

Chapter 1

They're close, and getting closer by the minute. She's made a mistake by coming inside. The drive-through; that would have been safest, the best way to get food in the kids and return to the interstate before any of the powers pursuing them took notice.

Gracie scans the restaurant, her gaze skipping over garish plastic fixtures of red and yellow, seeking out faces, searching for the tell-tale blur of features. Not here yet. They may be near, but there's still time.

"Mommy, I have t'go potty."

"Me, too."

Panic rises in her heart, and her hands start to shake. Emmy stares back at her, dark eyes framed by dark hair in a face that is warm brown and oval like Gracie's. Her burger is mostly gone, but she's taken only a sip or two of her cola. Smart girl.

Zach's eyes, hazel like his father's, roam the restaurant, his mouth full of fried, processed chicken. His Sprite is gone. A trip to the bathroom now won't forestall the need for another thirty minutes down the road.

She wants to scream, to sob. But she stands and holds out her hands, a mom to the very end.

"Come on, then," she says. "But when we're done we have to get back in the car, understand?"

Emmy nods, wide-eyed and solemn. She does understand. Too well.

“I want d’sert,” Zach says.

Emmy shakes her head. “Not now, Zach.”

His expression darkens, brows gathering like storm clouds. So much like his father.

“We’ll have to stop for gas in a while,” Gracie says. “We’ll get you candy then.”

She leads them to the ladies’ room--two stalls, and one is taken. She waits while they go, and then, begrudging the time, but hoping against hope they can somehow escape another stop for an hour or two, takes a turn herself. She can hear Emmy coaching her brother on how to wash his hands. They giggle at something, and tears well in her eyes.

It shouldn’t be like this.

She finishes, joins them at the sink. Zach has drops of water on his nose and chin and forehead. They both wear impish grins.

“All right, you two,” Gracie says with mock severity. “Time to get going.”

Emmy’s smile slips, and all color drains from her cheeks. “Mommy...”

“They’re here?”

“Who is?” Zach asks, looking from his sister to Gracie. “Daddy?”

God, no. Don’t let Neil be with them. That would be too much for the kids, not to mention what it would do to her.

“Where are they, sweetie?”

Emmy chews her lip before pointing toward the back wall of the restroom. It takes Gracie a moment to orient herself, but when she does, she sags. Of course. Precisely where the van is parked.

The van, which has all their belongings, and which, to those tracking them, probably

lights up the desert sky with magic.

“I wanna see Daddy.”

“Daddy’s not with them, goober.”

“I am not a goober!”

“Are you sure, Emmy? You don’t feel Daddy at all?”

She shakes her head.

“Mommy, tell her I’m not a goober!”

“Don’t call him that, okay?”

Gracie stares at the tiled wall, ignores Zach when he sticks his tongue out at his sister.

All their things. But aside from the booster seats, how much do they really need? And after all, can’t they drive some distance without the boosters?

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do,” she says. “We’ll go out the door that’s right by the potty, and then... then we’re going to drive a different car out of here.”

Emmy’s eyes widen. “We’re going to steal a car?”

“We’re going to borrow one.”

“What about Zeeber?” Zach asks. “And my blankie?”

“You don’t have Zeeber?” Gracie asks, voice rising.

He shakes his head. “You always tell me not to bring him to rest’rants, ‘cause I’ll get food on him.”

Gracie exhales through her teeth and rakes a rigid hand through her hair. Zeeber and that stupid blankie. She knows he’s right: She hates it when he brings that stuffed zebra into restaurants. But she wants to shake him and ask why he chose this time to listen. The blanket she

might be able to replace, but Zeeber... Zach's had it since his infancy, and even if this one *could* be replaced, she wouldn't know where to find another. She's never seen a stuffed zebra like it. It's a damn miracle that he didn't drag it into the restaurant with them. A miracle that could get them all killed. Or worse.

A transporting spell might work, but the men who are after them will feel the magic. They would only have one chance at this.

"We can find you another blankie--"

"No!" His voice echoes off the bathroom walls. "No, no, no, no!"

She puts her hands on his shoulders. "All right, all right. Quiet down." Too late she realizes that there is still someone in the other stall. Stealing the car would have been a bad choice anyway, but that leaves them with few options.

"Okay." She straightens, squares her shoulders. "Stay close to me. Do exactly as I say."

"What are we going to do?" Emmy asks.

"We're going to get in the van and drive away."

"Really?"

"Really."

Emmy gives her best "whatever you say, Mom" eye roll, but she keeps her mouth shut, which Gracie appreciates.

"Hold your brother's hand. Don't let go, no matter what."

Emmy takes Zach's hand, as grim as a warrior. For once, he doesn't complain.

"Ready?"

Emmy nods. Zach shoves his thumb in his mouth, something Gracie thought he'd

stopped doing half a year ago. Leaving Neil has taken a toll on all of them.

Gracie pulls the restroom door open and ushers the kids out, keeping them close and squarely in front of her. She picks the weremystes out of the lunchtime crowd and they spot her at the same time. Two remain in the parking lot, visible through the glass doors, but less of a threat for now. Two more are in the restaurant, their features blurred, though she can still make out the predatory grins that curve their lips at the sight of Emmy and Zach. She has warded herself and the kids a dozen times already today, and yet she has to resist the urge to waste valuable seconds on still another protective spell.

Instead, she attacks. She doesn't want to hurt the people around her, but she doesn't have time enough to be careful. She lashes out, drawing on the electricity humming in the walls and ceiling of the restaurant. Bolts of magic, writhing and twisting like twin snakes, fly from the palms of her hands. The restaurant lights flicker and then burst. Glass and sparks rain down on them. People scream. And the two men before her are tossed backward like ragdolls. They land on tables, slide across them, and tumble into the laps of diners, eliciting more screams.

Zach lets out a low, "Whoa!"

She pushes the kids to the door, yanks it open and steps onto the sidewalk out front. Two more men face her there. One is young, his magic a soft blurring at the edges of his face. He is nothing.

But the other...

Gracie halts, her breath catching. Power like this shouldn't be possible. Not for a mortal. She gets a vaguely familiar impression of sharp, handsome features, silver-white hair and a trim goatee and moustache. He wears dress pants and a button-down shirt. She senses age, wisdom,

and all that power.

“Hello, Engracia.”

She knows better than to attack him head on. He can defeat any spell she might cast, and she won't have time for a second attempt.

“What have you done with it?”

She tries the unexpected. Her casting lifts the younger man off his feet and slams him into the older gentlemen. Both mystes go down in a heap. For good measure she casts again, dropping a trash can on them. One of those big, rectangular faux stone ones that restaurants keep near their doors. It's full, and it lands with a satisfying crash.

“Run!” she says.

The kids stare at her.

“Run!” She yells it this time. They sprint toward the van.

She pulls the fob from her pocket and thumbs the doors open. She checks again on the two men and casts one last spell--a second garbage can soars at the mystes from several yards away and drops onto them much as the first did. Her head is starting to hurt, and her vision swims. She's going to be in no condition to drive.

She dashes to the van, pulls the door shut, and fumbles with the keys, trying to stick the right one in the ignition.

“Hurry, Mommy!”

Gracie glances back through the rear window. Already the older man is stirring. She shoves the key in place, starts the car, and backs out of the space with a squeal of rubber on pavement.

She hits the curb as she turns onto the street, has to swerve to avoid being hit by a pickup. The driver hollers an obscenity.

But Gracie is watching through her rearview mirror. The silver-haired man is on his feet by now. A young woman emerges from the restaurant and glares after her. The gentleman lays one hand on the woman's shoulder and holds the other out toward the van.

"Mommy!" Emmy says, her voice rising.

"I see him."

She casts a warding on the van. Her stomach heaves, and she fears she might be ill.

An instant later, his spell hits. The van swerves again, tips onto its right wheels. Emmy screams. Zach starts to cry. She fights it, trying to hold the steering wheel steady, and at the same time casting another warding, an answer to the silver-haired myste's assault. And still she fears it will not be enough. She feels faint; her grip on the wheel slackens. But then the van rights itself, dropping back onto all four tires with an impact that jars her and the kids.

She chances one more peek at the mirror and sees the silver-haired myste release the woman. She crumples to the pavement.

Gracie runs a red light, barely missing an SUV. Horns blare at her, but she ignores them, steers the car down the ramp toward the interstate.

The myste will have seen her take the southbound ramp. That can't be helped. But she'll leave the interstate at the next opportunity and strike out into the desert. He won't expect that, and by the time he figures out what she's done, she and the kids will be far away, sheltered somewhere he doesn't know, laying low until it's safe again.

That's the plan, anyway. But even as she hurtles down the freeway, headache building

behind her eyes, she glances at her mirrors, expecting to see the dark ones coming for them.

Chapter 2

I sat low in the leather bucket seat of the Z-ster, my silver 1977 280Z. The driver's side window was open, a camera balanced on the top of the car door, its lens trained on a motel room door some twenty yards away.

This wasn't any old camera. It was the latest high-end Canon DSLR, with a twenty-plus megapixel APS-C CMOS sensor--1.6 crop factor--mounted with a four hundred millimeter "L" class telephoto lens and a 1.4 times teleconverter. In short, this was a ridiculously nice piece of equipment with some serious magnification. There was no way I could have afforded to buy the thing; I'd rented it for a few days, at the expense of my current client.

I knew that there were professional photographers working out in the Sonoran Desert with set-ups a lot like this one, snapping amazing photos of the Southwest's stunning wildlife.

Me? I was sweating in my car, waiting to get a shot of a cheating husband as he emerged with his mistress from the Casa del Oro Motel near Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport. Another day in the glamorous life of a private investigator.

In all honesty, I could hardly complain. Over the past few months, I had brought down the Blind Angel killer, the most notorious serial killer ever to haunt the streets of the Phoenix metropolitan area, and I had battled a cadre of dark sorcerers and the necromancer who led them. That was more excitement and glamor than most PIs experience in a lifetime, and I had crammed it all into one nearly-fatal summer. I should have been grateful for work that wasn't likely to get me killed.

Instead, I was bored out of my mind, which probably makes me sound insane.

But what else is new? I sound insane on a regular basis. In fact, I *am* insane on a regular basis. I'm a weremyste. For three nights out of every month--the night of the full moon, and the nights immediately before and after, I lose control of my mind, even as the magic I wield is enhanced by the moon's pull. What's more, these *phasings*, as they're called, have a cumulative effect; sooner or later--I have a strong preference for later--I'll go permanently nuts and will suffer from the same kind of delusions, hallucinations, and neuroses that plague my father. He's a weremyste, too.

The full moon, though, was still seven days away, and for now I had a case to work on, distasteful though it was.

I hated these kinds of jobs. Of all the work I did as a PI--which included uncovering corporate espionage, finding teen runaways, even investigating insurance claims--nothing was worse than these trashy failed-marriage cases. I'd started my business well over a year ago, after losing my job as a homicide detective with the Phoenix Police Department. And in the months since, I'd come to realize that regardless of whether I was hired by the disgruntled husband or the wronged wife, when all was said and done, I could find fault in both of them.

I like clarity in my cases. I like there to be a good guy and a bad guy. Helping one slimeball duke it out with another slimeball was not exactly my idea of the perfect job.

But as owner and president of Justis Fearsson Investigations, Incorporated, and as a guy with a mortgage, I was glad to have the work. My client, Helen Barr, was paying me well to track her tomcatting husband, whose name happened to be Thomas. The Barrs lived in one of the wealthier sections of Scottsdale and she could afford my new prices: \$350 per day plus expenses.

To be honest, I was a little disappointed by Tom's choice of this motel for a tryst. It wasn't as though he couldn't have sprung for a room in one of the fancier downtown hotels. Then again, if the woman he was sleeping with--one Amanda Wagner--didn't mind, who was I to complain?

Most cheating spouses are far less clever about concealing their affairs than they think, and Tom was no exception to this. He and Amanda had been smarter than others, but that really wasn't saying much. They used more than one motel for their rendezvous, and they tended to arrive at the motels on foot, after parking some distance away.

But they met the same days of the week, at the same times. And they made no effort at all to confine their displays of affection to the privacy of their rooms. I wasn't prone to squeamishness, but I really didn't need to see Tom Barr sticking his tongue down the throat of a woman half his age.

I'd gotten a few pictures of them going into the room about an hour ago, and by themselves those photos were pretty incriminating. But, in the interest of being thorough, I wanted to get them coming out of the room as well. It wasn't like I needed to protect Helen Barr's feelings. She knew what her husband was up to. At this point she wanted the photos so that she could wring as much as possible out of him in the divorce settlement. I couldn't blame her. And since she was paying me, and providing me with this fine camera equipment, I figured I should give her her money's worth.

The door to their room opened and I put my eye to the viewfinder. The happy couple emerged into the desert sunlight and I depressed the shutter button. The autofocus whirred and the camera started to click away--eight frames per seconds burst rate. Returning this camera was going to be difficult.

I got a couple of good ones. One with Amanda's hand resting on his chest; another with Tom patting her butt and grinning. As I said, Helen was no saint and I knew that neither she nor Tom was blameless in the collapse of their marriage. But Tom was a sleaze, and I'll admit that I was enjoying myself a little bit knowing how much these pictures would cost him.

And then, with a suddenness that made my heart thump, I wasn't enjoying myself at all.

Magic brushed my mind, dark, hostile, and too damn close.

Neither Tom nor Amanda was a weremyste. In all the time I'd been on this case, I had sensed no magic in them, and I saw no sign of the blurring around their faces, necks, and shoulders that I could usually see in other sorcerers like me. So, being a fool, I hadn't taken the time to ward myself from magical attacks. One day being stupid was going to get me killed.

Since my battles with dark sorcerers during the summer, I had been a target of one magical assault after another. As far as I could tell, none had been meant to kill me. Saorla of Brewood, a centuries-old necromancer who commanded these so-called weremancers, had her reasons for wanting me alive, at least until she herself could savor the pleasure of killing me. But that didn't mean the attacks were a picnic.

Now here I was, unwarded, in my car with the engine off, holding a camera and accessories worth more than I made in a given month, my Glock 22 .40 caliber pistol hidden under the driver's seat. Stupid. I would have liked to toss the camera in the back seat, but I had a feeling the rental place would be less than pleased.

I set it down on the passenger side, while simultaneously reciting a warding spell in my head and scanning the street for the weremystes I had sensed. The warding would have to be general, which meant that it wouldn't be as effective as a spell matched to a specific assault. But

it would be a hell of a lot better than no protection at all. I conceived the spell in three elements: myself, a sheath of power surrounding me, and whatever magic my stalkers might throw my way. The words and images didn't matter much. They were what I used to focus my conjurings. These days I was working on casting with a mere thought, without having to resort to the three elements thing. But this didn't seem like the time to put my training to the test. On the third repetition of the spell's components, I released the magic building within me, and felt it settle over me like an invisible cloak.

Tom and Amanda had returned their room key and were walking away from the Casa del Oro in opposite directions. I started up the car, hoping that I might manage to slip out of the parking lot without having to confront the dark sorcerers.

No such luck.

The first spell hit me in the chest--these damn dark sorcerers always went for the heart, and this guy was no different. I could tell that whatever spell my attacker tried failed to penetrate my warding. Most attack spells hurt like hell, and in recent months my heart had been crushed, cauterized, and shish kebabed by wielders of dark magic. This time the attack merely felt like I'd been kicked in the chest by a mule. I grunted a breath and winced, wondering if my sternum had been shattered. But that was something I could figure out later.

I threw the Z-ster into reverse, only to feel the car shudder, the way it would if I was driving at high speed along a windy stretch of road. It didn't move, though, and before I could ward the vehicle itself, another car--sleek, midnight blue; I think it was the new BMW 6 coupe--pulled in behind me, blocking my escape. I saw two people sitting up front, which I suppose I should have expected. They had been coming at me in pairs and groups of three for some time

now.

It was bad enough being trapped in the parking lot; I didn't want to be trapped in the car as well. I opened the door and climbed out, my movements stiff, my chest still aching. For the moment, I left my Glock where it was. No sense giving my new friends something else to attack with their spells.

They got out as well. The driver was a man: tall, athletic, good-looking. At least I assumed he was; I couldn't get a clear view of his face, because the smear of magic on his features was too strong. The suit he wore might well have been as expensive as the Beamer. His passenger was a woman who was about as tall as he, and dressed in business clothes: black skirt, white blouse, a beige linen jacket, and black high heels. Her dark hair was cut short and I could tell through the blur of power on her face that her eyes were pale blue. It was like the two of them had stepped off the pages of *Vogue* and *GQ* for the sole purpose of messing with me.

"I'm not sure you're allowed to park there," I said, nodding toward the Beamer.

"We won't be here long," the woman said, drawing my gaze. "We have a quick message for you from a mutual friend."

"Saorla is no friend."

Her smile was as thin as mist. "Who's Saorla?"

"What's your message?"

The woman darted a glance toward her companion, my only warning.

Their attacks charged the air, like the gathering power of a lightning strike. I did the one thing I could think of. The sheath of magic that materialized around me shimmered and undulated as if made of heat waves and aqua blue glass. Their spells rebounded off the warding.

One of them knocked the man off his feet, so that he landed hard on the pavement, the air forced from his lungs with a satisfying *oof!* The other casting slammed into the BMW, scorching away part of that lovely paint job in a frenzy of white flame.

“My turn,” I said.

I’d learned the hard way that dark conjurers were good at wardings. They almost always had protective magic in place that blocked even the most powerful of my attack spells. Which is why I had long since given up on direct magical assaults. They were figuring this out, of course. Each new team of weremancers sent after me was better prepared than the last for the quirky spells I threw at them, but I was adjusting as well. And I was nowhere near running out of ideas.

With *GQ* Guy knocked on his keister, he and *Vogue* Woman were too far from each other to share wardings, and that was fine with me. Under normal circumstances, I would never dream of committing any act of violence toward a woman. But for these dark sorcerers, I was more than happy to make an exception. I threw a spell at her first. Three elements: my hand, the heel of her shoe--the left one--and a good hard twist. I heard the heel snap off her shoe. Her ankle rolled and she lost her balance. As she went down I kicked out, catching her flush on the chin so that her head snapped back. She was out cold before she hit the ground.

I spun toward GQ, who had gotten to his feet.

Once again, my casting took advantage of the sartorial splendor of my opponent. His tie, my hand, and an abrupt yank. He stumbled forward, and couldn’t defend himself from the fist I dug into his gut. I hit him again, an uppercut that connected solidly with his jaw and should have put him down on the pavement. It didn’t. He staggered, fell back several steps, but then he righted himself. Blood trickled from his lip, and even as I saw it, I cast.

His blood, his face, and a magical fist to the jaw. This punch put him down, but not out. He tried to get up, but I closed the distance between us in two strides and kicked him in the side. He folded in on himself, deflating like a balloon. I hit him once more, a chopping blow high on his cheek. He collapsed to the ground and didn't move again. My hand throbbed from the punches I'd thrown, and I was breathing hard, but they hadn't hurt me. I'd been lucky. Again.

"Tell Saorla to leave me the hell alone," I said. I didn't know if either of them could hear me. On the other hand, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Saorla herself was nearby, unseen, watching and listening to all that had happened.

I fished in GQ's pockets for the keys to the Beamer, and finding them, moved the car out of the way so that I could back out. That I happened to ram the front grill of the BMW into a dumpster was purely accidental, all three times.

As I walked back to the Z-ster, though, I spotted out of the corner of my eye a large dog padding in my direction.

Except it wasn't a dog at all. Silver and black fur, golden yellow eyes, and paws as large as my hands. A wolf. A were, no doubt. I froze. The wolf slowed, bared its teeth, hackles rising. It continued in my direction, placing one paw in front of the other with the grace of a dancer.

Hurting weremancers was one thing. They were sorcerers, just like me, and they were fully capable of choosing for themselves which side they fought on in the magical war that had descended on the Phoenix area. Weres--werecoats, werecoyotes, and, yes, werewolves--often didn't have any choice. They were conscripts, controlled by Saorla and her allies. I didn't want to hurt any of them, this one included. I held my hands at waist level, palms out.

"Good doggie," I said, trying to keep my voice level.

The wolf growled deep in his throat. Belatedly, it occurred to me that it might not like being called a doggie.

I pointed at Vogue and GQ. “Those are the ones you should be angry with. They’re the ones controlling you.”

The wolf didn’t so much as glance at the unconscious weremystes. He remained fixed on me, and his expression hadn’t softened even a little. My, what big teeth he had.

I eased toward my car, my hands still open in front of me. And I made a point of not breaking eye contact with the were, of not doing anything that the creature might construe as submissive behavior. He tracked me with his eyes, growling again and padding after me, matching my movement.

As I neared my car, however, he took three quick steps, cutting in half the distance between us and snapping his massive jaws.

I cast: my hand, his snout, and the magical equivalent of a two-by-four. The wolf yelped and backed away.

I ran to the car. But before I could get in and close the door he recovered, lunging at me and forcing me back. I tried swatting him on the snout again, but it only made him angrier.

Vogue let out a low groan. I knew that if I didn’t find a way past Rin Tin Tin, and soon, I’d have her and her partner to deal with as well. I didn’t want to hurt the were, but I couldn’t allow him to delay me anymore.

“You can understand me. I know you can. I’ve faced weres before, and all of them retained some trace of their humanity, even after they turned.”

The wolf stared back at me, teeth bared, a snarl on its thinned lips.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

Then do not. Defend yourself.

The voice echoing in my head was not my own, but rather the rumbling baritone of Namid’skemu, the runemyste responsible for my training. He was the reincarnated spirit of a shaman from the K’ya’na-Kwe clan of the A’shiwi or Zuni nation. The K’ya’na-Kwe, also known as the water people, were an extinct line, unless one counted Namid, who was, for lack of a better term, a ghost.

I am not a ghost!

He hadn’t actually spoken to me, but after training under his guidance for longer than I cared to remember, I could hear his voice in my sleep.

For the past two months he and I had worked on wardings and assault spells, ignoring other castings with which I also needed practice. Like transporting spells.

But this seemed as good a time as any to practice.

This was a more complicated casting, requiring seven elements. Me, the wolf, the weremancers, the pavement on which I stood, the distance between myself and the front seat of my car, the glass and metal of the car door, and the car seat itself, where I wanted to be. I held the elements in my mind, repeating them to myself six times as the power gathered inside me. On the seventh repetition, I released the spell.

Cold and darkness closed around me like a chilling fog, and for the span of several heartbeats I felt as though I was suffocating.

And then I was in the car, heat radiating off the black leather seats and steering wheel. I rolled up the window, dug in my pocket for the car keys, and started her up. The wolf threw

himself against the car door.

“Stop that!” I yelled, though I knew it wouldn’t do any good. If I got home and found that he had put even the smallest dent in my door, I was going to drive back here and kick the crap out of him, weres and ethics be damned.

I backed out of the spot, taking care--against my better judgment--not to run over either weremancer, and pulled out onto the street. The wolf ran after me, but I accelerated, leaving him behind. The last I saw of him in my rearview mirror, he was loping off the street, vanishing between two buildings. I exhaled and rolled down my window, my pulse pounding and my hand slick with sweat. Autumn air flooded the car and I savored the caress of the wind on my face.

One of these times, my luck would run out and Saorla’s weremancers would get the better of me. But not today.

I steered onto Interstate 10 and made my way back to Chandler, where I have my office and my home.

#

My office is on the second floor of a small shopping complex. It’s nice as offices go: wood floors, windows overlooking the street, and an espresso machine that cost way, way more than it should have. The computer, in contrast, is ancient, which I suppose says something about my priorities.

I switched it on and while I was waiting for it to start up, I also fired up the coffee machine.

When the computer was functional, I removed the memory card from the camera and downloaded the photos I’d taken. They were as clear as I would have expected from such fine

equipment. I chose the best dozen or so and copied them onto three compact discs. One copy I hid in my desk. The other two I intended to take with me: one to keep at home and one to give to Helen Barr.

Once the discs were burned and I had a cup of espresso in me, I called Missus Barr and asked if I could come by. She agreed, and I left the office once more and drove up to Scottsdale, fighting traffic all the way. It wasn't yet what I used to think of as rush hour, but in Phoenix these days "rush hour" began at dawn and continued past dusk. It took way too long, but I reached the Barr home, a Spanish Mission style mansion in the Scottsdale Ranch Park area. The front lawn was perfectly manicured and along both sides of the house were rocky gardens filled with ocotillos, prickly pears, chollas, and golden barrel cacti. A cactus wren sang from atop an ocotillo stalk, and a pair of thrashers chased each other around the base of one of the chollas.

I followed a winding flagstone path to the front door and rang the bell. Within the house, a small dog began to yap, its claws scratching on the floor on the other side of the door.

A moment later the door opened, revealing Missus Barr. I had met her in person once before. She looked younger than I remembered, perhaps because she had her hair down. She was petite and tanned, with dark blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair.

"Mister Fearsson," she said, a tight smile on her face.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"Of course. Come in." She waved me into the house and closed the door behind us. "I was about to have a glass of wine," she said, leading me through the living room. "Can I pour one for you?"

I followed her into an enormous kitchen, complete with granite countertops, cherry

cabinets, and every small appliance I could name, plus a few that I couldn't. The kitchen alone was probably worth more than my entire house.

“Water would be fine.”

She filled a glass with ice and water from the refrigerator door and handed it to me. Then she poured herself a massive glass of white wine and led me over to a breakfast nook that offered a view of the back lawn--also flawless--and yet another rock and cactus garden.

“So, you have news for me,” she said, fixing a smile on her lips.

I pulled out one of the discs I'd burned. “I have photos.”

Her face fell. She stared at the disc for a few seconds, then got up and walked out of the room, only to return moments later with a laptop computer. She set it on the table and held out her hand for the disc, which I handed to her. She inserted it in the slot and, after a few clicks of the touchpad, began to scroll through the photos I'd taken.

“She's pretty,” she said, after the second or third picture. “What do you know about her?”

“Her name is Amanda Wagner.” I kept my voice low, my tone devoid of inflection. And I kept my eyes on the screen, not on her. “She works for a temp agency, and was assigned to your husband's office for a few weeks back in February.”

Missus Barr had continued to work her way through the images, but at that she glanced in my direction. “February? That's when this started?”

“I haven't been able to determine exactly when their affair began. The earliest date I've been able to confirm is in the first week of April, but it's possible that they started meeting before then.”

“How old is she?”

I lifted a shoulder. "I'm not sure of her exact--"

"Of course you are. How old?"

I hated this part of my job. "Twenty-seven."

Her nod was jerky. "Tom has always been a handsome man. And I suppose the money helps."

I said nothing.

She clicked through a few more images, stopping at the shot of her husband with his hand on the young woman's rear.

"Damn," she whispered.

I chanced a peek at her, and regretted it right away. Tears ran down her cheeks from eyes that were red-rimmed and swollen.

"I'm sorry, Missus Barr."

She swiped at her cheeks, the gesture impatient, angry. "It's not your fault, it's his. And mine. I told you to find out everything, didn't I? I thought it wouldn't bother me, that I'd sue the bastard for divorce, take him to the cleaners, and be happy to walk away. It's not that easy, is it?"

"In my experience, it never is."

A small breathless laugh escaped her. "Am I that much of a cliché, Mister Fearsson?"

I dropped my gaze, cringing on the inside. "Forgive me. That's not what I meant."

"It's all right. That was an attempt at humor." She closed out of the program she was using to view the photos and ejected the disc. "You have more copies of this?" she asked, holding it up.

"Yes, ma'am. That's yours to keep, and if by some chance you lose it, or he finds it and

destroys it, I can make a new one. And I'll see to it that the photos are available for the divorce proceedings."

"Good. What do I owe you?"

"I can send you a bill."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're here now. Let me pay you. Or rather, let Tom pay you. I like the irony of that, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, grinning. "But I had some expenses that I need to tally up. And I was wondering if you might want to keep me on retainer in case you should need more information."

She hesitated. "I suppose that might be a good idea. How does that work?"

"It's very easy. We've already signed an agreement, and it remains in place until we both agree to terminate it. The difference is, I'll be taking on other clients and will only charge you for those days when I work on your case a minimum of three hours. And in the meantime, I'll bill you for those days I've worked thus far."

"Yes, all right. Thank you, that's... I find it reassuring knowing that I'll have your services if I need them."

"Yes, ma'am."

She led me back to the front foyer, seeming more composed than she had when looking through the pictures.

"I'm sorry to have been the bearer of bad news," I told her as she opened the door.

"You weren't, not really. I hired you because I suspected Tom was up to something. Now I know beyond a doubt. Thank you for that."

“You’re welcome.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mister Fearsson. I’m fine. Or if not, I will be soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m going to call my lawyer, then I’m going to take a nice hot bath, and then I’m going to go out and get laid.”

I laughed.

“You didn’t expect that, did you?”

“No,” I said, and meant it.

“Tom won’t expect it either.”

My cell phone rang before I could respond. I glanced at the screen. The call was from Kona Shaw, my former partner on the Phoenix police force.

“I’m sorry, Missus Barr--”

“No apologies. Go answer your phone. And be sure to bill me soon. That’s one check I’m going to enjoy writing.”

I shook her hand and started back up the path to my car. As I walked, I flipped open my phone. Yes, I’m still the somewhat-less-than-proud owner of a flip phone; I try to keep away from gadgets that are smarter than I am, which these days is almost all of them.

“What’s up, partner?” I said. “Please tell me you have work for me.”

“Private investigating business slow these days?” Kona asked, her voice sounding paper thin through the phone. Our connection buzzed with all the noise in the background, not only the din of voices one hears at any crime scene, but also a prominent hum. It sounded like she was standing by a race track.

“Yeah, a little. Where are you?”

“Just off the interstate. Feel like eyeballing a couple of corpses, maybe telling me if you see magic on them?”

“Sick as it might sound, I can’t think of anything better right now. As long as the case has nothing to do with broken marriages or cheating spouses.”

Silence.

“Kona?”

“Sorry, Justis. Meet me at the burger place, exit 162 off of Interstate 10. I’ll explain everything.”

Chapter 3

The Interstate was already filling up with end-of-work traffic, but I made decent time through the city. The burger place wasn't too far from where I lived in Chandler. I felt a little like a yo-yo, driving up and down I-10.

Even before I left the freeway, I saw the crime scene. There must have been a dozen police cruisers in the restaurant parking lot, all of them with their lights flashing. I exited and crawled through the crowded roadways until I reached the lot. One of the cops there tried to stop me from pulling in. I took out my wallet and opened it to my PI license. But once the cop got a good look at my face, he waved me in without bothering to check the license.

Fame had its perks.

Since late spring, when I killed Etienne de Cahors, the reanimated spirit of a medieval druid from Gaul, who had been responsible for the infamous Blind Angel Killings, I had been something of a celebrity here in Phoenix. My role in solving a second set of murders this summer only served to cement that status. A part of me wondered if at this point I could have gotten myself reinstated as a detective in Homicide. But the problems that first convinced the hire-ups in the PPD to fire me--the phasings and the fact that I lose my mind for three days out of every month--hadn't gone away. I was still a weremyste, and thus still subject to the moon's influence on my mind and my magic. Plus, I had come to enjoy my work as a PI, despite its many drawbacks. Mostly I liked being my own boss, and with wealthy clients like Helen Barr now seeking me out, I was starting to make decent money.

I parked and soon spotted Kona and her new partner, Kevin Glass, standing by the doors to the restaurant. Kona raised a hand in greeting and then beckoned me over with a waggle of her fingers.

No matter where she was, Kona stood out in a crowd. She was tall and thin, with skin the color of roast coffee, the cheekbones of a fashion model, and tightly curled black hair that she wore short. With her thousand watt smile and her tasteful fashion sense, she might well have been the most beautiful woman I had ever met. Predictably, though, she wasn't smiling now. Neither was Kevin, who was also African-American and attractive. Together, they were every bit as stunning as the weremancers who had attacked me earlier.

I passed a body as I walked to where they waited for me. It was covered with a white sheet, and a pair of uniformed officers were keeping people at a distance. I slowed as I walked by. A woman's hand, with nails painted bright pink, peeked out from beneath the sheet. I continued to where Kona and Kevin were waiting.

"Thank for coming, partner," she said, her expression grim, her voice flat. "I'm sorry if I pulled you away from something important."

"I can't even begin to tell you how you didn't. Hey, Kevin." I held out my hand and Kevin gripped it.

"Good to see you, Jay."

I glanced around the parking lot and then tried to see inside past the reflective glare of the restaurant's glass doors. "What have you got?"

"Two dead, three more wounded, one of them critically, and a whole lot of frightened people who can't make up their minds as to what it is they saw."

“What do you mean?”

Kona scanned the lot before tipping her head toward the door. “Come inside and we’ll talk.”

“You don’t want me to take a look at the body over there?”

“Oh, you will. But I want you to see the one in here first.”

That didn’t sound good at all.

I followed Kona and Kevin inside, and halted, taking in the damage. The place was a mess, the floor littered with half-eaten burgers and torn ketchup packets, french fries and plastic utensils, paper wrappers and brightly colored cardboard, all of them soaking in spilled sodas and shakes. I took a step and heard something crunch beneath my shoe.

“Careful,” Kona said. “There’s glass everywhere.”

I examined the windows, frowning. None was broken. “From what?”

She pointed at the ceiling.

Craning my neck, I saw that the recessed light bulbs above us had been blown out. All of them.

“Geez,” I whispered.

“No kidding. Any idea what might do that?”

I shook my head. “None.”

“I was afraid of that. Follow me. There’s something else I want you to see.”

We walked around a condiment station and a trash can, placing our feet with care. I was wearing tennis shoes, and didn’t much care that I was walking through a shallow lake of cola, lemonade, and root beer. But I could tell that this was killing Kona, whose love of nice shoes was

exceeded only by her love of bright, dangly earrings.

She led me to a table that was as much a wreck as the floor. A body lay beside the table and its fixed chairs, the sheet covering it soaking up the spilled drinks.

“They wanted to move him,” Kona said, reaching down to pull the sheet away and wrinkling her nose. “But I insisted they keep him as he was until you could see.”

“Thanks, I think.”

I squatted to examine the corpse more closely. He was a big man, tall and broad, with nondescript features. His eyes remained open, and his teeth were bared. Forced to guess, I’d have said he died in pain. He might have been a runecrafter in life, but I couldn’t be sure. The blurring effect that I could see in the faces of weremystes died with the sorcerer.

I could tell, though, that magic had killed him.

The front of his shirt was blackened and there was a hole in the cloth where the spell had hit him. The skin beneath was scorched as well. And a sheen of glowing magic clung to his shirt and blistered flesh, warm reddish brown, like the color of the full moon as it creeps above the desert horizon.

All spells left a residue of magic that manifested itself in this way, allowing a trained weremyste like me to do a bit of magical forensic work. Every sorcerer’s power expressed itself in a different color, and faded at a different rate. The more powerful the runecrafter the richer the magic and the faster it vanished. The russet I saw on this corpse was a powerful hue; having not seen the spell when it was first cast, I couldn’t determine how much it had faded, but I was guessing that it had been a good deal brighter an hour ago.

“Well?” Kona asked, watching me.

“Yeah, he was killed with magic.” I pointed to his chest. “It hit him there.”

“I could have told you that,” Kevin said.

“I don’t know what kind of spell it was.”

“People described it as bolts of lightning,” Kona said. “They say it flew from her hands, like in the movies. That’s what one guy told the uniforms who took his statement. ‘It looked like something out of the movies.’” She chuckled, dry and humorless, and shook her head. “That’s not all, either. When she attacked them--”

“Them?”

“Yeah,” Kona said. “John Doe here had a partner. The second guy was hit by the same magic, but somehow he survived, at least so far. The EMTs couldn’t say why. He was in bad shape when they took him; they said the odds of him recovering were no better than fifty-fifty.”

I nodded. “Okay. You were going to tell me something else--something that happened when he was attacked?”

“Right,” Kona said. “That was when the lights blew. They flickered and then popped. People said there were sparks everywhere.”

I eyed the broken light bulbs again. I’d never heard of magic drawing upon electricity, but there was a first for everything, right? “Tell me about the woman.”

“Dark hair, dark eyes, most agree that she appears to be Latina. About five feet, five inches and one-hundred and twenty pounds. Witnesses say she’s attractive. And every one of them confirms that she has two little kids with her: a girl of about eight, and a boy of four or five.”

I straightened, my eyes never leaving Kona’s face. “A mom did this?”

“A magical mom, from what you’re telling me.”

“Damn.” I rubbed a hand over my face. “You called this guy John Doe. He had no ID on him?”

“None. And neither did his companion.”

I gazed down at the body again, taking in the expensive clothes and shoes, the nondescript features. “Well, this is a little weird.”

“This is nothing,” Kevin said. “Wait until you see the woman outside.”

We left the restaurant and walked to where the second body lay.

“Accounts of what happened out here are a little sketchier,” Kona said. “Apparently our magical mom brought her kids out of the restaurant and were confronted by two people. One was young, blonde, about five-ten. The other was older--mid-sixties, maybe--silver haired with a trim beard and mustache. From what we were told, it seems he’s our second killer.”

Kona bent and pulled back the sheet covering this second corpse. The woman on the pavement was perhaps in her mid-thirties. She was heavy, with light brown curls and a wedding band on her left hand. She wore jeans and a Diamondbacks t-shirt. I could see no obvious cause of death, no marks on her face and neck, no tears or cuts in her clothing, no blood trail from a wound on her back or head. Her facial expression was as different from that of the first victim as one could imagine. Her eyes were closed, her features so composed she could have been sleeping.

One mark on her t-shirt did catch my eye: a stain on her left shoulder, about the size of a fist and located at the seam where the sleeve began. The shirt was red, so I couldn’t be certain, but it might have been dried blood. Not a lot--not enough to have killed her--but enough to draw

my attention.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing at the spot.

“That’s what we want to know, too,” Kona said. “It’s the only wound on her.”

“So there is a wound under there.”

She nodded. “But not like one I’ve ever found at a murder scene.”

“Can I look?”

Kona glanced at Kevin, who was already watching her. He shrugged.

“Knock yourself out,” she said. “But don’t do anything stupid to my crime scene.”

Right.

I didn’t have gloves, but I did have a pencil--the one I used to take notes when questioning clients and witnesses. I took it from my pocket and gently slipped it under the dead woman’s sleeve. Using the pencil as a lever, I lifted the sleeve and peered beneath it. I couldn’t see the entire wound this way, at least not without allowing the pencil to touch the victim’s skin. But I could see enough.

The skin hadn’t been broken, but it was discolored. At first glance I thought it nothing more than a simple contusion, darker than most, but not strange enough to draw my notice. If Kona hadn’t mentioned how unusual it was, I wouldn’t have given it a second glance. But as I examined it, I saw that she was right. The skin on and around the “bruise,” for want of a better term, was raised and puckered, and the subcutaneous darkening was uneven, almost dotted, as if... Well, I didn’t quite know how to finish that thought.

“Witnesses?” I asked, still examining the injury.

“Several, but their accounts don’t help much. Our silver-haired perp laid a hand on the

woman's shoulder, kept it there for maybe half a minute, and then let go of her. When he did, she fell to the pavement and didn't move again."

I frowned. "He did this with his hand?"

"That's what they say. I'm assuming there was magic involved," she said, dropping her voice.

"None that I can find."

"Say that again."

I eased the pencil out of the sleeve and straightened once more. "There isn't any magical residue on the woman at all. If the perp was a weremyste, he didn't use a spell to kill her or direct any magic her way."

"Well, damn," Kona said, staring down at the body. "I didn't see that coming."

"Do you have any idea what the cause of death was?"

She shook her head. "That's what I wanted you to tell me. Now we're going to have to wait for the coroner's report."

I didn't answer at first. I faced the restaurant and surveyed the parking lot and sidewalk, trying to reconcile what I had seen inside with the wound on this corpse lying at my feet. The restaurant grounds were as much a mess as the interior. Two large trash containers had been overturned, strewing garbage everywhere. I walked to the nearer of the containers and squatted beside it. Rust-colored magic danced along the edge of the faux-stone plastic, bleached by the afternoon sun, but obvious now that I knew to look for it. The same magic shimmered on the other container as well.

"The woman with the kids was trying to get away," I said.

“She *did* get away.”

I faced Kona. “I get that. What I mean is, these other guys came after her. The dead guy inside and his friend, the silver-haired man out here. They were after her for some reason. She attacked the two inside directly. Out here...” I gestured at the mess. “For some reason she didn’t go after the older man and his partner in the same way.”

“You know this, or are you guessing?”

“I’m guessing,” I said. “But there’s magic on these trash cans.”

Kona’s eyebrows went up. “All right. So why wouldn’t she use the same mojo here? It worked well enough the first time.”

I considered the question. “There are a number of possible reasons. Maybe she didn’t want to hurt or kill the guys outside. Maybe she knew them, cared about them, and so she held back.”

“That’s one possibility. What’s the other?”

“I can think of two others. The first is that the casting she used inside wouldn’t work out here. It seems like she found some way to tap into the restaurant’s electrical system, and she might not have been able to replicate the spell once she was outside. But that reasoning breaks down pretty quickly. A sorcerer powerful enough to use magic like that inside would be able to come up with some other attack.”

“All right, then what about third?”

“Well,” I said, “if I found myself face-to-face with a sorcerer I knew I couldn’t beat, someone so powerful that any attack spell I tried was bound to fail, I’d go to a different sort of attack, something that a normal warding might not stop.”

“Like dropping a garbage can on him,” Kevin said.

“Exactly.”

My eyes met Kevin’s, and apparently Kona didn’t like what she saw pass between us.

“The woman killed a man,” she said. “At least that’s what my witnesses are telling me.

For now at least, she’s as much a murder suspect as the guy with silver hair.”

“Even if she was protecting herself and her kids,” I said.

“Even if. And what’s more, you know I’m right. You haven’t been off the job that long.”

She was right. For the most part.

“Not that long, no. But the fact is, I don’t have a badge anymore.”

“Aside from the PPD, you don’t have a client, either.”

“The PPD isn’t a client, and you know it. I do this to help you out, and because, sick as it is, I still love working a crime scene. But I’m not bound by the same rules.”

“Justis,” she said, a warning in her tone.

I stepped closer to her. “Think about it, Kona,” I said, my voice low. “Procedure might be telling you one thing, but your head and your heart are telling you another. The woman had kids with her, little kids. She wouldn’t have gotten into a magical battle unless she had no choice.”

“That a new magic you’ve learned?” she asked. “You can listen in to what’s going in my head and my heart?”

I held her gaze, saying nothing. After a few seconds of this, she rolled her eyes.

“Fine, it might have been self-defense. Be that as it may--”

“You invited me in,” I said, “but I have no official role here. So wouldn’t it be helpful to you if I dug around a little bit?”

“That depends.”

“It’s not like I’m going to help her slip out of the country. But the magic is pointing me in a clear direction: she’s a victim, or would have been if she hadn’t gotten away. So let me work that angle. Maybe I can find her. And maybe through her I can find your silver-haired killer.” I pointed at the second corpse. “And figure out how he killed that woman.”

For a long time, Kona didn’t respond. She pursed her lips, her eyes trained on the ground in front of her, and after a while she began to shake her head, which told me that I had won.

“She’s driving a minivan, silver, late model. We have conflicting reports on whether it’s a Toyota, a Mazda, or a Honda. She was last seen turning onto the southbound entrance ramp.” I thought she might say more, but after a moment she closed her notepad.

“What else, Kona?”

“It’s probably nothing.”

“Probably?”

She raised her eyes to mine. “A couple of witnesses said that her van nearly tipped over as she sped away. And one of them was convinced he saw the silver-haired guy hold his hand up, like he was pointing at the van. This was before the woman he was holding died.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I went back to the corpse and again used the pencil to uncover the wound on her shoulder. There was one possibility that explained the wound and what the silver-haired man might have been doing. It might even have explained why there was no trace of magic on the dead woman. The problem was, I didn’t believe what I was contemplating could be possible. Didn’t believe it, and didn’t want to.

“What’s on your mind, Justis?” Kona asked from behind me.

I shook my head, and stood once more. “Nothing. I’m... nothing.”

“Uh huh.” No one could pack more sarcasm into two syllables than Kona.

“I’ll let you know what I find out,” I said. “You’ll do the same?”

“As much as I can.”

It was, I knew, the best she could offer.

“All right. See you around, partner. Kevin, take care.”

“Later, Jay.”

I made my way back to the Z-ster, got in, and started her up. After idling for a few seconds, I pulled out of the parking lot and steered onto the interstate. But rather than heading back north into the city, I drove south. I couldn’t say why. I didn’t think I could track the woman by her magic, though to make sure I cast a spell that, at least in theory, might have worked.

Seven elements: the woman, her minivan, her kids, her red-brown magic, the freeway, me, and a magical trail connecting all of us. I felt the power of my spell dance along my skin as I drove, but I saw nothing.

Still, I drove for a while, emerging from the sprawl of Phoenix into the flat open desert of the Gila River Indian Community. The reservation covered close to six hundred square miles, and had been, since the middle of the nineteenth century, home to the *Akimel O’odham* and *Pee-Posh* tribes, also known as the Pimas and the Maricopas. As with so much Indian territory in the state, there wasn’t much to look at on this land. Even back in 1859, the Federal Government had already gotten very good at picking out the least valuable lands for the tribal nations. There were few landmarks along this stretch of highway beyond a small airfield about three miles south of the restaurant.

I tried the tracking spell a second time, but was no more successful than I'd been before. And yet I couldn't bring myself to turn around. I drove forty miles through the heart of the territory and beyond its southern boundary, until I reached the outskirts of Casa Grande. There, finally, I took the exit and reentered the freeway heading north.

I'd wasted some gas and some time, but I didn't mind that. What bothered me was the sense I had after starting back toward Phoenix that I was now heading in the wrong direction. My spell hadn't worked, and I couldn't explain what I was feeling. But I had been a cop and a weremyste for too long to dismiss it.

I resisted the urge to head south again, and made my way back into the city. The one blessing in all of this was that I was driving against the worst of the traffic. Before long I had pulled up in front of Billie Castle's house in Tempe.

Billie and I met during my investigation into the last of the Blind Angel murders. The killer's final victim, a girl named Claudia Deegan, was the daughter of Arizona's senior U.S. Senator, Randolph Deegan, who had established himself as the most powerful politician in the state. He was about to be elected governor in what everyone, including his opponent, knew would be a landslide, and many believed he had Presidential ambitions. Among those who believed this was my girlfriend. Billie was a journalist. To be more precise, she was what many in the business call an opinion shaper. She maintained a blog called "Castle's Village," which attracted a wide readership throughout the Southwest.

When we met, she was digging up information on Claudia's murder, and I was less than forthcoming with what I knew. Eight years on the Phoenix police force had left me with a healthy aversion to the press.

But in addition to being tenacious and smart as hell, she was also charming and beautiful, and for some reason surpassing understanding, she wound up being drawn to me as powerfully as I was to her.

Notwithstanding a few preliminary bumps, our relationship had been developing steadily ever since. It took her a little while to believe in the magic I wield, and a bit longer to accept that my ability to cast spells was worth the cost of the phasings. To be honest, I'm not sure that she's convinced of this yet. There are drugs that a weremyste can take--they're called blockers--that would blunt the effects of the full moon and probably keep me from going insane later in life. But they do this at the expense of my runecrafting, and that's not a trade I'm willing to make. At least not yet. But I was convinced that if Billie had her way, I'd be taking them.

Aside from that, though, things have been great.

Well, mostly. Being involved with me did almost get her killed during the summer, when Saorla threw the magical equivalent of a bomb at a Mexican place in which we were having lunch. Billie's injuries were severe: broken bones, concussion, a collapsed lung. But she's better now.

Yeah.

I have no idea why she was still with me. If I had been in her position, I would have run screaming from this relationship months ago. I was a lucky man.

I parked out front, pulled the Glock from beneath the seat and slipped it into my jacket pocket, and approached her front door. Before I was halfway up the path, the door opened and she came outside looking none-too-happy.

"Thank God," she said. "I've been calling you, texting you; I even tried email."

“I was driving. What’s up?”

“Your friend’s here. He’s doing that silent immovable thing and it’s driving me nuts.”