



A Rylee Adamson Novel

RAISING INNOCENCE

SHANNON
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Raising Innocence

Rylee Adamson #3

Shannon Mayer

I hung from the ceiling of my bedroom, my arm muscles trembling under the strain of holding up me and the twenty-five pound sack of potatoes tied to my waist. The thick rope I'd wrapped around my right arm was frayed and rough, usually a good surface to grip, but not so much today. Sweat dripped from my body, making it hard to hang on. In nothing but a black tank top and stretchy jeans, I fought to keep up the pace I'd started with three hours before, my breathing harsh even to my own ears. I was desperate to stop my mind from going where it wanted to go. My workouts had always been an escape for me, but today even pushing my body to the edge of exhaustion wasn't keeping the flutter of anxiety in my gut still.

O'Shea still hadn't come back. It had been over a month since he'd been infected with the werewolf virus. A few months ago, I wouldn't have cared what happened to the FBI agent, he'd been a thorn in my ass for years. Then things had changed between us; he'd saved my life and I'd saved his. I'd thought I'd found a man who could stand with me in my world, be a part of my life. But maybe not. The supernatural world was a hard place to live, the learning curve deadly for most, especially for humans coming into it.

I grit my teeth and looked up to see how much higher I had to go. Three feet, not too far.

There hadn't even been any salvages to take my mind off Liam. Pretty bad when I was hoping for a child to go missing so I wouldn't have to think about one tall, dark, and dangerous man.

"Son of a bitch," I growled out, blinking away the sudden burst of nausea rolling up through my body. Oh, puking twenty-five feet up in the air was not going to happen.

With a pounding heart, and saliva filling my mouth as my gorge rose, I struggled to hold it together.

Visions of a fluffy bed and a darkened room where I could sleep for a week straight floated through my mind. If only my life were that easy to escape from. I wasn't sick—at least not physically; it was more a sickness of the heart. And that pissed me off. Weakness was not an option.

I only needed to swing a little to the right to grab the second rope hanging from the ceiling; then I could shimmy my way down. Only I rocked my body to the left, getting my momentum going—like pumping my legs on a swing. It took a couple of jerks left and right before I was close enough to grab the second rope with my left hand. The sack of potatoes continued to swing even after I stopped, jerking me hard to the left, and I slipped a few inches, the rope burning my arm. I bit the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood, and I clenched my fingers around the rope harder still. There was no way I was going to let go. I'd survive the fall—there were a few mats below me—but twenty-five feet up was a hell of a lot of pain and bruising just because I got tired and couldn't hang on.

As I let go of the first rope, a wave of fatigue hit me, and I slipped downward again, my overworked hands doing me no good in the way of grip. Desperation kicked in and I wrapped the rope around my legs—a cheat in my books for this particular exercise.

"Are you almost done?"

I glanced down at Milly, my former best friend and the best witch I knew. Even though I'd kicked her out of the house, chosen Alex over her, I could still say I was proud of her accomplishments. She could whip up a spell in no time, her natural talent needing very little help in the way of training. Of course, she had her flaws too. More than I cared to count. My eyes flicked over her; she was wearing skin-tight black and green dress that hugged every inch of her curvy body, leaving nothing to the imagination. There was a bit more curve to her too, like she'd packed on some extra pounds. In the past, Milly's behaviour hadn't bothered me—the way she did things or, more accurately, who she did things with. It was just a part of who she was. Lately, though, it had gotten under my skin, to the point where I couldn't bite my tongue. Then again, everything about Milly lately had me on edge.

"You're chubbing up, Milly. Maybe you should try working out on your feet instead of your back." I panted, frustrated by how much my routine was taking out of me.

Slipping and sliding, I let myself down the rope, the burn of the coarse material reminding me to grip a little more with my legs. Five feet up I yanked the sack of potatoes up into the air so that it was at my eye level and then jumped, catching the bag on my way down.

Milly clapped, her expression one of self-indulgence, as she ignored my barb. "You done showing off? I need a hand getting the last of my boxes into my car."

Shrugging, I lowered the sack of potatoes to the ground and took a deep breath. "Yeah, sure."

The air between us was more than a little cool. She was still pissed at me. But I knew I'd made the right choice.

When I'd told her she had to go, she'd left immediately—she was never short on places to sleep—and I had only just come back for the last of her things. We hadn't talked in the last few weeks and I felt the strain between us as if it were a living thing strangling what was left of our friendship to death. It hurt me to know how little she thought of me, of our history together. Apparently, O'Shea had been right—she'd meant more to me than I had to her.

With a frown, she tossed her long brown hair over one shoulder. "Hurry up, I have a date tonight. I don't want to be late."

I untied the rope from around my waist, jerking at it when it got stuck. "Then maybe you shouldn't have shown up in four-inch heels and a dress you're going to have to peel off. Shit, you're moving boxes, not stripping for me!"

Milly pouted, a move that helped her get her way with the male species, but didn't work on me. "It's the least you could do after picking that *werewolf* over me," she said, placing a hand on her hip, green eyes narrowing.

A black, contorted muzzle peeked around the edge of my bedroom door and one large amber eye blinked up at me. "Hiya witchy." He waved one paw at Milly. "Done peeing."

I held my hand out to him, and all two hundred pounds of werewolf came bounding into my room, banging against Milly's legs, which sent her sprawling to the floor, her spiked heels doing nothing to help her keep her balance. She screeched, I laughed, and Alex cringed against my legs. A weak,

submissive werewolf, he was trapped between man and wolf, his body hunched and covered in black fur with silver tips; not to mention he had the mind of a two-year-old child.

But I had to admit he was one of the few good parts in my life, and seeing Milly sprawled out on the floor spluttering, I was glad once more I'd chosen him over her.

"It's okay, buddy." I patted his head. "Milly isn't mad; she's leaving."

That's where I was wrong. Milly pushed herself to her hands and knees, then used the door frame for support to stand. Her hands moved in a spell I recognized, the blackness surrounding her fingers—a tell I knew all too well.

I leapt toward her, slamming my hand over her mouth and tackling her to the floor. Being Immune had its perks, and this was one of them. The spell diffused against my skin, negating the effect she'd been going for.

"Oh, fuck no. You are not killing Alex over him knocking you down!"

She wrestled against me, but she never worked out, never thought about what would happen if she couldn't use her magic.

Shimmying up, I sat on her chest, pinning her arms to the floor with my knees. She bucked and writhed, and I finally lifted my hand from her mouth.

"Get the fuck off me!" Tears clung to her lashes and while I could understand her being angry, I didn't understand the crying.

"Milly, I wish you'd tell me what's going on," I said, not letting her up.

She flicked a finger and my bedroom lamp whipped at my head, catching me off guard. The ceramic base shattered against my skull, unbalancing me and giving her the edge she needed.

She scrambled away from me, crying, her makeup running down her face in long black streaks. Shit, now I felt bad. But I still couldn't let her kill Alex.

"I thought you were my friend, Rylee. But you aren't, you're no better than your parents, turning your back on the people who depend on you."

Fuck, now that was a low blow. I had to stop myself from physically cringing. "The friend I knew," I said, advancing toward her, "wouldn't try and kill Alex. Not for knocking her over. The friend I knew would tell me what was wrong with her. The friend I knew." I was yelling now, and Alex was howling from behind me, "wouldn't try to use my past against me!"

Milly cringed, then wiped her face, sniffing. "We aren't the same people anymore."

"You might not be." I turned my back on her to close my bedroom door and keep Alex out of her line of fire. "But I am. I still go looking for kids. That's what we swore we'd do. We took an oath."

Her head hung so that her chin nearly touched her chest. "I know."

“And you walked away from it like it was nothing!”

“I have other oaths—” She gulped back a sob and whatever else she was going to say, then shook her head.

Other oaths? To the coven? It didn't really matter, not now. She'd made her choice.

Stomping my way past her, I went into her room and grabbed a box, the blood from my battered up hands smeared across the cardboard. The scent of roses caught me unawares—Milly's perfume.

A slight catch in my throat made me pause. I would not let her see me cry, not over this. Two strikes, she was out. The first time she had left me and Giselle it was for the Coven, and I saved her ass and brought her back. This time there would be no coming back; I could feel the difference.

Making my way back into the hallway, I was surprised to see her standing where I'd left her. “Come on, I'm not packing this all the way into Bismarck,” I said.

She half-stumbled her way out to her car, a brand new white BMW. Someone was getting some serious sugar daddy time.

I all but threw the boxes into the back seat, wanting to be as far from her as possible. She was not my Milly, not the friend I'd grown up with. No, the stunning brunette in front of me was a stranger. A dangerous, deceptive stranger.

Turning my back on her, I headed back toward the rambling farmhouse, the sinking sun giving the perfect backdrop for a picture. Too bad cameras wouldn't work for me; this was a scene I needed to remember.

“Aren't you even going to say goodbye? And what about Giselle, I want to see her sometimes.” Milly called after me, the echo of the lost girl she once was heavy in her voice.

My feet stilled and I rolled my shoulders. I'd said goodbye to her before, hoping she'd come back. She had, but she'd changed and not for the better.

“I'm not going to say goodbye.” I lifted my eyes to hers, saw my own pain mirrored on her face. “And Giselle is none of your concern. I'll take care of her, no different than before.”

Her body stiffened as if I'd struck her and the pain turned to anger, her lips parting as if to speak. I tensed, muscles prepped for a fight. If she wanted to get ugly, she knew my secrets, knew what would hurt me the worst both in the physical and metaphysical sense.

The air stilled, the ever-blowing wind of North Dakota stopping, as if it too held its breath. We stared at each other, eyes locked, the tension building until something had to happen. I sure as hell wasn't backing down, though. Her green eyes sharpened and I thought she would try and spell me. Shaking her head ever so slightly, she broke eye contact first. I let out a slow breath. The last thing I wanted to do was fight with her, because if it came down to it and she forced my hand, I would have to hurt her. Maybe even kill her. And despite everything, I still cared about her.

Milly ducked down into the BMW, the door slamming behind her. Within seconds she was peeling off

of the driveway spitting gravel and dirt at me. The pebbles sprayed the bare skin on my arms, but I barely felt it. ~~This was not like before, when she'd broken her ties with us for the Coven.~~ I could feel in my gut; Milly and I were done. The line had finally been drawn in the sand and we were on opposite sides.

Why then did I suspect this wouldn't be the last time she caused me grief?

Back inside the house, I let Alex out of my room and then cleaned up my hands, the raw skin biting at me with the antiseptic cleaner. Muttering under my breath, I wrapped my hands as best I could. It wouldn't take me long to heal. I wasn't near as fast as Alex, but still faster than the average human.

I cursed my way out to the main living area, my words stilling on my tongue as I took in the scene. Giselle sat in the corner of the window seat, staring out into the evening sky. Alex was curled up beside her, pointing at things.

Though they were at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of supernatural abilities, the werewolf and my mentor had bonded over the last month. Maybe it was because in a weird way, they were the same, learning how to live in a body with a mind that was no longer their own. He was forever a child trapped inside his mismatched body, and she was only at times lucid.

While they sat and stared out the window, I sat on the floor, crossed my legs and went to work on a routine, one that drained the shit out of me to practice. But it was necessary, especially with Alex.

With some effort, I'd learned over the last year to hold my Immunity back, just on my hands. Just enough to keep my Immunity from affecting Alex's collar and thus exposing him to the world as a werewolf. I did it without thinking for the most part, and the practicing was something I did now more when I was bored and had nothing better to do.

I played with it, peeling my Immunity up and over my wrists, sweating, but doing it. Because Giselle has said it was good for me to stretch myself and my talents, even if that meant trying things that seemed silly at times.

After an hour, I finally let my Immunity go back, flow over my hands. A slight tingle, and it was done.

Standing, I stretched, back popping one vertebrae after the other. "Giselle, are you hungry?"

Alex flipped himself over backwards, scrabbling across the hardwood floor, the silver tips of his fur catching the light. He slid to a stop at my feet and rolled huge amber eyes up to mine.

"Hungry, yes!"

Giselle chuckled to herself. "Socks, have you got your blue socks yet? You'll need them soon."

Helping her to her feet, I guided her into the kitchen. "No blue socks yet. But when I find them, I'll let you know."

"That's good. Blue socks. You need them for sure."

I settled her into a chair and heated up some leftovers. Nothing fancy, but at least it was home cooked. Alex dug in, alternating between using his claws and the fork, finally giving up and just using his mouth.

My mentor didn't eat; just sat there and stared. What was I going to do with her when I got my next salvage? ~~There was no way I could take her with me when hunting for a kid. Even now, I had to lock her bedroom door at night; she'd wandered off three times in the last month. With the weather sitting well below freezing, it was a bad time to develop a thing for midnight walks in her nightshirt.~~

"Giselle, you need to eat." I held up fork with some food on it and pressed it against her mouth. She turned her head away like a naughty child. But I couldn't be angry; it wasn't her fault. The fault lay with the abilities she had to see what no one else could. The more she'd used her abilities, the more she was drained of her sanity; apparently it didn't happen to all of the supernaturals like her. But a lot of them, for sure, had the same trade off. Not a very good exchange rate. Being a Tracker and an Immune, I didn't have drawbacks like that. Thank the gods.

I tried again to get her to eat, holding the fork up. She pushed it away. "Someone comes."

The sharp rap of knuckles on the front door sent a shiver of adrenaline through me. There were very few people I could call friends, and fewer still who'd show up unannounced.

My head and heart tripped over one another. O'Shea, it had to be O'Shea. Running full tilt to the door, I flung it open, breath catching in my throat.

Not O'Shea. But it was an FBI agent.

Agent Valley stood on my front porch looking up at me. Brown eyes flecked with green were definitely his best feature. He sported an overbite and an offset nose that looked as though it had been broken more than once. Jowly and a good four inches shorter than my 5'6, he wouldn't seem the type to be in charge. Yet, here he was, department head for the Arcane Arts division of the FBI. His perfectly pressed black suit and the file folder under his arm made him look like a travelling salesman.

Still, he was O'Shea's boss and my wannabe boss.

I didn't say anything, just stared down at him.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "May I come in? I have some information you might be interested in."

"About what?" I held the door, ready to slam it. Agent Valley wasn't a bad guy, just not exactly as good as I'd have liked. He'd tried to guilt me into coming to work for his division, and that was a real piss-off in my books.

"Some cases we are looking at. And I would like to speak to you about O'Shea."

Ah, here we go. He didn't know where O'Shea was, either. I could still Track him, but had only done so once. That one time was enough for me. He'd been close—in fact, I suspected he had something to do with the local werewolf pack's sudden loss of interest in Alex—but O'Shea was not a happy boy, his mental state fluxuating from rage to sorrow to blood lust, and then back through them all again. If I were to make a guess, I'd say that O'Shea could shift back and forth; his emotions were far too complex for him to have ended up like Alex. At least that was good. But I respected his choice. O'Shea wanted to figure this new part of his life out on his own. I wouldn't begrudge him that, though

I missed him fiercely.

I waited another ten seconds before slowly opening the door and allowing the agent to step in. I didn't share my personal space well at the best of times—and this night certainly wasn't that.

Agent Valley made his way further into the room, selecting the same chair he'd sat in last time he'd shown up unannounced, his feet not quite touching the floor.

“Are you going to sit down, so we can speak?” He opened the folder and drew out sheets of paper clipped together.

I folded my arms over my chest, tucking my bandaged hands away from sight. “No, I'll stand.”

“So be it. But I will warn you, this is going to be a long conversation.”

Snorting, one corner of my lips lifted. “I doubt that very much.”

He seemed unfazed by my rudeness. One by one he laid out the paper-clipped piles on the table in front of him. “These children were all stolen from hospitals, all within the last two years.”

I couldn't stop my ears from perking up. Why hadn't I heard about this? Something like this would have been all over the news. Bending, I scooped up the papers closest to me, thumbing through them. Six months old, in the hospital for not even twenty-four hours before going missing. Youngest of three. Sophia. That was almost a full two years ago; she must have been one of the first.

“There seems to be a strong correlation between the illnesses that the children came in to have treated and whether or not they get kidnapped,” Agent Valley said, leaning back in his chair. I crouched to the ground and flipped through another pile. Age, four years. Oldest of two. Benjamin. There was nothing about why he was in the hospital.

Age, two and a half. Only child. Jasmina.

Age, three weeks. One of two twins. Elana.

Age, five years. Middle of seven. Kent.

The list went on; there were over twenty children missing.

“Aren't you going to ask me what the correlation is?”

I spread the papers out, unable to stop myself from caring, even knowing that Agent Valley was manipulating me. “I suppose you'll tell me eventually. If not, it doesn't really matter. I can find them.”

“So sure of yourself,” he said softly.

I lifted my eyes to his. “It's one of the few things I'm sure of in my life.”

Alex came trotting in from the kitchen, Giselle clinging to his collar. Neither one said anything to

Agent Valley. They just went back to sitting on the window seat, staring out into the night sky.

The agent watched them, shaking his head ever so slightly. “I don’t know how you can live with a werewolf.”

My eyes narrowed, anger surging. What would he think if he knew O’Shea was a werewolf now? “Easier than living with some asshole with an overbite.”

His face flushed from his head down to his collar, his lips tight, and a vein bobbing in the side of his face. For a brief second, I wondered if all FBI agents were required to have a vein in their face or neck that reacted when pissed off; like a mood thermometer.

Fuck, I really knew how to make people hate me. Was it just me or were all Trackers like that?

Maybe I should mellow out a little. At least, I could try. “What’s the connection between all these kids?” I brushed my finger along the edge of their names, wishing I had a picture of one of them so I could Track them right now.

“They’re terminal.”

My brain froze, and I slowly lifted my head. Agent Valley was sombre, his eyes full of grief.

“You mean like as in cancer?”

“Amongst other things.”

I quickly scanned the papers and picked up the first one, Sophia. I held it out to him. “How long did she have?”

The agent took the paper and glanced at the name, not even consulting with another sheet before he answered. “Three months. Even if whoever took her had all the medical supplies they needed, she’d be dead by now.”

Rocking on my heels, I looked at the papers with a new angle. “So you’re telling me that not one of these kids is living? That they’re all dead?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

I stood up and backed away from the agent and his piles of papers. There were times I went after a child and they were already dead, or they were killed before I could find them. Just one downside of being a Tracker. But going after these kids, this many dead? Shit, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that, to put myself through seeing that many parents grieving, to feel the depth of sorrow that only a child’s death brought on. Besides, it wasn’t like they didn’t know the fate of their children. They knew they were dead, long past. Harsh, but true. A shiver ran through me and I could almost see the group of parents clinging to one another, crying, begging for mercy on their babies. No, this was not something I wanted to do.

“I think I’ll pass. You know their fate. You don’t need me.”

Agent Valley leaned down and scooped the papers up one by one, slipping them back into his file folder. "I thought you might say that."

Moving back, I crossed my arms again, feeling like a fucking heel. But, there were times that even I wasn't strong enough. Weakness, hadn't I *just* bitched at myself over being weak? But this was different. The body I could conquer, the mind . . . all I could see in my mind were the parents, their sorrow, and then perhaps their condemnation. In my mind, they looked like my own parents as I was accused of murdering Berget, my little sister. They'd believed the worst of me and that had etched itself in my soul.

Agent Valley stood, but paused mid-step. "Have you heard anything from O'Shea?"

"No, he hasn't contacted me." That, at least, was the truth.

"But you could Track him, couldn't you?"

"I don't Track adults." Well, that was fudging it a little, but I owed Valley nothing.

He nodded. "I don't suppose I can ask you another question?"

Agent Valley was about to drop something on me. What, I could only guess; most likely something he thought would push me into a corner. Right then, I should have just said no, escorted him out and locked the door. But no, I had to nod and say, "Yeah, sure."

"We brought in a young hacker last week. He was the source of a major leak in our department, and was caught selling information on our confidential Arcane Arts division. Of course, we stopped him before it was able to get out to the world via the black market."

My muscles tightened and my brain was screaming at Kyle. The little prick, after I paid him so fucking well? Now at least I knew where the print out I'd had disappeared to, the little bastard! I'd never even had a chance to go over the papers on the AA division before they'd gone missing while I was on a salvage. Kyle must have snuck out to my place, knowing that I'd be indisposed. But why wouldn't he have just hacked in and re-printed the information?

The next time I saw him I would have to ask; then, I would kick his ass into next year for crossing me.

"Hmm. I don't see what this has to do with me." I stilled my nerves, forced myself to stand relaxed and at ease. Jail was not somewhere I wanted to end up; I'd been on the wrong end of the law once in my life. Once was enough, thank you very much.

"Well, I just thought you'd like to know."

"That's not a question," I said, my voice even and calm.

"Isn't it?"

We were in a stare off, him waiting for me to break. It would be a freaking happy day in hell when I didn't win a staring competition. I shrugged. "You are one strange little man."

He glanced away. Point for Rylee. I had to give him credit. He was pretty good at trying to get what I wanted without full on asking for it. But it wouldn't work with me.

“Can you at least tell me if he's alive?”

Back to O'Shea again.

“Now that's a question.” I leaned one hip against the wall. “Yes. He's alive.”

Agent Valley nodded. “Is he coming back?”

That was an even better question, one I'd like the answer to as well.

I took in a long slow breath, let it out as I formed words I hated to say. “I don't know.”

The agent nodded and then headed for the front door; he made it all the way there before turning around, a smile on his lips. He was way too happy after I'd just turned him down. I felt the first niggling of fear along the back of my neck; he'd been holding back.

“It's a shame you aren't interested in the case.”

I nodded and gave him a tight-lipped smile, but said nothing else.

Tapping his folder against his leg, his eyes seemed to twinkle, his hand on the open door.

Shit, here it comes.

“The team's main source of help is in the hospital, too sick to move anymore.”

My eyebrows lifted, confusion flitting through me. “And this would be important to me why exactly?”

Agent Valley smiled and I felt the hook set in mouth as he said, “Because he's a Tracker.”

I couldn't stop my jaw from dropping. Agent Valley said nothing, stepped out onto the porch, and shut the door firmly behind him.

There had never been another Tracker that I'd known about, no one to learn from, no one to tell me how not to do things, or even what other things I might be able to do. I couldn't let this pass by me, even if he was bluffing. Shit, shit, shit.

Grabbing at the door I flung it open to see the agent smiling up at me. "Shall we start again?"

Flustered and irritated that he'd played me like a freaking harp, I stepped back to let him come back inside. Once again seated in my living room, he held out his hands.

"I thought you might turn me down, this isn't the kind of case you typically go after. You like to find them alive, not long past their expiry date."

Snorting, I sat on the edge of the coffee table, the wood corner pressing into my thigh. "After finding your first half-rotten child corpse, you wouldn't be so eager to go after them, either."

He blanched.

That had been one of my earliest salvages, and it had left me with nightmares and flashbacks for weeks. Even now, I could still smell the putrid mix of decaying meat and baby powder to cover it up. No, that was not something I willingly went after. If a kid was missing, and I took on the salvage and they died before I could get to them, I did my best to bring them home. But taking on a salvage willingly, knowing that the kid was gone? Nope, not as fun as it sounds.

Agent Valley eyed me up and down. "You are not what I expected, from what O'Shea reported, I thought you'd be more of a hard ass."

"Yeah, he would say that," I muttered. "Listen, what about this Tracker, why can't he go after them?"

"Like I said, he's in the hospital. Dying. Lung cancer, I believe." He handed me a piece of paper with name on it I didn't recognize, stats, but again no picture.

Jack Feen. Age forty nine, single, red hair, blue eyes. Tracker. Seeing the Tracker's stats on paper made it more real to me for some reason.

"Where is he?"

"That's where things get tricky."

I lifted my eyes to the agent, expecting him to squirm under my glare. I didn't like this game he was playing with me. "What do you mean, tricky?"

"You see, it isn't just the FBI on this case."

Brilliant.

He cleared his throat, seeming to almost choke on the words. “Interpol has asked for our help. Their Tracker is down and they want to borrow ours. You.”

I shot up, my voice rising sharply. “What the hell? You’ve been telling your buddies that I’m on payroll? You think you can pawn off my services like I’m some sort of high-priced bird dog?”

Alex gave a soft woof. I’d almost forgotten he was there, he’d been so quiet. A look over at him and Giselle, seeing their eyes look to me for reassurance, calmed me down. No good would come of getting riled up; I didn’t have to do what Agent Valley asked of me. But I knew I’d never find the other Tracker if I didn’t help him.

Son of a bitch, he was a sneaky bastard.

“Where?”

Agent Valley continued to smile. “London. All the children were snatched from hospitals in London, and it’s where Jack Feen is dying. You won’t have much time. The doctors are saying he’s got weeks at best.”

London. How the hell was I supposed to get there in a giant piece of technology that could flick off a the drop of the hat simply because I was too close to it?

I smiled, seeing a roadblock he likely hadn’t considered. “And how would you like me to get there? Paddle boat? Swim? Click my heels together three times?”

He continued to grin, and I knew I’d finally met someone who might outmanoeuvre me. O’Shea had been persistent, had intimidated me and never backed down. But this man, this short, dumpy, ugly little man, had an answer for everything.

“We’ve outfitted a Boeing 747 with the proper displacement materials to keep your vibrations from setting off the equipment. You can fly out in three days, and be in London with plenty of time to visit Jack.”

“Vibrations?” What the fuck was he talking about?

“Our scientists have determined that it is specific vibrations that supernaturals give off that interfere with technology. I’m not going to explain it now. Suffice to say that we understand the cause and have a way to block the resulting problems.”

This was news to me. But it made sense. I swallowed hard, my mind racing with possibilities. He wanted me to go, needed me to. I’d lay money he’d already told Interpol that I was coming. Hmm. I could use this to my advantage. Let’s see how he liked the tables being turned.

“Then I want a few things besides the usual pay cut.”

He nodded as if expecting this. He hadn’t seen anything yet.

I held up one finger. “I need a care nurse here twenty-four-seven while I’m away, for Giselle. Someone who is familiar with dementia *and* the supernatural.”

Pursing his lips, he pulled a phone from his breast pocket and scanned through it. “Yes, that can be managed. We have someone in our AA division that is familiar with both.”

“I want to pick my back-up.”

“That’s fine. I don’t have a problem with that.”

Smiling, I leaned back. “Eve is coming with us. I can make her small with a spelled anklet that Milly left for me.”

Agent Valley’s jaw clenched. “You want to bring a Harpy with you.”

“She’ll be about the size of a hawk. Fits right into the plane with no problem.” I continued to smile—this was kinda fun. Almost as much fun as I had playing with O’Shea when he’d been trying to bring me down. Almost.

The agent gave a sharp nod. “She can be controlled, I assume?”

“Of course. She’s got all her mental faculties. She’s young, but bright.” I smiled. I was going to make him pay for twisting me around. “And Alex comes with me, too.”

Alex jumped up at the sound of his name. “Coming?”

“Yup, we’re going to London,” I said as Agent Valley sputtered.

“That’s too much; you can’t bring a werewolf to London. Impossible. Bad enough that you want to bring a Harpy!”

Grinning down at the werewolf, who rolled on his back at my feet, I rubbed his belly with one foot. “Alex is a part of my search team. He helps keep me safe, amongst other things.”

Alex wiggled on his back, balancing on his spine with feet straight up in the air. “Alex going to London, Alex going to London,” he chanted, wrapping it all up with a howl of “Keeping Rylee saaaaaafe.”

Agent Valley stood, his face red. “You can’t bring a werewolf to London!”

I laced my fingers in my lap and said quietly, “Then I’m not going.”

His jaw went tight and I knew I had him. Still, he didn’t answer right away. We had a second stare off and again, I won, his eyes flicking away from mine to look out the window.

“I won’t promise you anything. There are other factors I have no control over,” Valley said.

“Not my problem. Alex and Eve come with me or I’m not going.”

“I heard you the first time. I will do my best.” Agent Valley narrowed his eyes. “You can keep him on a leash, and hide him with that collar of yours, correct?”

Fuck, how much did he know about me and Alex? “Of course. I’m not going to go running around London announcing I have a werewolf.” What did he think I was, an idiot?

“One more thing,” I said.

The agent was standing back up, and I wanted to be sure we understood each other before I dove into this.

“What is it, Ms. Adamson?”

Ah, getting formal now, that was a good sign. Meant he was finally taking me seriously.

“This doesn’t mean I’m working for you. Nor does it mean I’m going to do things your way. Consider this a one-time contract to find those kids.”

His eyes narrowed, anger flitting across his face before he smoothed it away. “Anything else?”

“I’ll be sending you an invoice through my manager.” Okay, Charlie wasn’t my manager per se, but close enough.

Shaking, Agent Valley gave a sharp nod, turned and headed once more for the front door.

“We’ll send a car round for you in three days; your flight leaves at noon on the seventeenth.”

“I can’t leave until I know for sure someone is here with Giselle.”

“I will have someone here before your flight.”

I felt like I’d scored a major victory as the door clicked shut behind the FBI agent. Slumping against the opposite wall, I stared at the door. I was leaving for London in three days, with Alex and Eve. Better than that, I was going to meet a Tracker.

The rush of excitement that zinged through me left me shaking with excess energy. Milly was going to freak when I . . . No, Milly wouldn’t know about this. The excitement drained and I frowned down at my shoes. Ah, fuck it. I was going to celebrate anyway.

Jogging into the kitchen, I dialed Charlie’s number on my old rotary phone, the tick of the dial clicking softly as it spun around with each number.

He answered with a “Hello, me lassie! No new salvages for you. Good and bad, eh?”

“Right now it’s a good thing. Charlie, come on over, I need someone to clink glasses with.”

He let out a shout. “Gods be praised, yous going to start drinking!”

Laughing, I cradled the phone against my shoulder. “Don’t get excited, I’ll be drinking orange juice.”

“Bah, you don’t know what you be missing, lassie. But I’ll be there in a jiff.”

I hung up and two minutes later there was a knock on the door. That was one of the things about Brownies. They could use doorways and windows as jumping points. Pretty handy, if you asked me.

Dressed in blue jeans and a button down shirt, he sported a black bowler that truly did not match the long fur coat he wore. Open, of course, like he’d thrown it on and scrambled to get here. Then again, could have been because he was trying to hide the fact he was missing a leg. It had happened a long time before I’d ever met him and he wouldn’t talk about it. Not even when he got drunk on ogre beer.

Charlie was about three feet tall, and I scooped him up easily into a hug.

“What the hells has happened to yous, lassie?” He grunted as I put him down. His eyes searched my face, as if he thought to see something stamped on my forehead.

“I’m excited.” I wasn’t sure I could describe it to him. My whole life I’d been alone, the only Tracker Giselle had ever known, and no one I’d met had ever met another. Maybe Doran had, from his cryptic words, but I wasn’t so sure I’d trust the daywalker Shaman to tell me the truth. Every other supernatural was a part of a group, even vampires, the few there were, had each other. But Trackers—I’d never known another one. For years I’d thought that was always how it was going to be.

In one long rambling, high-speed sentence, I spilled. “There’s another Tracker in London and I’m going to meet him in three days and I can’t even believe that this is happening and I have no one else to tell ‘cause I kicked Milly out and the FBI is going to have someone take care of Giselle while I’m gone and they’re even going to pay us!”

Charlie looked at me, his eyebrows lowered, and he lifted his hands as if to slow me down. “Easy, lass. Are yous sure yous not been fed anything strange? Ogre beer, perhaps?”

I scrubbed my face with my hands. “No, sorry, I just . . . I just thought I was alone.”

The brownie smiled up at me. “Yous never been alone, Rylee. Yous got lots who love you. Me for one. The big blue ox down south, and Ogre’s don’t give their loyalty easy like. Alex here, of course, he’ll never leave yous.”

We headed into the kitchen. “I know that. I don’t mean, it’s just . . . Charlie, if there were no other brownies, how would you know all the things you could or couldn’t do?”

He opened his mouth as if to argue, but paused. “Damn me, I guess I wouldn’t. Well, no, some things I’d figure out.”

I poured him a shot of Milly’s best whiskey and handed the glass to him, then poured a glass of orange juice for myself.

“Exactly. Once I meet this other Tracker, I’ll finally have someone to show me all the things I can do. I’ve no doubt there’s more to my abilities than what I’ve figured out on my own. Maybe there’s nothing else, but at least I’ll know.”

Charlie climbed onto the kitchen chair so we were eye level, his glimmering with tears. He’d lost

everything, his wife and children. So the idea that we could help others find their kids, well, it was almost as much a drive for him as it was for me.

“And then you can help even more of the wee ones with what you learn. Ah, I see now why you be so excited.”

Nodding, I clinked my glass to his. “Exactly.”

“Eve, I wouldn’t ask you to do this if it wasn’t important,” I said as I stared up at the juvenile Harpy pacing around my backyard. She was well over a thousand pounds, with beak, wings, and talons of a bird, but her upper body was human looking, complete with all the trappings of being female. Lower body was all bird, her massive wings set just behind the blending of skin and feathers.

She’d flown back to North Dakota as soon as I’d called down to her, Dox passing on the message for me. Most surprising was that she’d brought presents for each of us; a fossilized bone for Alex that he’d been chewing since she’d given it to him, an obsidian blade for me, and a necklace for Giselle. That last was the most disturbing because it had not come from Eve.

It had come from Doran.

I held it for a long time before handing it over to Giselle, unsure of what it would do, if anything. She’d just let it fall from her fingers, not even watching when it hit the ground. So that was that.

Alex, his new bone, and Giselle were curled up in several blankets on the back porch, watching us. Alex gave Eve a double thumbs up while Giselle continued to mutter about blue socks.

“Rylee, it isn’t that I don’t want to help you,” Eve said, as she continued to stride about, her clawed feet turning the snow and ice into a slurry of pale brown mud. “But the idea of being spelled is” She turned large golden eyes to me. She’d been held captive by a Coven of black witches when I’d first met her. Things hadn’t gone so well for the witches, but they hadn’t gone so well for Eve and her sisters, either. Only Eve was left, courtesy of me and my blades.

“I understand,” I said, laying the clasp in front of her. “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think it was necessary. You know Europe and the supernaturals there better than I do. ”

That was the truth. She’d lived there in her early years before coming to America with her sisters. Or more accurately, until they took off from Europe because their Clutch evicted them.

Eve fluttered her wings. She’d been training with Eagle, a tribal Guardian in New Mexico, for over a month. Already I could see the changes in her, maturity that hadn’t been there before, not just jumping into things, overall a better control of her emotions—something essential to a Harpy, at least as far as I was concerned. Whatever training she was getting, it was doing her a world of good. Perhaps I should have let her stay with Eagle, should have done this salvage on my own.

No, I couldn’t trust the FBI to actually help me, and the gods only knew what I’d be facing over there. Without Milly or O’Shea at my side, I knew enough to know that I couldn’t do this run alone. Call it a gut feeling, intuition, or whatever the hell you want, everything about this run screamed at me to take all the ammunition I could. Not a good sign, but one I would deal with.

With a heavy sigh, Eve bobbed her head once. “Yes, I will wear the anklet. Perhaps we could try it now, before the moment comes that I must wear it? Then I will be ready for whatever changes it puts on me.”

I smiled up at her. “You have grown up a lot, Eve.”

She blushed and clacked her beak. “Eagle is a good mentor, a good flyer. I like him.” The flush deepened and warning bells went off in my head. Shit, if she had a crush on the tribal Guardian, that would not end well. He would only be around long enough to make sure his Shaman gained enough strength to take care of herself. What was I going to do with a broken-hearted Harpy? I shook off those thoughts. No point in going there just yet. Besides, she was young; she would grow out of a silly crush on Eagle. I hoped.

“As long as I’m holding the anklet, the spell won’t kick in,” I explained to Eve. I bent down to put the diamond and ruby studded clasp around her leg, just above her claws.

“Since it’s not just an illusion, I have no idea if it will hurt or not. It shouldn’t, though,” I said, fingers slipping off the clasp. I stood up, and took a step back. “You feel anything?”

Eve shook her head. “It’s cold against my skin, but I feel—wait, it’s starting to heat up.”

That was a good sign.

It didn’t last.

Eve screamed. Wings outstretched, she let out a screech and fell to the ground, her body convulsing as her eyes nearly bugged out of her head, her voice sounding as if she were being strangled.

“Rylee!”

Alex barked, high-pitched, full of fear, and even Giselle let out a moan that added to the energy swirling around us.

Fuck, what was going on? I ran to Eve’s side and a sharp talon whipped over my head. I dropped to the ground, rolling across the crunchy snow to get close to her.

“Hold still!”

“I can’t!” She screeched, wings thumping the ground hard enough that I anticipated the crunch of bones, or at the very least the sickening snap of her pinion feathers.

Her talons swept by me again, brushed along my back and sliced open my jacket. Razor sharp was a freaking understatement. I lunged forward, now well within the danger zone of her claws, and wrapped myself around her leg. Riding her leg, I reached down and grasped the anklet, stopping the flow of magic with a simple touch of my hand.

Her wings stilled and she let out a low moan, her body going limp in the snow. We both lay there, still as could be; I was unwilling to move and chance losing contact with the anklet. I suspected she was hurt, but I wasn’t ready to ask that just yet.

Panting, she shifted her weight and stared down at me. “I have never felt so much pain; it was as if a thousand flaming hot knives were burrowing under my skin to flay me alive.”

There was no question as to what was going to happen now.

“I’m taking this off,” I said, my hands moving to unclasp the anklet.

“No, perhaps it is just the normal discomfort of shifting into a smaller form. Now that I’m ready for it, I can take it. The pain just caught me off guard,” she said, blinking back tears. Shit, this was too much to ask.

“No, I’m taking it off. None of Milly’s spells cause pain, not unless—”

Giselle’s voice curled around me. “Unless she wanted to cause pain. Or death. Or a theft of powers.”

A quick snap and I’d unlatched the anklet. Giselle was right. I took a close look at the anklet. There was something different about it. I counted the diamonds and the rubies. The number was the same, but they were in a different pattern, so subtle I didn’t notice it. Milly must have switched out the anklet she had originally given me at some point for this one, maybe while I’d been in New Mexico. She did this on purpose. A part of my brain was stunned, absolutely fucking gobsmacked at the length Milly was going to in order to get her way. When had she resorted to death spells as the answer to her so-called problems? More importantly, why? It didn’t make sense, at least not with the girl I knew, the girl I’d thought of as my sister. Another part of my brain wasn’t so forgiving. The Tracker in me saw only a threat to my charges, and I was leaning heavily to agreeing with that portion.

I was going to kill her.

And I didn’t mean in I’m-going-to-beat-your-ass-until-you’re-black-and-blue kind of way. More like I’m-going-to-run-you-through-with-my-sword-you-fucking-piece-of-white-trash-slut.

“Eve, are you okay?” I asked softly, shame nipping at my heels and smothering my anger for a brief moment. She’d trusted me and I’d let her down. But I would make it right.

“I’m okay, Rylee. You couldn’t have known.”

With a tight grip on the anklet, I shook my head. “I didn’t know, but now I do.”

I strode around the side of the house, the snow slippery under my feet. With a sharp jerk I yanked the door to my weapons stash open and stepped down into the converted cool storage-turned armory.

Could I really do this? Could I really hunt down my best friend? Yes, I decided. She hadn’t left me any choice.

There was only one thing I needed. No, make that two. I slipped on my back sheath, which would hold my two swords under my jacket, and settled the weapons. There wasn’t much time, less than twenty-four hours before my flight left for London. But it was enough to find Milly and end this.

She wanted those closest to me dead for some reason, and the only way to protect them was to kill her. Maybe she thought I couldn’t do it. My heart clenched and I fought a sudden wave of grief, tears working their way to the edge of my eyes.

I would not cry, damn it!

Dashing a hand across my face, I sucked in a sharp breath, smelling the still lingering scent of musty old vegetables mixed with leather soap and dust. ~~*Pull yourself together. She'll kill you if you go in weak.*~~

What had happened to her? Was she possessed? But even if that was the case, I had to end this. Possession, unlike the movies show you, is not reversible. Once you have a demon truly possess you, there's no going back.

Letting my breath out, I silenced the side of me that wanted to believe Milly could be reasoned with, the child in me that wanted her best friend to always be her best friend. That was not my life. I had to protect those who looked to me for safety.

Grabbing a couple of bottles of salt water, I headed back up the stairs, kicked the sloped door shut behind me, and strode to my Jeep.

Stashing the salt water behind my seat the sound of the passenger door opening brought my head up. I looked up expecting Alex, surprised to see Giselle opening the passenger door.

"What are you doing?" I made a move as if to stop her.

"Milly is as much my responsibility as yours."

Gods, how I wished that Giselle wouldn't have become lucid right then. If there was any moment when I prayed for her mind to lose its connection with the real world, that was it. The moment that one of her 'daughters' would kill the other.

"Giselle, you can't come with me. Your powers have drained you, and I can't keep us both safe."

She smiled over at me, a wry twist to her lips. "For once, you will listen to me, stubborn Tracker."

My eyebrows went up. I always listened to her. Really.

Giselle slid into the passenger seat, her body moving with a stiffness that made her look older than she truly was.

"There are a few last lessons I would give you. And now your friend Doran has given me the chance to hold the madness at bay long enough to do so." She held up the rainbow opal now hanging around her neck.

Only a month had gone by since I'd worn a similar opal, one of the fire variety, to keep some nasty demon venom from freezing my ass off. It's a long story, but the crux of it is this: the longer I wore the fire opal, the more powerful the kickback if it came off.

I licked my lips. "Giselle, what happens when you take the opal off?"

With one swift move, she buckled herself into my Jeep, her eyes staring straight ahead.

"You know what will happen. It is time. I am more a burden than I am a help."

“I can’t let you do this,” I said, my heart thumping painfully, as if it wanted to beat its way out of my chest. ~~She couldn’t mean to do this, not now.~~

Giselle turned to face me, her eyes softening. “You have no say. I am your mentor still, and you will listen to me this one last time. It is my wish, and you *will* honor it.” She clapped her hands together, ending that line of conversation as she had so many times when I was still a teenager.

Uncertainty flared within me, but I did as she said, climbed in my Jeep, and started the engine.

If this was how I was to honor her, then so be it.

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