the channels, wishing there was some reason to text Jackson besides a booty call, she went to bed wondering if the chicken sacrifice had worked.

—

The routine waited for her, like an overdue bill. When Magdalena returned from school, it was time for Maya to leave for the evening shift. The cops watching the house pulled up, waving as she drove by.

The Weaver was ready to strike.

The cops keeping an eye out for the little one were as useless as they were easy to dispose of. She didn't even need magic. It was as simple as walking to the car after dark and blow-darting them

through the neck with poison sourced from the Amazonian frogs she kept as pets. They were so damn tiny and cute with their deadly skin, but men and women would foam at the mouth and writhe while life drained away, nothing

tiny or cute about it. It took ages before anyone had a clue what the cause of death was.

The Weaver waited for the cops to settle into bags from Wendy's, and while they shoveled limp burgers into their mouths, two darts, one after the other, flashed through the open driver's window. One pressed a palm to his neck, frowning at the sudden prick of pain. His other hand squeezed the burger with a stiff clamped grip. Ketchup and pickles slid into his lap before his body bucked against the seat uncontrollably until he slumped over dead. The other blinked erratically, eyeing the dart poking out an inch from his nose. Blood tricked from one nostril before the convulsions bashed his body left to right, hitting the window repeatedly with his head until the right side had a pulpy red spot near the temple. He was dead within minutes.

The Weaver charged into the home, knowing exactly where to go. Next would be the girl, Magdalena, asleep in her bed without a worry.

"Walk or your sister is dead. She is tied up in that van right now."

Still drowsy from sleep, the young girl moved. She tried to reach the switchblade attached to her thigh but the woman behind her sight pressed her own blade deeper, cutting the skin. Maybe this wasn't someone to mess with. Magdalena was more than frightened and angry. When they both climbed into the back of the van, it was empty.

"You lying bi—" Before Magdalena could finish her sentence, The Weaver knocked her out cold with a single blow.

The detective was hardly a problem. She saw the way he looked at Maya. A natural attraction. She scrolled through Magdalena's phone with the expectation Maya would have left the detective's number in a text or WhatsApp message in case of an emergency.

There it was, so fucking predictable and easy. She texted the detective to meet her at the abandoned shop that used to be a Fred's Fish Fry in a dead part of the city.

There were more strays than people roaming the sidewalks. Dark corners

stretched their fingers beneath a moon ducking in and out of furry white clouds. The address was an area of town the politicians kept promising to revive but never did. Abandoned businesses with gang signs spray-painted on boarded-up windows lined potholed streets, derelict housing projects waited for money to be spared for much-needed renovations, vacant lots of weeds piled with garbage waited to be purchased. This was a place for people to be forgotten or individuals looking to not be bothered.

The Weaver parked in the back of the restaurant, already unlocked and ready for her arrival. Planning was everything. Before leaving the vehicle, she pulled a bandana from around her neck, over her nose. The first time she scouted the place, the stench of the dumpsters made her cough and wretch from the decomposing seafood. It was perfect for hiding a corpse.

Magdalena, barely dressed, lay in the back of the van on a thin blanket to keep out the cold with her wrists and ankles bound with silky rope so as to not damage the skin. A folded wheelchair lay next to her.

The girl wasn't difficult to move as The Weaver used the blanket to pull Magdalena to the edge of the open van doors before hoisting her into the wheelchair. She was using the last of her strength in this body. Everything ached with age. She marched through the kitchen and to the front of the restaurant where two gurneys lowered to the floor waited. The cowboy was next.

Jackson walked right in with gun in hand, calling out their names, chest squared with all the swagger of the hero from *Die Hard*. He couldn't have announced himself louder if he'd tried. When he stopped short of rushing to Magdalena, The Weaver blow darted him with a lower dosage of a different species of tree frog, one less potent than the others. He couldn't die just yet, as tempting as it was to use the gold frog venom.

His gun clattered to the ground after the dart pierced the back of his neck. For a moment, she thought she might have underestimated the amount needed for his size. He swayed with a drunkard's two

step, trying to reach his neck, and bent down to reach the gun. As his hand stretched unsteadily, he toppled over, shivering.

When she was sure he couldn't get up, she pulled Jackson by the armpits to the empty gurney. The flabby skin of her upper arms ripped painfully from muscle as she struggled with his bulk. She strapped him tightly as an extra precaution. A single photo was all that was needed to get Maya to the early Halloween party.

When Maya saw Tyson waving her over from the corner of the floor, she knew something was wrong. Since the scare, she'd instructed Tyson to alert her if the phone should ring or a message popped up.

Locked in the toilet, she opened the message. It was a picture of Jackson and Magdalena tied to gurneys, followed by an address.

The pounding bass against the walls was dizzying. The bikini she wore, a parka, making sweat roll from her armpits. With her left fist, she punched the bathroom door open. It swung back and forth; the strike left an indentation that resembled a giant paw.

Maya pulled her jeans over the ass floss and threw on her father's denim jacket with the white sheepskin inside. Before Tyson could stop her or ask questions, Maya rushed out the door, yelling,

"Tell the boss I had non-stop diarrhea from too much watered-down Chardonnay, or my period returned with a vengeance, whichever!"

She drove to the location in the message with her mind set on carnage. From inside, the Jaguar was watching in the dark, waiting to bite.

The Weaver. This was it. This was the standoff to the death that was coming since the day her parents died. Who else would have done it? Everything was as clear as her hunger.

The closed fast food joint sat on a corner lot with its windows boarded up. It looked like the gates of hell with blue fish giving you the thumbs up that everything was going to be okay anyway.

Suddenly, the furry collar around her neck felt infested with fleas.

Sweat rolled down her back and between her breasts, even though it was a chilly night—she hadn't bother with a t-shirt over the triangular bikini top. No time for planning or thought. She kicked open the car door. She was ready.

“Mama. Papa. Dios. Give me strength.”

If only there was someone to call for help. There was no one they could trust with this. The police would probably end up getting them all killed in some drawn out Mexican standoff. Alone. She should be used to that.

Maya mustered the courage with switchblades in hands to approach the building. The door was ajar, waiting for her to push it open.

“Put down the blades or I will shatter his leg. Don't make me ask twice.” The Weaver stepped from the dark between Jackson and Magdalena. She dangled an axe between the two like a pendulum.

“Fuck you, cabrona!” Maya's skin was itching with an overwhelming desire to kill. The thought made her salivate. She licked her lips.

“Are you alone?” Magdalena screamed while writhing against the restraints.

Jackson couldn't speak with a gag in his mouth, but tried to wiggle free. Despite his size, there was no loosening the leather straps.

Her bottom eyelids drooping like melted wax, The Weaver widened her gaze, letting out a throaty laugh, peeling back lips and exposing swollen red gums. With one swing overhead, the axe pierced Jackson's right knee, nearly severing his leg. He screamed in sobering pain.

Maya dropped the blades. “Don't! Please! Stop!”

He continued muffled screams through his gag, jerking in minute motions, his expression surprised and terrified.

Maya snarled then and took two charging steps closer, but with the speed of a

gunslinger, the Weaver withdrew the dart straw and blew. Maya stopped, stunned, and crumpled, the dart between her breasts.

“Good,” The Weaver said in a voice with the tone of velvet and all the insanity of a serial killer.

Magdalena tried not to look at the detective’s leg. With drowsy mumbling and fluttering of eyelids, he fell in and out of

consciousness. The Weaver had patched him up enough to keep him alive; however, he looked in bad shape. The rough bandage around his knee saturated with blood, the excess pooling on his boot.

“Why do they call you The Weaver? More like crazy puta bitch to me.”

The Weaver was dressing for the first part of the ceremony.

“Because I am the weaver of dreams for some, and the weaver of nightmares for others. It all depends on how much you are willing to pay. And if I recall, your sister is the puta, as you so eloquently put it.

You see, black magic is like a tapestry. It is only as good as the craftsman’s skill and the materials used. I only procure the best, and I am a master craftsman. The problem with most magic is people have their own little beliefs instead of seeing the bigger picture. I’ve put together a compendium of the darkest, most forbidden and taboo of spells to create a new black book of magic. One ring to rule them all? Ha! One book to rule them all.”

Magdalena spit in the direction of The Weaver. “You still ain’t shit but a crazy puta bitch.”

The Weaver kissed Magdalena on the forehead, giving the girl a close look at her stitched face. “If you don’t keep quiet, I will sew your mouth shut.”

Magdalena narrowed her eyes, not backing away from the woman’s stare. Through gritted teeth she growled, “Where’s my sister?”

How beautiful this creature is, The Weaver thought. She'd had that same spirit at her age, so feisty and defiant. It was good she would never know what it meant to be irrevocably broken, death sparing her all the cruelty and disappointment of the world.

"She is tied up at the moment. I suspect she will be awake soon.

The party will begin shortly."

The Weaver turned to finish her preparations for the ceremony.

She walked across the room to her steel cart where her instruments lay. She ran her fingertips across the sharp objects, feeling herself become excited about the new skin she would wear, the stickiness of the wet garment as she put it on for the first time, like a wedding

dress, but instead of white lace, it would be one of flesh. She let out a sigh of satisfaction. It was time to check on the other one.

Maya gagged on her bikini top, but still wore her father's jacket. It was a small comfort in a situation that had gone from bad to worse.

She was alone in what must have been the kitchen. Animal feces, broken beer bottles, used condoms, syringes cluttered the place. It smelled like fetid cooking oil and rotting animal fat.

She tugged with her arms to see if there was any way to loosen the leather straps. There was no give.

"You are awake! Excellent. Just in time."

Maya looked up to see a thing of nightmares and horror films.

Whatever was happening to this woman was not good. Her face resembled the melting Nazi from *Indiana Jones*. Instead of a designer outfit with killer boots, The Weaver wore a rubber suit like the ones you see in slaughterhouses. Now Maya was really scared.

The Weaver wheeled her into the main dining area. The windows were

covered with black bin bags. Putrid, rot-scented candles lined the room on the floor they seemed to liven and brighten the room as The Weaver stepped closer. The concrete floor was a mural of runes drawn in blood; two jaguars dominated the picture. Next to the drawing, a cart with assorted instruments of torture or surgery. A knife made of gold, an obsidian tipped blade, and a few others that looked like modern medical utensils.

Magdalena saw her sister by the heightened candlelight and she screamed out, “Maya, don’t do what this Weaver cunt says! Don’t you dare!”

“Shut up, I said! You are all going to die tonight so I can live!

Isabella de Souza, The Weaver will always be, thanks to your sacrifice. I have to say, you made me work harder than I expected. If it wasn’t for your gift, I wouldn’t have bothered. You are all just the same.”

Maya clenched her teeth, eyes darting for hope, but settling on Jackson. His hair was stuck to his face from sweat with his pale gray skin like the scales of a dead fish. The wounded leg was a mess of ripped flesh, barely put together, just enough for life. He was trying to say something that came out as indiscernible gibberish. Magdalena

was next to him with her pajama pants dripping blood, old blood caked between her toes.

The blood. The color. The scent. The lure of the taste. The screams of all the anger she’d felt over the last few years roared.

She wanted to be free from this body that stopped her from revealing her true self. Nothing was going to stop her anymore. Maya’s breathing quickened. Her teeth ached as they felt like they were about to slice through her gums. Fingertips tingled as her fingernails extended into claws. She wanted nothing more than to slash the flesh off this woman, hear her scream as she shredded her chest cavity to pulpy, bloody barbacoa. All her veins slurped like a bowl of spaghetti.

Maya let out an unearthly cry that was more animal than human.

The chicken had worked. She could feel herself changing. Her chest hitched as her torso elongated. Fur sprouted from her breasts to the rest of her body. Her arms and legs thrashed until the leather straps popped free of her shifting appendages. She threw off her father's jacket, her paws swatting the air and expanding jaws snapping at nothing. As her ears moved up her skull, the gold hoops she wore flew across the room. Brown skin became a spotted orange and black silky coat. Her throat released a guttural purr as her mouth continued to grow in size to accommodate sharpening teeth. She was on all fours as a snarling, spotted Jaguar.

“No. No! This wasn't supposed to happen!”

The Weaver jerked away, taking a step as if to run or grab at the table of instruments. Maya was faster and leaped with claws flexed, her jaws open to crush bone in one swift chomp.

The Weaver fell to ground, Maya's muscular bulk pinning her, her gigantic paw swiping at whatever it could dig into. Before The Weaver could let out another scream, Maya dug her fangs into her face, ripping off the loose flesh.

Clots of fat and blood clung to the exposed skull in the hollows of her cheeks and around the eyes. Ribbons of muscle attached to the eye stretched from their sockets as The Weaver searched for an escape. The rest was a mask of bloody shredded gore, the face of a monster.

The screams from The Weaver's body had the unnatural sound of a thousand voices dying at once. Maya slashed again, creating gullies that filled immediately with the running tide of the bitch's blood. The chunk of flesh and fat loosened from her bite hit the back of Maya's throat. With instinct taking over, she swallowed it whole.

Maya bolted sideways then and extended her arm in front of her to swipe the leather binds holding the detective and her sister. In a loud howl, she managed to scream as humanly possible, “Run!

Magdalena, teary-eyed and shocked, nodded and scrambled up from her gurney. The castors spun and the table flipped, sending an echo down the hallways of the old building.

Something sharp pierced Maya's side, causing her to yelp. She wanted to faint and fall, but she kept her massive body weight on The Weaver. She growled deeply into that face and listened with incredibly sensitive ears as the sprinting footfalls carried away from the building.

The Weaver snarled a fleshless face, spitting blood with each breath as she twisted something deeper into Maya's side. The pain took Maya's breath and strength away. She collapsed, allowing The Weaver to get to her feet.

Maya rolled to her knees and tried to follow, but her body began to shrink, becoming human again. Her chance was lost, but at least her sister was safe.

The detective lay next to Maya, watching under heavy eyelids.

He tried to reach out to touch her or lift himself up. He didn't have the strength for either.

—

Magdalena stopped running when she realized she didn't know where she was. Her lungs hurt from sprinting in the cold air. Eddies of breath escaped her lips as she breathed hard. She was in her pajamas and alone in the dark, feeling helpless. She had to go back.

Her mind was still trying to make sense of what she'd witnessed. The image of her sister turning into something from *Animal Kingdom*, a beast, flashed in her mind.

The conversation at the diner: "We aren't like other females."

She felt guilty for not really listening. Would she turn into a jungle beast, too? The thought was terrifying and confusing. Magdalena would run back the way she came and Maya would make everything clear, keep her safe. The abandoned restaurant was so horrible, it couldn't be missed. She crouched behind a nearby tree, noticing the van was gone. With all the courage she could muster, Magdalena scanned the empty lot next to her for anything that could be used as a weapon. She grabbed a discarded metal pole from a pile of rubbish, ignoring that it was covered in filth.

With quiet, creeping steps, she slipped through the open back door. She carried the pole like a batter ready to strike. There was no movement or sound. In the front of the restaurant, both the detective and Maya were on the floor, out cold.

She found her sister's cracked iPhone was still working. Should she call the police? Someone from the club? She decided on the police because she figured they would be protective of one of their own. If it was just her and her sister, she wouldn't bother. They might send ICE instead.

"Hello, yea, officer down!" she shouted into the phone, gave the perfunctory information as she knew it and the location as best she could describe it, and then hung up.

Magdalena paced, looking around for anything that might lead them to The Weaver. On the cart of instruments was her switchblade. She grabbed it with spite, placing it back in her leather garter secured to her knee.

A pile of skin that resembled a bloody rag lay on the floor. Her face. Magdalena bent to see it closer. Disgusted, she turned away.

She gasped.

A bone-handled object protruded from her sister's ribcage, meaning she had to work quickly. She wrapped the face in a piece of discarded plastic, stashing it in the inside pocket of their dad's jacket.

Then she knelt beside her sister. This was going to suck so bad, but the weapon would be forever gone if she didn't take it. Biting her lip hard, she grabbed the knife with trembling hands. Her sister moaned but didn't open her eyes.

The knife slipped a half-inch from the wound, spurting a fresh helping of blood. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Magdalena moaned. She kept pulling, tilting her hand slightly until she decided to treat it like a Band-Aid.

Maya groaned.

When it was completely out, Magdalena hid it inside Maya's coat.

All she could do was apply pressure against the wound, praying the ambulance and police would arrive soon. She did say it had to do with the murders on TV.

When the sirens could be heard approaching, Magdalena put on her best tears to tell the story of how the serial killer kidnapped them, but the brave and heroic officer stepped in just in time to save her.

Thank God for the police.

Within minutes, she was wrapped in a blanket and comforted.

Jackson better do the smart thing and just corroborate the story. The two officers at the house were found by neighbors. This added to her tale that the killer was on the loose and a danger to everyone.

—

The Weaver sped through the dark, empty streets to her sanctuary, not caring if she was pulled over. She would kill whoever tried to stop her. The pain radiating from her face made it difficult to see. That mongrel bitch was going to experience the pain of being flayed alive for days instead of hours, once she got her hands on her. Then a charm to keep her alive after that, while maggots and flies infested the corners of her raw muscles. For days.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter until her hands began to feel numb; it was a welcome distraction from the throbbing of her head.

In the safety of her home, The Weaver pulled the blinds shut and lit lavender candles. Her reflection made her physically ill. The Jaguar took the entire flap of skin that covered her face from the middle of her neck to the seam at the scalp. A large chunk of her left cheek was missing so that her tongue was visible as it wiggled within her mouth. She pulled out a jar of aloe mixed with pickled salamanders. The balm would protect the exposed flesh and help

restore the nerve endings. The sludge offered little relief from the pain. This

was only a quick fix.

In the dark, she lay in bed watching the fan spin above her as her phone played calming ocean sounds. She should be sleeping but her mind continued to revisit how this went so wrong. All those years of waiting for two shifters close in bloodline, one mature and the other yet to shift, could have been lost because of that mutt bitch, Maya. She was sick of moving place to place.

As the ages wore on, it became more difficult to stay in one location to kill. Before modern technology, it was easy. There was a time when dead bodies stayed where they fell. All she wanted was to set down roots to practice her black arts and eventually share all the knowledge she acquired, should anything ever happen to her.

This turn of events meant she had to use one of the faces hanging on a mannequin, which meant hunting for a replacement.

She seethed with anger. She didn't particularly enjoy killing; it was the art she loved. It was the creativity of it all that gave her joy. The fact that it was flesh was a minor detail that made her black magic potent.

Sleep was not happening. She got up and returned to the mirror.

She had to create something to cover the horror of a face. Instead of using the skin she'd previously procured, she would go out again after dark. A good distraction since her vitriol prevented her from focusing on anything else.

Besides, it was nearly Halloween and the streets would be ripe with flesh.

Chapter 8

Maya woke up to Magdalena at her bedside. Seeing that her sister was safe outweighed the stinging of her ribcage. "You're okay."

"Of course," Magdalena said and took her sister's hand.

"Where are you staying? I don't want you alone." The IV attached to Maya's arm prevented her from lifting it high enough so she might hug her sister.

"Aye!" She cried as the IV shifted in her vein. It hurt more than the wound.

“They called Samantha’s parents. I’m with them. Sam’s outside waiting for me.”

“Good. Tell them thank you for me.”

“Fine, but how are you?”

“I’m in pain, but I’ll be okay. They gave me some good drugs. Not that drugs are good!”

Magdalena rolled her eyes and then settled her gaze on their father’s blood-spattered jacket hanging on a hook on the back of the door. The inside of her chest tightened thinking about what had happened, feeling how alone they were. The stabbing sensation traveled to the corners of her eyes. She couldn’t cry, it would only make Maya worry. Her tears burned teetering between the bottom of her eyelids and trying to hide within the ducts where they belonged.

“Jackson? Did he see what happened?”

Magdalena sucked in air loudly through her nose, recovering.

“He will be fine. He’s a few doors down. And we saw it all.”

Maya lay against the back of her bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Great,” she said flatly.

Magdalena gave her a gentle, playful nudge. “Why didn’t you tell me we are the definition of savage? And that pinché president is right, we are fucking animals. Watch out!” She lifted her hands to resemble claws, then brought them down to meet her sister’s. “You were amazing, Sis. I’m scared, but this is a revelation!”

Maya had to laugh at this youngster language. Savage? Yea, she guessed they were. She lifted her head again to face her sister. “I tried, but would you have believed me? Until yesterday, I could only change during the full moon. Someone gave me advice and it worked. Thank Jesus it worked.”

“It’s incredible.”

“We aren’t the only ones with this power. There are others.”

“I don’t care about others right now.” Magdalena kissed her sister’s forehead. “Hey, I have something for you.” She pulled out a greasy brown bag from her backpack.

Maya could smell the meat, onion and garlic inside. Breakfast tacos. She was ravenous.

—

When Maya could get out of bed, she found Jackson’s room. His leg was elevated in a cast. His eyes closed. Looked like he must have been on the good drugs, too. As she turned to leave, he called her name.

“Maya, where are you going?” he said softly.

Her nerves were kicking in. Who wants a shifter stripper caught in the machinations of a serial killer? She turned to face him. “I thought you were asleep.”

“Nope. I want to talk about last night.”

Maya could feel herself cringing inside. What could she possibly say about something she barely knew anything about herself? Her grandmother only told her bits and pieces before she died, and she guessed her mother thought they would have more time together than they did in the end.

“What about it? You saw your murderer up close and personal.”

His voice was lower, quieter. “I know. I thought I was dead when I passed out. Then I wake up and boys from the station were in here patting my back. Telling me great detective work for getting so close to nabbing the killer. Even talk of promotion. Your sister told them a tall Texas tale. I figured I should play along. To keep your secret.

Which is what I want to talk about.”

Maya looked down at her thin gown, feeling naked. “I don’t know what to say except now you’ve seen all of me. No secrets. You’ve seen it all.”

“You are incredible, Maya Ramos. If you will have me, I am yours.”

She pursed her dry lips and took a deep breath. Under the harsh halogen lights and surrounded by a combination of sterility and sickness, this was a strange place for a profession of love. This was the second time he had shown his intention. It felt genuine, but still, she held her tongue, opting to fold her arms across her chest, feel the coldness of the hospital.

“And I know I have not seen all of you. I would love that opportunity more than anything. It’s a shame you just missed my mother. I’ve told her all about you.”

Maya wanted to smother his body in kisses and gropes, give him a sponge bath with her tongue, but she had unfinished business. If she made it out alive, she would have him, all night long, their own private rodeo for two. She would admit to him that she felt the same.

“I’m leaving soon. When I get back, we will talk.” Before Jackson had time to question her, Maya was out the door.

The pain was subsiding quickly with the wound looking like it was only a scratch. One would never believe she was stabbed. She’d send Ximena another email with a list of questions about their kind.

Before the doctors asked any questions of their own, she discharged herself. Magdalena was smart, taking a few bits that belonged to The Weaver. If black magic was involved, they would need someone that knew the ways of it. Maya took out her phone as she sat in the back of an Uber and searched for local curanderos.

There were six names, all flashy, none of them sounded really legit, mostly selling oils and trinkets instead of practicing magic. She leaned back on the seat, thinking. The driver kept looking at her in his mirror with distrustful eyes. Before she could snap at him, she realized she was splattered with blood. Make-up smeared her face like a mask.

“Bad Halloween party.”

He nodded his head and didn't look back again. A huff left her lips and she turned her attention back to the window where everyday life rolled by, unaware of the real dangers of the world.

She did have one idea about magic, but that was a long shot, and after she got home and changed.

—

Magdalena kept two switchblades tied to the outside of her lower thighs, just above the knee, beneath her pleated skirt. Maya had two in her back pockets. Even though she could shift, she wasn't sure how reliable it was. Her follow-up emails to Ximena remained unanswered.

Alone as sisters, they were going to find this Weaver bitch and kill her. It would be the only way they'd be free. Maya knew The Weaver had not left. She could feel her, sense her rage. During the struggle, Maya unwittingly swallowed that chunk of flesh. For

reasons she could not explain, ingesting part of The Weaver had tethered them somehow. It was a weak awareness, Maya could not exactly pinpoint where she might be, only knew she was close. That one taste made her want more. Unfinished business.

They pulled up to the club just after five. Maya turned to Magdalena, who looked shy in the parking lot of AllStarz, sliding lower in her seat as a man walked passed the car. “Stay here. You have your phone and switchblades.”

Magdalena sat upright again. “I want to come in.”

“Absolutely not. There some things you are still too young for.

You've already had to grow up so fast.”

The defiant teen decided to show up. “I don't judge you. You're the reason I can do what I'm doing. You sacrifice so much for me.

Besides that, I'm as much as part of this as you. I will be what you are someday. I'm going with you. Don't make me scream *you aren't my mother*."

Maya couldn't argue with that. Magdalena would be seventeen soon. "Fine, but no wandering around. We go through the back." The only part of the club she would see was the kitchen before entering the dressing room.

Tyson sat at his make-up counter applying lashes to one of the dancers. The man was an eyelash wizard with a black belt in karate to boot.

"Hey, Ty. I need a favor."

"Please tell me it's to do your hair and make-up for that long overdue date."

Magdalena butted in, obviously delighted to get her way, despite the severity of the situation. "Right! I keep telling her to end that dry spell. That detective is cute."

Maya looked at her sister in surprise. "Uh no. And what do you know of dry spells? You better keep those feet in sneakers and winning those math awards." She touched Tyson's shoulder. "Ty, you mentioned your family practiced alternative healing. Some of them into magic? You mentioned a psychic, too."

"God, I have the loosest lips when I get drinking. Yes, I have a cousin that is not like the rest of us, but none of that rubbed off on

me. You are in the wrong place if you want that kind of voodoo hoodoo. I don't do that shit. I do make-up, chemistry, and hair."

Maya squeezed his firm bicep. "Please, Ty. It's important."

He exhaled loudly through his lips. She had been calling in sick for the last few days, and with the shadows beneath her eyes... "I'll give you the phone number and address for my cousin, Martinique.

She runs with some curandero that lives on the south side, near her hospital. She is also an ER doctor, so I would call before heading over."

“Thank you. I owe you big time.”

“De nada, mija. Be careful. There is a reason I don’t fuck with it.

She used to scare me as a kid, knowing things. God knows what other supernatural things are in the world. We are cool now.” Without pause, he switched subject. “Your hair is falling kind of flat. Here.”

Tyson tossed her an unlabelled bottle of hairspray.

Maya inspected her bangs in hid mirror. She gave them a quick tease with her fingers then doused it with hairspray. “Thanks, man.”

She handed the bottle back. He waved her off.

“Keep it. It’s my own formula. You know I’m gonna have my own empire one day. Let me know what you think. And tell my cousin to call me.”

She put the bottle in the side pocket of Magdalena’s backpack.

Free hairspray. Things were looking up.

—

Martinique was a tall, graceful AfroLatina from her namesake island.

She opened the door with a warm smile. Long, amber braids adorned with small shells and gold rings fell to her waist. A dot of a nose ring pierced the left nostril. She wore green scrubs. Natural beauty ran in Tyson’s family.

“Hi. I’m a friend of Tyson’s. The one that called earlier.”

“Yes, you were very vague on the phone. What kind of help do you need? I don’t do curses or love spells. You can’t control love or war, I’m afraid.”

“We just want to get a sense where this person might be.”

Magdalena handed over the plastic bag that held the flesh that was once The Weaver’s face. Now it looked like a disembodied nut sack.

Martinique inspected the bag with repugnance. “I can already tell you this person has long crossed over, maybe twenty years. There is nothing here. Did this belong to whom you seek? It looks so fresh?”

She lifted the bag closer to her face, twisting it around.

Maya nodded as she exchanged glances with Magdalena. The girl pulled out the bone knife wrapped in a towel that was once plunged into her sister’s side. Martinique extended her hand to touch it, then pulled back. Fear gathered in her eyes like tears.

“This is the darkest kind of magic, my boyfriend Antonio would know more about this, but I will give it a shot.” Martinique tore her eyes from the object that clearly terrified her.

Magdalena leaned in tight to her sister’s side. All the playfulness she’d harbored at the club had drained away in the face of Martinique’s knowing expression.

“Come with me.”

They followed her to a back room that smelled of sage. A large portrait of La Virgen hung on the wall next to various framed degrees. Martinique wasn’t just a healer in the spiritual sense.

African masks and wooden sculptures of Catholic saints neatly decorated the rest of the room. There was a table in the center, splattered with red, white, and black candle wax. Four chairs were tucked beneath it.

“Place the object in the center of the table, please. I do not want to touch it.”

Maya did as told.

“Please sit.”

No argument; the pair pulled out heavy wooden chairs and sat.

“Now, I might react in way that may scare you. I assure you, I will be fine. Do not be alarmed.”

Martinique placed her hands above the knife, her brows furrowed in concentration. As her fingertips began to tremble, she closed her eyes. Beads of sweat gathered around her scalp, then rolled down the sides of her face. The quivering moved to her hands and spread through the entirety of her body. Her fingers balled into fists as she resisted the desire to touch the bone knife.

Magdalena grabbed her sister's hand. She was scared.

"No!" Martinique screamed before opening her eyes. "Whoever owned that is furious. You really want to find the owner?"

The sisters nodded their heads.

"The house is in the King William district. Not cheap. You got yourself a very rich psycho. There is a pumpkin on the front porch with a crescent moon carved in the front. But that knife. That knife is made from the bone of an ancient animal. It died in a very cruel way no beast or human should ever die. The person who created that instrument has the ability to possess whoever is using it. I might have alerted the owner of its being used. No one can touch it any longer. I will smash it, then bury it in consecrated earth. Antonio and I will pray over it tonight."

"Thank you. Get rid of it however you see fit. How can we repay you?"

"Stay alive. I don't condone murder, but this kind of evil should not exist. Come to think of it, can't murder someone that is already dead. I'm guessing this has something to do with that killer in the paper."

Again, the sisters nodded.

"Wicked, evil stuff. I tried to see into the space where the dead linger, but someone was blocking their energy. Now I know why. I will light candles for you and pray. If I can do anything else to help, you know where to find me."

Out the door and halfway to the sidewalk, Maya turned and said to a lingering Martinique still standing in her doorway, "Tyson wants you to call him."

They returned from Martinique's home to order pizza and watch *Enter the Dragon*, one of their father's favorite films. They fell asleep on the sofa huddled beneath a blanket together. When their alarms buzzed in the morning, Magdalena didn't want to go to school, but there was no arguing. She had a test that couldn't be missed. She would catch the bus and try to concentrate. Maya also needed time to think of a plan.

Maya double-checked all her affairs were in order. She learned from her parents' deaths that one should always be prepared to live

their last day. They didn't mean to leave an expensive mess, but it took time to sort everything out when they were taken so suddenly.

She wrote a letter to her sister giving her all information she needed about their accounts and cash hidden throughout the house.

Untaxed tip money was the only benefit of the job. There was also another letter telling her how much she loved her, recounting all the petty fights and fits of laughter they had shared over the years. Push came to shove, Maya would sacrifice herself if it meant her sister might live. The Weaver would die, no matter what.

Maya stared at the CD player in her car—once her father's, an old, brown El Camino beautifully restored. They did that together.

The house had to be sold, they didn't want to stay there anyway, but she couldn't bear the thought of selling his car. For three years the CD in the stereo remained untouched. Maybe it wouldn't work. Today she would push play because it would be on the last song he listened to before his death.

She kissed the wooden rosary that hung from the rear-view mirror, allowing her lips to stain the wood with pink gloss. Then she placed both hands on the dust free, recently shined dashboard. The chemical fragrance with cherry undertones made her think of Saturday mornings when she would clean her parents' cars for pocket money. That graduated to learning how they worked.

“See, mija, you will never need a man to rescue if you are ever stranded because you know how to change it for a spare. ”

She rested her forehead on the warm steering wheel, holding so tight as to never let go. Tears soiled her jeans. With a finger as unsteady as her grandmother’s human gait, she pressed play. There was a sliver of hope his ghost might appear next to her to offer comfort. That familiar gong could only be one song. *Hells Bells*. Of course, it would be AC/DC. One solitary ring would echo one after another until it met a guitar, then a cymbal, Maya could feel herself gaining confidence, anger swelling as the tempo increased. His brown face with the salt and pepper five o’clock shadows that scratched her cheek whenever he gave her a kiss appeared in her mind. Feet as sure as the speed when she ran in her Jaguar skin moved to the brake pedal. She lifted her head and felt for the gear

stick. The beat of the song ricocheted off the seat and the windows then slammed into her chest. The man had loved his rock ‘n roll, even though her mother hated it—except Santana, she could dance to his music.

Maya turned the volume up. The drum vibrated against her back.

She was on her way to hell, one way or another; it might as well be to good music. The city looked exactly the same as it did the day before with big-wheeled trucks and SUV’s pulling in and out of strip malls: Targets, Olive Gardens, and HEBs. Major fast food signs craned above the smaller shops looking down in domination.

If she made it out alive, she would not only fuck Jackson to an inch of his life, she would take a vacation, go to Mexico and experience all the flavors of her ancestors, find the rest of their family, heal those old wounds. She had her mind on killing and killing on her mind. Daydreaming of blood caused her fingertips to tingle, gripping the steering wheel tighter. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to shift. She took deep, soothing breaths and thought about something happy. Her hand holding onto Jackson’s pumping ass.

Magdalena waited on the curb with her friends, all dressed in their uniforms, starched and modest according the strict school code.

Simple black flats and white socks to touch the hem of the skirt at the knee. “*Modesty is a female’s friend*,” the head mistress said with pursed lipstick-less lips when Maya introduced herself as Magdalena’s guardian.

Magdalena had changed into her sneakers, good. They all turned towards the car that blared Satan’s music with the windows down.

Samantha stood and embraced Magdalena, and waved to Maya once her friend was halfway across the street.

Maya gave the girl a smile. She was happy Magdalena had someone to lean on. When Magdalena was in the car, Maya turned to her. “You got your switchblades?”

Magdalena lifted her shin length skirt to the bottom of her thigh, showing double leather garters securing the switchblades. “I do.”

Maya returned her attention to the wheel, her right hand went to the shifter, and her foot popped the clutch before punching the gas, pulling out in a screech. “Let’s go.”

“You turned on Papa’s music.” Magdalena looked as if she was about to cry.

“Yes, and this car is yours if anything should happen to me.”

“Don’t talk like that! We are doing this together and leaving together.”

Now Maya wanted to cry. “If I say run, you run. Don’t look back.

And when you stop running, there are things for you on the kitchen table.”

What seemed like a decade passed in silence by the time they reached the targeted block of historic mansions, the yards all pristine without so much as a pile of leaves left to clutter the pretty picture.

Maya turned off the music and rolled slow, looking for the right house.

There it was, clear as the Texas sky in summer: a large, colonial style home with the pumpkin on the porch. The house was dark.

Maybe she wasn't there. They could hide until she came home, then pounce. Magdalena with her blades and Maya with her teeth. They began to approach when a voice called out behind them.

"Where are you going?"

Magdalena and Maya whipped around, both unleashing their blades in dual lightning motions. It was Ximena and three other women in the shadows thrown by an oak tree and a small garden shed. Around the bend, not fifty feet away, was a big, gaudy Cadillac.

Maya dropped her guard and stepped into the shadows, across the street from The Weaver's house. "What are you doing here?"

How did you even find me?"

"We are hunters by nature. Technology also makes it hella easy, and your email gave me all your contact information, plus your sister's social media. We arrived this morning."

"You didn't return any of my emails. I thought you didn't want anything to do with me. By the way, thanks, the chicken worked."

"You are very welcome and I'm sorry I left you hanging like that."

Council gathered to discuss you and whatever has been stalking you."

Magdalena's eyes went large and she unintentionally whispered as she squeezed her sister's hand, "Council?"

"We are gonna help you kill this bruja. She fucks with you, she fucks with all of us. We have been hunted in the past and we don't want those days to return." Ximena stood unwavering, her chin high, looking ready.

Maya simply nodded, her attention shifting to the others.

"I want you to meet your extended family. Simone—Cheetah clan, Van—Tiger clan, Catori—Bear Clan."

Magdalena, still stunned—life was suddenly offering all impossibilities possible—said, “Bear?”

Ximena touched Catori’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “These are women like us, but only you and I are Jaguar. Your sister, in a year or two.”

Maya liked all these women instantly. They exuded confidence and power. She could smell the hunger on them. Ximena was all red lipstick and attitude. Her kind of woman.

“All right then. We were ready to storm in. Did you have another plan?

“No plan, but council decided, and I agreed, we had to be here immediately,” Ximena said.

“But how did you know she was such a threat?” Maya said.

Simone spoke, “My father was a game warden in Africa. One day a strange woman came to stay at the resort on the park. He drove her around on what he thought was just part of a Safari vacation.

Halfway through the second day, she demanded he take her to a remote village. My father thought it an odd request because it is a village that most tourists do not know of. He did as she asked because she was considered a VIP guest in one of the suites. When they arrived, she made another demand to be taken to a local healer.

Again, she should not have known these things. She wanted to know everything about his beliefs. The part that made him pretend he was ill for the duration of her trip was when she asked about us.” Simone took a breath and sneered during the exhalation. “She was looking for a shifter. I was only small, but my father knew then what I was.

He had no doubts in his mind if she had any inkling of me, I would be gone in the night.”

Magdalena clenched at the folds of her skirt.

Maya could see the worry on her sister’s face. “Sis, I have ample backup.

You don't have to do this. I can see how scared you are, smell it. It's okay for you to stay here."

"No. I want to go." Magdalena was nearly seventeen. One more year of being a normal girl, then she would be a woman having to face the world as something else, something that others might want to hunt and kill like a trophy. "Have to go."

Maya looked to Ximena hoping she would back her up on this.

"I think you should let her come with us. We always have and always will face adversaries. Danger happens at all ages. This can be a lesson. I promise to put myself in harm's way if need be."

Maya trusted Ximena despite knowing nothing of her. Just a feeling, Ximena could be her older sister.

"We ready then?" Maya could only agree,

They were a pack of brown-skinned Charlie's Angels without a Charlie, intent on knocking down a demon's door.

They moved steady as one of the gangs from *The Warriors*.

Manicured fingertips that would turn to claws twitchy and aching for action. They crossed the road, passing pumpkins and piles of dead leaves, up the stairs of the house. Magdalena kicked the face of the jack-o-lantern in and then flicked orange pumpkin bits from her shoe into a shrub next to the steps.

Catori let out a grizzly bear call before kicking in the door. The wood splintered and the steel hinges creaked as they bent. The deadbolt fell into the doorway after clinging into the cut lock groove for an extra heartbeat.

They rushed in to see a horror unlike anything any of them had seen before. The front room was a menagerie of skin suits hanging on mannequins; one had to look closely to know they weren't alive.

The craftsmanship so perfect it was scary. Each body had bloody symbols painted on the skin like tattoos. A wall was lined with floating bookshelves

holding clear jars of body parts and organs.

There were dolls of all shades, fashioned from what had to be skin with human hair sowed into the scalps. Their faces painted in detail, like that on delicate china dolls, except their expressions were twisted in pain.

The smell caused them to hold their bellies. Claret-colored candles lit the room on gold candelabras emitting a stench that could only be described as a mix of rotting death and burning fat. This woman was certainly in the spirit of the season. It wasn't even Halloween yet.

"Wow, I didn't expect trick or treaters this early. Look at you.

Pathetic. All from parts of the world no one cares about. I'll hang your hides in my collection."

The women turned their heads. The Weaver stood at the top of a staircase, a heavy mask of skin over her face. Unlike her elegant designs hanging like they belonged in a boutique, this one had the eyes and mouth crudely cut out in true Leatherface fashion. It was held in place with a white ribbon like those cheap witch masks from the drugstore.

"It's over, pendeja!" Maya shouted.

All five women let out their animal cries. Magdalena covered her ears from the deafening howls.

"Behold my superiority over all of you." The Weaver pulled out a blow dart straw. As each of the women took steps toward The Weaver, she loaded and blew. In quick succession, she hit them all.

They toppled in a line leading to the stair, crying out in misery, kicking their legs and squeezing at where the thick darts struck.

Magdalena was the only one left standing.

"Come to me, little one. With all these supernatural beings for sacrifice, I can spare you. Be my daughter. I will show you the full extent of your power.

With our magic combined, we will be unstoppable. You are as smart as you are strong. I know what happens next might complicate things, but if I can get over my parents giving me to the highest bidder, you can get over this.”

Magdalena’s chin quivered and adrenaline coursed her veins.

“You killed my parents. You nearly killed my sister. You really think I’m going to go with you?”

“They are weak, look at them.” The Weaver floated her hand, palm-up, as if revealing a showcase on a game show, then extended both hands to Magdalena. “Be with me. Be powerful.”

“Fuck you!” Magdalena’s hand moved to the blade still hidden beneath her skirt.

“Girl, you’re nothing now, but you can become something.” The Weaver took a step down the stairs.

As the pair exchanged barbs, the shifters on the floor looked to one another for strength and found it. Their blood fought to boil the toxins, and steam seeped from their pores. Growling and moaning, the women climbed upright.

Ximena arched her back like a cat, expecting to sprout fur from her spine. The women looked at each other. Catori swiped out her right arm, expecting claws and a greasy quill-like coat. Van flipped her hands over and back, looking for stripes. Nothing was happening.

“You trying to change? Sorry. Not going to happen. The darts weaken and I put a spell on those candles. They’re infused with a little something I had in storage for a rainy day. You have been inhaling belladonna, silver dust, and the blood of one of your kind—

an ancient male.”

Maya was the first to gasp for air as if she was choking. In a flash, the risen had fallen again, clutching their stomachs and throats. Their bodies went rigid then loosened as they writhed in pain.

Magdalena looked around in terror. She didn't know what to do.

She felt small, scared. Part of her wanted to run. She looked at her older sister.

Maya was trying to tell her to run. Her mascara and eyeliner smeared down her face like polluted rain.

The pleas in her eyes broke Magdalena's heart and she made a decision.

The Weaver descended the staircase a few steps. "My child, this is a hopeless situation for them. It doesn't have to be this way for you. Believe it or not, I would rather not kill you, but I will. You have a choice."

Magdalena took a step away from the gagging women, towards The Weaver. "Okay, bruja. I'll come with you. To be honest, my sister is becoming an embarrassment. The boys at school tease me. Tell me all kinds of horrible things that their brothers and fathers have said. Take me far away from here."

Maya fell into a coughing fit. The tears of hurt in Magdalena's eyes were real. This knowledge was worse than any torture that could be inflicted upon her body. This tore straight through her heart.

The Weaver watched Maya in delight, relishing the injury her sister's revelation was causing. "Good. To prove your intention, I want you to bind each of these women. I will stop the candle spell so they might shift. Once in their animal form we will sacrifice them, and I will possess their power. Kill your sister and drink her blood, unleash your own animal power. Prove your loyalty to me. You will have a good life. You shall have anything you wish as long as your loyalty remains unwavering. Someday, you will find it in your heart to call me mother. In time, I hope to give you another sister."

Magdalena bent down next to Maya and grabbed a switchblade from the floor and one from beneath her skirt, the buttons pressed and the steel blades nicking out. She spun, throwing them as hard as her arms would allow, as focused as she had been practicing at every opportunity.

The mask hid The Weaver's expression, but her eyes suggested surprise in

that moment of furious swift motion. There was no time to dodge. One blade pierced The Weaver's heart and the other her eye. She shrieked in agony as her eye burst and rained milky blood down the fleshy mask.

The Weaver removed the blade from her heart before wrenching out the one from her socket. Fluids oozed free as the bulb plopped to the ground. The lacerated mask peeled off at the same time, revealing a skull of gooey, macerated flesh. She galloped down the stairs toward Magdalena.

Maya screamed for her sister to run through groans of agony while the blades disrupted The Weaver's magic. Magdalena took two confident steps as the putrid bruja reached out. Maya groped for Magdalena's backpack, her fingers moving in all directions to catch

the pocket or a loose strap. But before The Weaver could do any damage, Maya pulled a track cleat free from the bag, spinning on the hardwood floor, and swung it across the back of the bruja's knees.

The rest of backpack's contents spilled, and the sudden injury gave Magdalena just enough time.

"Run!" Maya shouted.

The other shifters had balled together, trying to push upright and remove the darts from each other, trying to continue the good fight.

The bottle of Tyson's hairspray spun on the floor next to her feet as Magdalena grabbed a candle from the candelabra on the shelf.

The Weaver was snarling with purple, decomposed lips as she turned her attention from the sprawled Maya back to Magdalena.

The girl immolated The Weaver by lighting the hairspray. Her body was an eruption of blue and violet flames of the candle's dark magic.

The Weaver's screams were high-pitched enough to break the glass within the room. Echoes of male and female voices in suspended anguish upon their death sounded like a bullhorn being switched on from inside her lungs. As

her body continued to burn, the menagerie of flesh dolls and flesh suits on mannequins cried out as they ignited.

Stinking smoke filled the room, bringing along with it a change in atmosphere. The flames from the candles shrank, being pulled back into the wax. The Weaver's power diminished with her slowing heart rate.

The five shifters could move again. The flames from her blackened body were spreading fast from the surrounding hardwood floor to the furniture. The house was going to burn, and it wouldn't take long with all the chemicals The Weaver had stored for her magic and embalming.

Ximena screamed at the group, "We have to go!"

Maya didn't want to take any chances. The villains were never really dead at the end of flicks. "What if she isn't dead?"

Van lifted her platform rubber-soled back boot, covered in metallic spikes, and smashed into the skull of The Weaver like a rotting pumpkin. The crunch was distinct and incredible, rising above the din of the burning cacophony. "She's dead. Let's go. We can watch from outside if you still need any assurances."

The old home was crumbling quickly. As Magdalena was being pulled away from the falling debris, something caught her eye. "The frogs! We can't leave them!" Before Maya or the other women could stop her, Magdalena sprinted over burning timber and charred skin to reach the small square aquarium. The bright little things were jumping around frantically. She scooped the aquarium into her arms and sprinted back. Cinders rained and tattooed burns onto her skin and her hair sizzled and shrank as the inside of the house was almost completely set alight.

Chapter 9

Jackson was in bed reading a book about myths of Mexico while a nurse removed his dinner tray. "See you in the morning."

He turned his attention to Maya that waited at the door in a black duster coat

cinched at the waist. “Hey, look what the cat dragged in.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “You aren’t funny, you know. Good looking, yes.”

He was resisting the urge to ask for a kiss as she approached his bed. Kissing her was all he could imagine alone in his hospital bed, until the story hit the news. The fire was on every channel and he knew that was her doing. The thought of never seeing her again had crushed him inside. When he couldn’t reach her by phone, he had his buddy at the station drive by their home. Magdalena answered the door as if nothing was wrong in the world. The sense of relief was followed by a need to see her, hold her.

“Why aren’t you at the club? Don’t you work this shift?”

Maya sat next to his waist on the bed. “Supposed to, but I quit.”

He wasn’t going to lie. Part of him was happy about this. Not for his sake, but he knew she had dreams beyond a stage. “What?

Why?”

“Because I have family I didn’t know about and I have an interest-free loan to open a garage. Magdalena’s tuition has been paid for the year.”

“Great! I mean, if that’s what you want.” He hoped that didn’t come off too eager.

She leaned in close enough that he could smell the soap on her skin. Her smile was mischievous highlighted by the natural pink of her lips. “I promised myself if I survived that nightmare, I would do something for me.”

“And what is that?” he asked, hoping she would gift him with her mouth on his.

Maya slipped her hand beneath his hospital gown while playfully biting his neck. “You. All night.”

Her words filled him with an excitement he almost couldn’t handle. Her touch was a tripwire to his deepest desires. She could take whatever she

wanted from him. Her hand stopped teasing. He tugged at the sheet, trying to maintain control.

“I was thinking, when you’re out of here, maybe a short vacation in Nevada. You in?”

Jackson brought her hand to his lips. “I’m in this with you until the end.”

“You know, my sister will always come first.”

This was one of the things that made him feel like he was falling in love. The devotion to her sister revealed depth of character.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way. I don’t want you any other way.”

She left his bedside to close the door and blocked it with a chair.

As she turned around, she untied the belt of the coat to reveal what she had in mind for the rest of the night. She walked towards his bed again. There was a luminosity to her, those eyes flashing with the radiance of something supernatural.

“Good. Now get better because I want to spend Thanksgiving drinking cocktails poolside.”

—

The little forensic evidence recovered from the burned house linked the owner to the murders. They assumed the one complete body found belonged to the murderer with her identity matching the deed.

Case closed. San Antonio went back to the usual pace of life.

Jackson reluctantly accepted a raise and recognition for his work on the case even though he did fuck all except fall in love. Spending Halloween alone with Maya was the only reward he was looking forward to. Magdalena would be at a party with her girlfriend, so it

would be just them. Their first date. Maya warned him they would only have

a few hours before she would need to run free. He was okay with that.

He arrived with flowers, a Target bag filled with Halloween candy, and a bottle of red wine. After the surprise romp in his hospital bed, he wasn't sure what to expect, he knew only that he wanted to make this night special for her after the wild things she did to him.

Watching her take enjoyment from his body without apology or inhibition was a blue pill all of its own. It was a night of pleasure and a little pain from his healing wound. It was worth it. She would always be worth it.

Maya opened the door in a sports bra, baggy sweat pants, no makeup, and her hair straight and loose. In her hands, she held *An American Werewolf in London* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

"I wasn't sure what you liked so I picked two of my favorites."

"I would watch anything with you."

She walked backwards, beckoning him to come inside. The sparkle in her eye was that of a Jaguar on the prowl. Both dropped the contents of their hands to attack with unbridled lust. Their mouths couldn't find enough skin to kiss and bite. Just as she had his trousers unbuckled and her bra tossed across the back of the sofa, her phone rang. They ignored it, ready to fuck on the floor because the bed was too far away. The ringing stopped then rang again. Both froze. Maya grabbed her phone from the coffee table. It was Ximena.

Before she could call back, a text popped up: *We have a problem. You ready to take down a Tijuana Boss?*

Looks like one of The Weaver's clients is not best pleased his top bruja is dead. We have become targets and we need to get on top of this before it becomes open season on shifters. Let me know when you can get here. I need a Jaguar on this one. Bring your detective.

His expertise might be of use.

Maya handed the phone to Jackson and cradled her naked torso.

A prickle of fear ran the length of her backbone. Magdalena was vulnerable for another year.

Jackson's erection was gone now, the ache in his leg returned. "I guess we will be taking that vacation sooner than later."

Epilogue

The Tijuana Jefe

Tijuana, Mexico

Ximena waited in an alley a block away from their destination. She wore brown leather trousers and vest, and pointed, silver tipped boots. Lipstick was brighter than the neon signs advertising cold cervesa or tits that lit up the night. As before, her bobbed black hair was tucked behind the ears with a bandanna capping her head.

Nobody was going to fuck with her looking like that. Those curves were more treacherous than the mountain roads in the Sierra de Tigre range. A woman's body was as dangerous as it was beautiful, just the way God intended nature to be.

Jackson had been on surveillance the last few days, drinking regularly at the cantina, taking notes about the people that came and went, and the jefe's routine. He was happy to get out of that watering hole that had all the charm of a cemetery at night. His new boots, now caked with spilled alcohol and cigarette ash. Today, he was lookout.

Maya had never been to Mexico before. There were only the stories she was told by her grandmother and parents, but not this kind of Mexico. They came from villages and wide-open spaces.

As far as she knew, this town never slept. An establishment always open or someone shouting trying to sell you something.

Every desire and impulse you might need satisfied could be satiated here. The food stalls offered new flavors and delights foreign to her Tex-Mex palette.

But she wasn't here for pleasure or culture, this was business. Blood business.

Magdalena was safe with Samantha and her parents, far from this threat that might not be so far away if they didn't sort it out fast.

The club in Nevada had already been attacked and ransacked.

Ximena was sure it was only a matter of time before someone sniffed out Maya and Magdalena. They were vulnerable without a pack.

The cantina didn't look like anything special with a single burglar barred window that had a faded cold beer sign, and a black door. A few women stood outside smiling at men with heavily lined dead eyes and enticing shades of lipsticks with their sole job to get passersby to venture in. Their expressions, that only hung on their faces, changed when they saw the Mexicana duo. They scurried off, not wanting any trouble, and these women looked like the definition of trouble.

Ximena turned to Maya before opening the door. "Thanks for coming. I needed a Jaguar on this one."

Maya tilted her head curiously.

"I'll explain later. You ready to get good, bad, and ugly on these fuckers?"

Maya gave her a half smile. "You had my back, so I got yours.

Besides, I'm ready to see what I was born to do."

When Maya and Ximena walked into the cantina, heads turned to the direction of the door, bringing some illumination to the otherwise dark bar, the only real light being signs of beer brands flickering sporadically. An old school jukebox was on at one end and seemed to be the solitary decorative item in the place. The bartender stopped wiping the bar with his rag and rushed to the back. A sound that must have been a bolt clicked into place. Traffic and voices of the bustling street outside were a distant din compared to the sound of the Banda music playing from a small speaker.

In the center of the bar sat a large man at a round table, playing cards. His eyes were shadowed by a wide-brimmed, brown Stetson hat. Plumes of smoke puffed from underneath like forest fire. In a booming, gruff voice he shouted, "I smell pussy! What do you think, hombres?" He rose from his chair, revealing eyes with prominent red thread veins. His mouth wore a thick black sombrero of moustache that connected to mutton chops on the sides of his face. Beneath lips, crimson stained canines were long, sharp. His black guayabera could hardly contain his muscled bulk that stood easily at six foot four. A snake belt buckle centered the waist of his jeans.

Ximena spat on the sticky floor. "Well, hombres, get ready to eat it."

Before anyone could move, both women released their Jaguar call, leaping in the air, toward the jefe and his men. Their bodies stretched and morphed as the men reached into holsters. The rest of the customers ran for cover behind the bar or past the women and out the entrance.

The papers reported: *Jefe of Tijuana is dead in cantina massacre. Manhunt for perpetrators has been promised by the mayor.*



REWIND OR DIE

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Midnight Exhibit Vol. 1

Infested - Carol Gore

Benny Rose: The Cannibal King - Hailey Piper - Jan. 23

Cirque Berserk - Jessica Guess - Feb. 20

Hairspray and Switchblades - V. Castro - Feb. 20

Sole Survivor - Zachary Ashford - Mar. 26

Food Fright - Nico Bell - Mar. 26

Hell's Bells - Lisa Quigley - May 28

The Kelping - Jan Stinchcomb - May 28

Trampled Crown - Kirby Kellogg - Jun. 25

Dead and Breakfast - Gary Buller - Jun. 25

Blood Lake Monster - Renee Miller - Jul. 23

The Catcatcher - Kevin Lewis - Jul. 23

All You Need is Love and a Strong Electric Current - Mackenzie Kiera - Aug.

27

Tales From the Meat Wagon - Eddie Generous - Aug. 27

Hooker - M. Lopes da Silva - Oct. 29

Offstage Offerings - Priya Sridhar - Oct. 29

Dead Eyes - EV Knight - Nov. 26

Dancing on the Edge of a Blade - Todd Rigney - Dec. 12

Midnight Exhibit Vol. 2 - Dec. 12

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