



# Night Owl Books (A Story in the World of the Sea Wicche #1)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Orla is an owl shifter, so her bookstore Night Owl Books is only open from 8pm to 6am. She gets very few customers—other than a couple of insomniacs—and that's the way she likes it. Customers tend to interrupt her reading.

All of that changes one night when a terrified woman runs into the bookstore, followed by two bear shifters, a werewolf, and a psychic wicche. Poor Orla's night is about to be far less quiet.

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# Page 1

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ONE

## A Quiet Evening Disturbed

The Night Owl New and Used Bookstore sat atop a hill, a sentinel watching over the dark city slumbering below. Candle-like, a meager glow shone from the windows, serving as a night-light to neighbors.

The bookstore held strange hours. True to its name, it was for night owls, opening at eight in the evening and closing at six in the morning. Most Monterey residents wondered how it could possibly stay in business, getting only the occasional sleepless customer wandering in and looking for a book to fill those misplaced hours while the rest of the world slept.

When I, Orla, owner and proprietor of Night Owl Books, moved to Monterey nine years ago, I'd found this old beauty looking the worse for wear. In her heyday, she was a stately Victorian home, three stories high and situated at the edge of a forest. I fell in love and purchased her and all the property I could around her.

A contractor renovated it for me, turning the first and second floors into one large retail space with twenty-four-foot ceilings. The third floor is my home, my bedroom in the turret closest to the woods. A round room might seem awkward, but I thought it perfect.

The bedroom had an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view, with windows all around. When I stood in the middle, I saw the ocean in one direction and the forest in the other. More important than the view, though, was the privacy.

The house was at the top of a narrow lane. I owned the property on either side of the road and well into the woods surrounding it. The nearest neighbors were at the bottom of the hill, just far enough away to let me settle.

What confused those confused Monterey residents was that I didn't much care if anyone bought my books. They were mine and I was slowly making my way through them. If anything, I found customers anxiety-making. I didn't enjoy dealing with strangers, but if I didn't push myself, I'd become a complete recluse. It was what my mother had always said. Enough with the books! You're becoming a hermit. Go make a life for yourself.

So, in deference to my mother, who was no longer here to yell at me in person, I forced myself to engage with others by making my library a bookstore. A few customers wandering in each week was about my speed.

You might wonder how I was able to afford such a large parcel of land and all the home renovations when I was only thirty. It was a good question with an unusual answer. I had plenty of money. It was neither a concern nor interest of mine. For the most part, I measured the worth of my fortune by the number of books I could purchase.

My parents were killed—it was horrible and I don't discuss it—a few years before I settled here, leaving me all their money. They'd lived very long lives and had accumulated full coffers. I wandered for a time, unable to make sense of a life without them, a life all alone. I chose apartments near vast libraries, spending my evenings in the stacks, reading to my heart's content. I did my best to escape a reality I wasn't ready to face. I would have probably continued like that for hundreds of years if the libraries hadn't kept such disappointing hours.

Bookstores often stayed open later than libraries, but then I had to deal with irritatingly upbeat music and salespeople asking if I needed assistance. The worst

were the men who behaved as though my standing in a bookstore meant I wanted to be talked at about the book I was holding.

When I looked up from the page and skewered them with the golden eyes of a predator, they usually retreated quickly. The ones who didn't were the ones I needed to watch out for as I walked home.

I didn't fear them. Shifters are much faster than humans. Stronger too. Unless someone was hunting me—no, I said I didn't want to discuss that. Anyway, regardless of whether they found me attractive, one look from me usually turned their bowels to liquid. I preferred it that way. The solitude felt safer and therefore more comfortable.

What kind of shifter am I? It's right there in the name of my bookstore. I'm a Eurasian eagle-owl shifter. We're known for our bright orange eyes and being one of the largest raptors in the world. Unfortunately, there aren't many of us left, at least as far as I've found. In my thirty years on this planet, I'd yet to find another one like me—other than my parents, of course. Perhaps we've all but died out in the modern world.

My bookstore was a maze of tall, carved wood bookcases, overfilled with books. Did I sometimes double shelf? Absolutely. Did I keep an inventory? Yes, but I never needed to consult it. When customers asked about specific books, I always knew where they were and could take them there—unless I was planning to read that one next and didn't want to sell it. In that case, I lied and told them I didn't carry the book. It was my book after all.

So, as it happened on the evening this story begins, I was sitting in relative darkness on the stairs to the top floor. My favorite spot was right above the bookstore pendant lights that I kept shining at a nice, dim forty percent power and level with the windows above the bookcases. I enjoyed looking out over the sleepy town when I

paused to consider a particularly beautiful turn of phrase.

Which is why I saw the woman running up the hill. Her eyes were wild, scanning right and left, looking over her shoulder. I put down my book and blew out a breath. It looked like I was about to have company. The quiet part of my evening had come to an end.

The front door flew open with a bang as I hit the bottom steps.

“Hello! Is there anyone here?” Her voice was pitched high in panic. I could hear her racing heart, even over the sound of her gasping breaths.

“Yes,” I said, rounding a bookcase and coming into view. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, thank God.” She bolted forward and stood behind me, staring out the front windows.

“Is someone chasing you?” She had the look of prey, so it seemed a reasonable guess.

She grabbed my arm. “Yes. Can you call the police? Please!”

Her eyes were huge and darting to every shadowy corner of the shop.

“Sure, but I need my arm back,” I said.

She let go and held her clasped hands over her chest, her shoulders pulled in, seemingly trying to make herself smaller. All predators know, when confronted by an aggressor, you make yourself bigger, not smaller. Her brown eyes were huge and dilated; her long blonde hair was falling out of its ponytail.

I pulled my phone out of the back pocket of my jeans and dialed 911 as I went to the

front door and locked it. I didn't see anyone, but I thought it would help her feel more safe.

The scared blonde woman was dressed casually, a hoodie and jeans. She didn't have a bag with her, which seemed odd. My observation has been that most human women carried a bag of some sort when they left the house.

"Did you drop your phone?" I asked.

Her nod was fast and panicked. She stank of fear but under that was another scent that wasn't hers. The dispatcher picked up and I explained what I knew. The woman's breathing was beginning to even out, so I handed her my phone. "Why don't you tell her what happened?" I suggested.

She took it and lifted it to her ear. "Hello? ...Yes...McKenna Martin...I was walking home from a friend's house...Oh, just down the block and around the corner...I don't remember...I don't know. What time is it now?...It just happened. Maybe five minutes ago...I was walking down the street, and a truck came up behind me...I don't know. I'm not good with cars...I don't know what kind...I'm not sure. There's only one streetlight and it's down at the far end of the street. Dark, I guess...He pulled up beside me—his window was down—and he asked if I wanted a ride. I said no and he said it was no problem, the road was dark and dangerous; a pretty girl like me shouldn't be all alone. I just kept walking. He was driving slowly, keeping pace with me. I said no again, and his voice changed. He called me names and said he'd enjoy hurting me. Stuff like that. He turned the wheel really fast, and I had to jump off the road into like the ditch beside the pavement. He revved his engine and I just started running."

Reliving it was making her heart speed up again. "He drove off the road and followed me. There's a—whaddayacallit?" She looked at me, tilting her hand up.

“An incline?” I guessed.

“Yeah, an incline on that side of the road, going up a hill. The truck jumped forward and almost hit me. I ran into the trees and tripped, but I knew his truck wouldn’t be able to follow me if I was in the trees. I heard the truck door open and I ran for the light, for the bookstore at the top of the hill.”

Her eyes were still on the front window, though nothing could be seen, as it was lighter in here than out there.

“Is it locked?” she asked me.

I nodded. I hadn’t seen a truck following her up the road, so he must have given up the chase before she got close to the bookstore. Too bad. I wouldn’t have minded scaring him, as he had her.

I walked back to the window to look out. “A vehicle’s coming.”

At her gasp, I added, “It’s not a truck. It looks like an SUV’s headlights.”

“Oh, okay. The dispatcher says that’s the officer.”

I unlocked the door, stepped out onto the porch, and waited. As the SUV started up my hill, perhaps a hundred yards away, the driver and I locked eyes. Ah, he was like me. Not an owl shifter, but some flavor of shifter. His dark skin was illuminated by the light reflecting off his dashboard. I’d need a better look or, more importantly, a better sniff to know what kind of shifter he was.

Over the years, I’d found that a preponderance of shifters had careers in law enforcement. Their innate need to assert power and control was rarely conducive to office work. Snarling at a client in a marketing meeting was frowned upon. Tussling

with a rowdy drunk? Always a good time.

I stood at the top of my steps, barring his way, a clear sign that this was my territory. He parked at the base of the stairs and got out. Oh . I couldn't recall ever seeing someone quite so good looking: warm, liquid brown eyes, dark skin over chiseled features, a short beard on a strong jaw.

We stared at one another and then he dipped his head. "I'm Officer Nick Garra, ma'am. I'm told there's a woman here who's had a rough night."

I stepped back and tilted my head toward the door. "She's inside."

When he passed me, I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply. Bear.

While he talked to the woman, I stepped off the porch and circled my home, scanning the forest, looking for anything out of place. I knew my woods like the back of my hand and I didn't see anything amiss. When I came back around the front, the cop was standing where I had been on the porch, his nose up, scenting the air.

Keeping my voice low, I said, "I don't have your sense of smell, but I don't see anything."

Nodding, he came down and handed me my phone. "Let's take a look around."

We moved silently down the drive, each looking for any clues. When we got down to the cross street, I went left, and he followed. This was the direction she'd come from.

"There," I said, pointing down the road to a thicket of grass.

"What do you see?" he asked, coming up beside me.



“Her bag. The hardware on the strap is reflecting the moonlight. That’s probably where he tried to hit her.”

He jogged ahead, took some pictures on his phone, and then picked up her small handbag. Moving back to the narrow road, he studied the pavement and then took more photos.

I’d been trying to catch that strange scent I’d noticed on the woman, but I couldn’t find it. The officer would have a better shot at catching that than I would.

The truck driver must have taken off when the woman—McKenna—went into the trees. I left the cop to do his cop thing and headed into the woods. I found the route she’d taken and the place where she’d fallen. What I didn’t see was any evidence of the man. There was a flash behind me and I turned to find the cop taking pictures of the rock and disturbed dirt where she’d tripped.

“I don’t think he followed her into the trees,” he said. “I don’t smell any fresh trails besides hers. And yours.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t see or hear anything either.”

He pointed toward the light from my bookstore, barely seen through the dark trees. Senses on alert, we followed her path, both moving silently through the woods.

Once we emerged and were walking back up the lane, he asked, “Did you see the truck?”

I shook my head. “Just the woman running up my hill. No truck.”

He nodded. “Can I ask? I don’t recognize your scent.”

I saw a candy wrapper fluttering in the tall grass. When I reached for it, he tapped my shoulder.

“Let me get it,” he said, pulling a baggie out of his pocket.

“Trash sometimes blows onto my property,” I explained.

He put his hand in the baggie, picked up the wrapper without touching it, and took a sniff. Shaking his head, he crumpled it into his pocket. “Just trash. That hasn’t touched a hand in at least a day. I’ll throw it away.”

We kept walking and I finally answered his question. “You don’t recognize my scent because you’ve probably never met one of my kind. I don’t know how many of us are left.”

He stopped walking, so I did too. He was a tall Black man, even taller than me, maybe six-eight. He had the shoulders of a linebacker and crinkles around kind eyes. He waited.

“I’m a Eurasian eagle-owl.”

His head tilted as he took me in, all six feet of me. My bright gold eyes were what people noticed first. On my driver’s license, it read that I had brown eyes. They weren’t, though. They were gold with specks of orange. I had a woman in a grocery store once cross herself at the sight of me and then run out into the parking lot. I started having food delivered after that.

I have long brown hair—almost the exact shade as the feathers around my face in my other form—and horribly pale skin, which was probably due to my being nocturnal.

“I’ve never met an owl shifter,” he said.

I shrugged and started walking again. “Like I said.” I didn’t like leaving a stranger in my home all alone. “That McKenna better not be stealing any of my books.”

He gave a low chuckle. “They should be safe. I put her in my rig while you were circling your home. I’m sure she’ll appreciate you finding her bag. Now she has her glasses and the keys to get into her place.”

“You’re driving her?” I asked.

“I am.”

We stepped up beside his SUV and the woman jumped in her seat with a yip of fear. The cop held up her bag and her body relaxed in relief.

He turned back to me and tapped the metal nameplate on his chest that read Garra and then held out his hand and smiled. “If you notice anything, call the station and ask for me. Okay, ma’am?”

Uncomfortable with all that beauty aimed at me, I froze a moment before looking down at his proffered hand, shaking it and mumbling, “Okay. And it’s Orla.”

## Page 2

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### TWO

Detective Orla

By the time they drove away, it was close to two in the morning. I flipped the Closed sign, locked the door, and flicked off the lights. Should I have stayed open for four more hours? Yes, but as the owner, I could do what I wanted. On my way up the stairs, I picked up my book and headed to my bedroom.

I rarely bothered with lights, as I had perfect night vision. Dropping the book on my nightstand, I went to the window, opened it wide, disrobed, and then felt the fire sweep through me as I shifted to my other form.

Stretching out my wings, I fluffed my feathers to shake off the aftereffects. Hopping to the windowsill, I listened to the quiet rustling of the leaves, the skittering of small creatures in the woods.

Owls are silent flyers which makes us excellent hunters. The edge of an owl's wing has fringed feathers that break airflow and reduce noise. Our wings also have serrated edges that create microturbulences and, again, reduce noise. And the feathers themselves are downy and velvety, absorbing sound. All of which meant that rabbits and mice never heard me coming.

I leapt off the windowsill and glided around my territory. This was when I felt most myself. I was comfortable in my feathers in a way I never was in my skin. I scanned the brush near the woods, looking for anything out of the ordinary. I knew it wasn't my place to investigate a crime, but it almost felt like I was in one of the mysteries I

loved to read. And if a meal presented itself to me along the way, I wasn't going to say no.

Flapping, I rose higher and again circled over the road leading to my bookstore. I flew over the area I'd walked with the officer, searching for anything I might have missed.

In the shallow ravine beside the road, I caught a pink sparkle. Gliding close to the ground, I stretched out my talons and snatched up a phone. I flew home, left it on the windowsill and then went back over the area I'd just checked.

This wasn't a busy neighborhood. If the truck man was out harassing McKenna at one in the morning, it was possible he lived nearby. Soaring up and down the streets, I rode the wind, scanning driveways for trucks. It was possible he'd parked in his garage or only prowled this area but didn't live here. Whatever the case, I couldn't find his truck. I did, however, find the apartment building where McKenna lived.

I saw movement in a window a block away. I saw her face for a moment when she shut the blinds. It was dark in the apartment, but I was sure it was her. I flew down and circled the apartment house. It had an open courtyard in the middle. Swooping in, I found her apartment. It was the only one in the right area of the building with a light on. A soft glow leaked around the blinds, and I caught the scent of the officer. As I couldn't exactly tap on her door with my beak and tell her I'd found her phone, I decided to contact Garra in the morning and ask him to return it to her.

While on patrol, I also caught two mice, so I was feeling pretty good as I headed home. I was gliding over the grass crushed by the truck's tires again when I sensed something amiss.

Swooping low, I found a dark, shaggy boulder making its way through the trees, his nose to the ground. I gave one low hoot and he looked up, nodded in greeting, and

went back to work. Settling on a branch, I watched and waited.

When he shook out his fur and headed up the hill toward my bookstore, I knew he'd struck out as well. Frustrated, I flew ahead and spotted his rig parked to the side of my house. I pulled my wings in, bulletted through the window, and landed on the bed with a quiet thump before shifting back.

I dressed, grabbed the phone from the windowsill, and went downstairs. Hopefully I'd catch him before he shifted and left. Jogging through the darkened bookstore, I headed to the back door. The cop was reclined on my porch, staring into the woods. He wore basic gray sweatpants and a t-shirt, the uniform of shifters. He probably had a bag of similar clothes in the back of his SUV.

I had a chair and a swing but he sat on the floorboards, his back against the house. Pointing at himself, he asked, "Okay if I rest here a moment?"

I nodded and tossed him the phone. He snatched it out of the air.

"I found that under some brush, maybe ten feet from where her bag had been," I said.

"Good eye," he responded.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a guest. Had I ever? I didn't think the real estate agent counted. Or the insomniacs in the neighborhood who used my bookstore as a time filler. "Would you like a drink or something?" That's what I was supposed to do, right? I'd read about this in books. One was supposed to offer refreshments.

He glanced up at me again and smiled. "Thanks. Water would be good."

I didn't freeze when he smiled that time. I was employing a new strategy to appear less awkward and fazed by his beauty. I looked just to the left of his face so I

wouldn't be overwhelmed. Ducking back in the door, I went to the small downstairs kitchen, poured two glasses of water, and returned to the porch. After handing him one of the glasses, I sat on the porch swing, crossed my legs underneath me, and gulped down my own glass. Shifting was thirsty work.

The officer put aside his empty glass and picked up McKenna's phone again. He woke it up, tapped in the security number, and was in her photos.

"She gave you her password?" I was five feet away but had no problem seeing what was on the screen.

He nodded. "She was filming herself at the time, making a video clip of her walking down the dark road for her social media. Her glasses were in her bag because she said they reflected the light from her phone, making her look like she was wearing goggles. She'd planned to flip the camera and show the sky, but then the truck moved up beside her. She dropped her hand, embarrassed to be seen filming herself. We should at least get his voice. With any luck, maybe a partial view of his truck."

He tapped play and we listened.

It's a dark, cold night, but I'm going to share my view with you. We're often socked in with fog here, but on a clear night, the stars look so close! I live in an ocean-side town. We had a little rain and a lot of wind earlier today. Yes, we get rain in the summer. As you can see, the only streetlight is way back there. I have woods on one side of me and some dark, sleepy houses on the other, meaning the sky is bri ? —

Tires kick up pebbles beside her.

"Quiet engine," the officer murmurs

"No headlights," I respond, and he nods.

“Hey. You shouldn’t be walking out here all by yourself, pretty girl like you. It’s not safe.”

“Oh! You scared me. Um, no. I’m fine. I’m not going far. Thanks.”

“You climb on in. I’ll get you there faster.”

“No, really, I’m okay.”

Her camera bounces more and she increases her pace. The engine revs and the edge of the passenger door opening is visible. McKenna stops.

“There. I got the door for you. Let’s go. Come on now. Don’t be stupid. Get in. I’ll take you.”

“His voice changed,” I said.

The cop nodded. “Her breathing has sped up. She’s terrified.”

“I don’t want or need a ride. Okay? I’m fine. Please leave me alone.”

“I’m being a nice guy. Don’t be a bitch. Come on. I’m not saying it again. Get in now or you’re going to find yourself in a world of hurt.” He laughed. “Just thinking about it is putting me in a good mood.” The sound of tapping or patting. “I have a seat for you right here. Let’s go.”

The camera bounces as McKenna begins to run. The engine revs. The front of the truck is visible for a moment before the camera hits the ground.

“Sonofabitch.”



Another door opens and heavy treads on the pavement are heard. Movement is seen but the tall grass obscures the images. A growl is heard. A door slams. Footsteps. Another door closes and then tires squeal as the truck races away.

The officer let the recording go until I eventually hear my bookstore door bang as McKenna threw it open. He doesn't react, allowing the playback to continue.

"You can stop now," I said. "That was the sound of my front door being flung open."

He turned to me, brow furrowed, and then reversed the video, turning the volume all the way up and holding it to his ear. When the bang came again, he turned it off and shook his head. "Seriously good ears. So, did anything strike you?"

I thought about it for a good long time. He didn't seem bothered by my silence, which was strange. It unnerved most people. His legs were straight out in front of him, crossed at the ankles, as he leaned his head back against the side of the house and waited.

"I think he's one of us," I finally said.

He turned his head, his warm dark eyes studying me. "I caught a very faint scent of wolf on McKenna, so I agree. What makes you say so, though?"

I organized my thoughts and then said, "I don't think the switch flipping to anger was because she said no."

His interest in me changed. He stared at me as though I'd just become interesting, a silver streak in a river he now realized was salmon. Still, though, he waited.

"He was hunting for prey," I said. "It's a quiet night, a quiet neighborhood. She should have heard him driving up behind her. She didn't. He revved the engine to

make it loud and scare her. He wanted her fear.”

Officer Garra nodded.

“Maybe he’s a mechanic,” I suggested, “because that engine had to be adjusted to make it run so quiet. Stealth’s more important to him than the show of power.” I looked out over the forest. “When I hunt, I surprise my prey. They can’t hear me and don’t realize I’m there until they’re trapped in my talons and are being carried away.”

He made a soft chuff of agreement.

“He rolled up on her,” I continued, “with his quiet engine and his dark headlights because I think he has naturally excellent hearing and vision. You and I can see in the dark, but I’ve seen humans stumble out there at night without a flashlight. Some of the late night and early morning runners or dog walkers even use those little lights on an elastic strap around their heads.”

“She was recording herself,” he said. “Maybe he saw the light from her phone.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but he would have had to have seen it far enough away to keep his headlights off while he was approaching her. I don’t know,” I said, putting my foot down to push the swing. “I don’t have your sense of smell, but I caught a strange scent on her too, and it wasn’t a human scent.”

He grumbled his agreement.

I stared at his perfect profile. It wasn’t as intimidating if he wasn’t looking at me. Or smiling. “I bet it was an adrenaline rush when she jumped. She made a little squeak of shock. I think that excited him.”

“I caught that too,” the cop murmured.

“Her running away would only rev up that excitement, but it wasn’t a successful hunt,” I said.

The cop got smoothly to his feet and stepped to the edge of the porch, studying the dark woods. He slipped McKenna’s phone into the pocket of his sweatpants. “There was no reason for him not to pursue her. Chasing her into the trees had probably been his plan if he couldn’t get her in his truck. My guess is he caught your scent and realized these woods are your territory.”

“You caught my scent from the road?” I asked.

He nodded. “Granted, I’d met you, been in your home, but even standing down there on the edge of the forest, I sensed it. I think that sudden anger of his wasn’t about her saying no to a ride. He would have enjoyed her trying to fight him off. Overpowering her. The rage came because he caught your scent and knew his hunt had been spoiled.”

“I’m that scary?” I put a foot down and pushed back, rocking the swing back and forth again.

He glanced over and watched me a moment before shaking his head. “No, but you’re an unknown. If he’s local, he knows we have a pack of wolves and a large den of bears here. I’ve got more aunts, uncles, and cousins than I can name in Monterey County. You, though, are unique and because of that, he wouldn’t know what you are or how much of a threat you pose.”

“That must have been frustrating,” I said, staring out at the wood. It was easier to talk if I wasn’t looking at him. “To start a hunt, locate your prey, and then turn away because you sensed another predator nearby.”

“He ran,” Garra said, considering the point. “Does that make him a coward or

controlled and canny?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “You’re the cop. I’m just a bookseller.”

Grinning, he shook his head. “Right.” He hopped off the edge of the porch and then turned back to me, his head weaving back and forth until he caught my eye and grinned. “I haven’t figured you out yet, but I don’t think you’re just anything. You’re most definitely something.” He gave me a nod and then circled around the back of the house and out of sight.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

### THREE

#### Avengers Assemble

I fell asleep considering what we knew and what we'd seen in the video. Was I part of an investigative we ? No, I was not. Still, it gave me something different to ponder than my most recent book, which was unusual and rather thrilling.

This reality business was far different from the mysteries I read. In books, breadcrumbs of clues were dropped, so I always knew what was happening and often who done it, sometimes as soon as he appeared on the page. I could study the descriptions, the lines of dialogue, and know how the author wanted me to feel about a particular character. In real life, we only had a voice on a video. He could be anyone. I was feeling decidedly off balance, but I kind of liked it.

When I woke, I was still considering the previous evening and the ridiculously handsome cop as I made myself a meal. It might seem odd to refer to a midafternoon meal as breakfast, but that was what it was. Omelets were easy, so that was my go-to, usually throwing in whatever meat I had in the fridge.

I sat on my shady porch, listening to the leaves rustle in the breeze, eating, and reading, though my mind kept wandering back to that video we'd watched of the man in the truck. Frustrated, I shook my head and scanned the page, looking for the last line I remembered reading. I'd never had trouble concentrating on a book before. That had always been my number one skill in life. This new preoccupation was exciting, though it did get in the way of my reading. Eventually, the story drew me in and I stopped thinking about something that, honestly, had nothing to do with me.

Around six, I went for a long walk in the forest. With one ear bud in so I could listen to a true crime podcast, I searched for anything out of the ordinary. Neither the officer nor I had found anything in my woods, but it seemed worth a second try.

In the investigation I was listening to, the detectives had accessed Ring camera footage and saw the make and model of a car passing on a road at the time and near the location of a child abduction. I wondered if Garra could do the same. Maybe some of the houses across the street from my woods had caught an image of the truck.

When I realized the evening was getting away from me, I ran home, got cleaned up and dressed, and was unlocking the front door one minute after eight.

On the porch waited one of my regulars. He got off work late and sometimes liked to stop in for a new book on his way home. When he heard the lock snap open, he turned from the railing and gave a quick nod.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said as though we were in the middle of a conversation. “I’m going to read that Camus book you mentioned a few months ago.” He walked past me and headed deep into the fiction section.

“The Plague?” I guessed, trying to place the conversation. I was so bad at remembering the things I said. I often didn’t listen when I spoke, my mind usually engaged elsewhere.

“That’s the one,” he murmured.

I thought a moment. “It’s on the third shelf down, left side. Black book. White writing on the spine.”

“Got it,” he called.

He met me at the black walnut table I used as my checkout spot. I had a tablet with a point-of-sale system and a card reader. That was it. No cash. Most customers didn't need bags, but I had a few with a little owl logo I'd drawn by hand. Sometimes I needed to think about the book I'd just finished before starting a new one. During my thinking times, I'd get out some pens and start sketching a little cartoon owl on a short stack of bags.

When the Plague man left, I went to my favorite step on the stairs to read.

A flash of light pulled me out of the story. Looking out the window, I watched headlights coming up my hill. I glanced over at the wall clock above the front door. Midnight. I didn't recognize the truck, but I used my finger as a bookmark and went down the stairs.

Was this last night's truck man?

The guy who came in the door was tall, probably a half a foot taller than my six feet. He had dark wavy hair that curled at the collar, a dark beard, and kind brown eyes.

"Hi," he said, looking around. "Am I in the right place?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that. "Depends. Were you looking for a book?"

He grinned. "Night Owl Books, right? I'm Declan."

When he didn't say anything else, I shrugged and said, "Okay." I waved my hand around the store and added, "You can look around if you want." I went behind my desk and sat on a stool, opening my book back up to where I'd left off.

He stood watching me a moment and then went into the stacks, pulling out his phone and texting. He wasn't the truck guy from last night, though he was a wolf. This

man's voice was much deeper and growlier than the threatening man's.

Damn it. I was doing it again. My eyes were skating over words, but I wasn't paying attention. I was thinking about werewolves stalking human women.

More headlights bobbed up the hill. Another pickup truck and an SUV this time. It was Grand Central Station around here.

The truck parked first. The man who got out put up his hand in greeting to the man parking the SUV. The truck man jogged up the steps and came in. He was a little taller than me, copper-colored skin taut over wide cheekbones. He had long black hair and dark eyes. He was clearly Native American, but that wasn't what was bothering me. It was the feather and forest scent that put my back up. He wasn't an owl, but he was some kind of raptor shifter.

The werewolf stepped out from the bookcases. He and the raptor nodded and then turned away from each other.

Another SUV came up the hill. What the hell was going on? A man and a woman got out of the first SUV but waited for the second one to park. This one I knew. It was the officer from last night. All three climbed the stairs and came in together.

"What are you doing here?" the wolf asked the woman.

"This one brought me," she said, tipping her head at the tall and very broad-shouldered Black man standing behind her. She was crazy beautiful, even in paint-spattered overalls. She had long curly hair in an amazing mix of brown, red, black, and gold. Her bright green eyes surveyed the bookstore before landing on me. "Hi."

My gaze moved back and forth between all of them. "Hello." Wary of five supernaturals all appearing at the same time in my home, I took a step toward the



back door. The Native guy sneered at my retreat, which made me want to swipe him with my talons.

The woman moved between the Native guy and me. She held up a gloved hand to him and said, “Stop it.” She turned to me. “Sorry. Clearly no one told you we were coming. Please excuse us for invading your space.”

The officer from last night held out his hand to the woman. “I’m Nick Garra. You work with my cousin.” He gestured to the other Black man.

I saw the resemblance now.

The woman glanced down at his hand. “I mean no disrespect, but I’d prefer not. Even with the gloves, things can slip through.”

The officer looked between the woman and his cousin and said, “Of course. I forgot. Sorry about that.”

The officer turned to me. “Orla, I tried to call earlier, but you didn’t pick up.”

I checked my phone and shook my head. “Service is spotty here.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Let’s start with introductions and then I’ll explain.” He pointed to the Native man. “That’s Kaknu. He’s Ohlone and a falcon shifter.” He turned to the werewolf who had arrived first. “Declan?”

The wolf nodded. “I’m Declan, Alpha of the Big Sur pack.”

Officer Garra held out his hand. “You’re the one who defeated Logan.”

Declan nodded again and they shook.

“Good,” Garra said. “That guy was a dick.”

His cousin cleared his throat and the cop shrugged. “He was. He rarely showed up. When he did, he complained he was missing a hot date. And it was impossible to keep the guy off his phone.”

“You won’t have that trouble with the new Alpha,” the woman said. “I’m his hot date and I have to be here too.” She waved at me. “I’m Arwyn. I’m a wicche and the representative of the Corey Council. My mom had the gig, but once I joined the council, she pawned it off on me.” She glanced at the men. “No offense.”

The man still standing by the door stepped forward. “And I’m Arthur Osso, Nick’s cousin. I’m a detective with the Monterey Police Department and a black bear shifter.”

Nick turned back to me. “I’m black bear on my mom’s side—Arthur’s aunt—and grizzly on my dad’s.” He glanced around and said, “And this is Orla. She’s an Eurasian eagle-owl shifter and owner of Night Owl Books.”

He turned back to me and I made the mistake of looking straight at him. Shit. I looked down at the table and moved my book closer to my tablet.

“We can’t send human police officers after supernaturals,” he explained. “So, when we find—like last night—that we have a supernatural preying either on humans or our own kind, we’re the ones who track him and put him down.”

“Or her,” Arwyn said.

“Right,” Nick agreed. “You seemed to enjoy investigating last night, so we wanted to see if you’d like to work with us.”

“And you have a great meeting place here,” Arwyn said. “Let’s not pretend that didn’t play a role in this invitation.”

Arthur moved forward and stood beside his cousin. They shared a certain family resemblance, but where Arthur looked stern and forbidding, Nick was, well, charming and open.

“Nick and I discussed the incident last night,” Arthur said. “He said he was impressed with your insights. We always need help, and having a large meeting place like this that’s open all night is ideal. Neighbors aren’t too close and everyone is used to vehicles showing up at all hours of the night.”

They were offering me a place on the investigative team. I’d be a part of the we . I’d worked hard to build this quiet little life. I was content. I didn’t need new complications. In the back of my head, though, I heard my mom telling me to get out and live a little. “What would I need to do?”

“The kind of thing we did last night,” Nick replied. “We investigate crimes—or the threat of crimes. Predators with gifts like ours are too deadly to go unchecked.”

His cousin Arthur added, “Humans are at an unfair disadvantage. We need to stop the rabid among us, if for no other reason than to keep our existence a secret.”

“And to save innocent lives,” the woman—Arwyn—said on an eyeroll.

The big man shrugged. “Sure. That too.”

What was this weird excitement I was feeling? This was the opposite of the calm life I’d always wanted. Glancing down again, I realized I was clutching my book. I placed it out of reach on the table and met the gaze of each person fanned out around me.

“Okay.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

### FOUR

#### Hostess with the Mostest

“There are more of us than who’re here,” Arthur said. “We all have lives. If you allow us to meet here, that means you’ll be part of the team more often than not. Arwyn here,” he said, gesturing to the woman, “has a huge gallery, but I’m afraid one of us will knock over a glass octopus and end up owing her twenty thousand dollars.”

“I told you we could meet on the deck,” Arwyn said. “Fresh air and the sound of the surf would cover our voices.”

“And,” the werewolf—Declan—began, “when my workshop is done, we’ll have that too.” He caught my eye. “We wouldn’t always need to invade your territory.”

The falcon Kaknu stood to the side, silent. Having him in my home felt like my feathers being brushed the wrong way. His stance said it was the same for him.

“You might not know this,” I told the others, “but raptors don’t get on well with each other. It would probably be best to decide if your investigation needs an owl or a falcon, but not both.”

“Oh,” Arthur said. He and the others looked between Kaknu and me. “We didn’t know that. Is it a problem right now?”

Kaknu glanced at me and away. “It would be best if we didn’t occupy the same space. You need to talk with her. We’re in her territory, so I’ll go. If you need me, you know

where to find me.” Without seeming to hurry, he was out the door and starting up his truck before anyone had a chance to respond.

“Sorry about that,” Nick said, leaning on my table.

I gave a quick shake of my head and picked up my stool. “There’s a couch and chair in the back.” I led them to the rear of the store. I had a long brown leather couch and matching chair back here. I’d rationalized the purchase by telling myself I was giving customers a comfortable place to sit and peruse books. Really it was where I’d sometimes lie down to read.

Declan, Arwyn, and Nick took the couch. Arthur sat in the club chair. I sat on my stool. Nick opened his mouth to begin but I popped back up, causing everyone to turn to me.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just—I’m supposed to offer you refreshments and I forgot.”

Nick grinned and Arwyn shook her head. “You don’t need to get us anything.”

“No. I’m sure it’s true. I’ve read it in books across various genres,” I confirmed.

“Not so fast,” Arthur said to the others. “Let’s see what she’s offering.”

Declan chuffed out a laugh at that.

“Okay.” I moved to the doorway into the back. “Go ahead. I already know what he’s going to tell you, and I can hear from the kitchen.”

While Nick explained what had happened last night, I looked through the cupboards. I found a package of cookies. When had I bought those? I checked the date. They were only a little past the expiration date. The package was unopened. They were

probably fine. I found a mixing bowl and dumped the cookies in.

What else? I found a pack of popcorn, so I programmed the microwave and then checked the refrigerator. I had eggs, some meats, cheese. Oh! Any crackers? I checked all the cupboards again. Nope. How about the freezer? Corndogs? Why in the world did I have a box of frozen corndogs?

When the microwave dinged, I dumped out the popcorn into multiple cereal bowls and then put the corndogs in. While they cooked, I filled up five glasses of water. I remembered a large cutting board my mom had. I found it under the sink, so I cleaned it and then started piling everything on.

Hmm . I'd clearly organized this wrong. I moved the popcorn to the big mixing bowl and the cookies to the smaller cereal bowls, which worked better. The microwave dinged again and I piled the corndogs onto a plate.

After grabbing a bunch of paper towels, I brought the board loaded with food back and then realized I had nowhere to put it down. I ended up kicking my stool closer, so it stood between the couch and chair, like a tall but narrow coffee table.

I handed everyone a paper towel and then sat on the floor, leaning up against the end of a bookcase.

Declan and Nick stared at the food, their eyebrows near their hairlines. Arwyn clapped her gloved hands on a laugh and took a corndog stick. Arthur scowled at the food but then took two corndogs and a glass of water. Nick stood and handed out the remaining water glasses, taking a corndog and three cookies for himself.

“Thank you,” he said. “We appreciate you doing all of this for us. I was just telling everyone about you finding the phone and how we both checked the woods but didn’t find any indication he’d followed her in.” He looked over at me. “Anything to add?”

Nodding, I said, “Does anyone want mustard for their corndog?”

Arwyn laughed again. She wasn’t laughing at me. I knew what that looked like, how it felt. She honestly just seemed happy, which made me happy.

“Yes, please,” she said.

I rose and went back to the refrigerator. I was almost positive I had seen a yellow bottle in the door. I came back a minute later, squeezing lines of mustard down all the corndogs, even those still on the plate.

After I returned the bottle to the refrigerator, I sat again, this time with my own corndog, and asked, “Did you make sure McKenna didn’t stay in her apartment?”

Nick paused mid-chew. Shaking his head, he swallowed quickly. “No. Why would I tell her she needed to leave? The guy didn’t have her wallet. He doesn’t know her address.”

Alarmed, I rose to my feet again. “We need to go check on her. When I was patrolling the neighborhood last night, I saw her in the window of her apartment house. She lives quite close. If I found her—and I don’t have a wolf’s nose—aren’t we worried he could too?”

Brow furrowed, Nick looked at Arthur and then back at me. “I walked her to her door—which should muddle her scent—accompanied her in, and made sure her lights stayed off until all her blinds were closed.” Tilting his head, he asked, “You saw her through the window of a darkened apartment?”

Nodding, I took a bite of the corndog and sat back down. I turned to Declan. “Can you see through darkened windows?”



He thought about it a moment. “Yes, but I’d need to be close. If I’m across the street and looking up, would I see a face in a dark apartment window? Absolutely. Would I see it from down the block?” He shook his head. “Doubtful.”

“Let me make sure.” Nick stood, put his corndog stick on the plate, and pulled out his phone, swiping through screens. When the woman answered her phone, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Arthur nodded at me. “Good thought. Did you notice anything else?”

I thought a moment. “I flew over the neighborhood last night. There are surprisingly few pickup trucks. The few I found had cold engines and smelled of human, not wolf. I may not have your noses, but I could identify all of you tonight so I think I would have scented a wolf. Granted, garages exist.” With a shrug, I continued, “I also went through my forest earlier this evening. I didn’t pick up on anything out of the ordinary.”

Nick walked back, pocketing his phone. “McKenna’s staying with her mom.” He looked at me. “Did you find anything else in the ditch besides her phone?”

I shook my head.

Declan’s brows were furrowed as he glared at the floor. Arwyn rubbed his knee. He looked at Nick over Arwyn’s head. “You’re sure you scented wolf?”

Nick nodded. “It was faint—barely there—but I caught it on McKenna. I didn’t scent anything on the road, but she was carrying a scent that wasn’t human, one I’m pretty sure was wolf.”

“Are there dog shifters?” I asked. “Maybe he’s a Huskey or a Malamute.”

Declan turned his hard glare on me, but after a moment it softened. “No. There are no dog shifters.” Relaxing back into the sofa, he continued, “Wolves are not dogs, but we are genetically close, so I’m following the logic.”

Had I just offended him? I was sitting cross-legged, so I rolled forward onto my knees, took a corndog, and handed it to him as a peace offering. “Sorry.” Then I rolled back down to my spot, leaning against a bookcase.

“No offense taken,” Declan said.

“Well, some offense was taken,” Arwyn murmured.

“Yes, but I was given meat, so all is forgotten,” he replied before taking a big bite.

“Can you call the pack together?” Arthur asked. “Then we could have Nick try to identify him.”

“Wait,” Arwyn said. “Can we narrow it down for him? Do we have anything the truck guy touched?”

“Did you show them the video?” I asked Nick.

He nodded. “While you were in back.”

“From that,” I said, “it doesn’t look like he touched anything other than his truck. McKenna never said he touched her. Right?”

Nick shook his head, “No. He didn’t touch her.”

We all thought a moment. I stared at Arwyn’s gloves, wondering. Some wicches I’d heard about had special gifts. “Why are you wearing gloves?”

She held up a hand and said, “Psychometry. When I touch things, I see visions. Usually, it’s stuff that’s already happened. Sometimes I see stuff that will happen. Why?”

I thought about that. “Well, we know he touched his truck, and his truck was on the pavement. We even have the rubber burn where he floored it to scare McKenna. Do you think you’d see anything if you touched the mark on the pavement?”

“I have no idea.” She stood. “But let’s go find out.”

Arthur took the last corndog and finished it in two bites. Nick took a handful of cookies, and then we all headed out the front door and down the hill.

“It doesn’t seem like you get a lot of customers,” Arthur said. “How do you stay open?”

I shrugged one shoulder, uncomfortable with the topic. “There’s a long answer and a short answer to that. I’ll give you the short one. I own the house and property outright. I don’t need to cover a high rent. If I sell a book, good. If I don’t, okay.”

He seemed to be waiting for me to say more. When I didn’t, he gave a suspicious hmm .

At the bottom of the hill, we turned left again and went back to where the truckman had approached McKenna. Nick pointed out where the bag had been found and then showed them where the truck had left the pavement, leaving an impression on the slope.

Declan crouched, his head lifted, trying to catch a scent. Arthur walked back and forth over the area, looking for anything. Arwyn waited on the dark road.

Nick eventually joined her and pointed to a dark spot on the pavement about ten feet away from where she was standing. “I think that’s the mark his tires made.”

Arwyn shook her head. “No. It’s here. I didn’t feel anything when I walked over there. It feels dark and ugly right here.” She took off her backpack and handed it to Declan. “If it looks like I’m going down,” she told him, “catch me. I don’t want to get all dirty.”

He swung her backpack onto his shoulder and said, “My pleasure.”

“Everyone else, move back please.” She waved us away. “I don’t want to catch any stray thoughts.”

Nick, Arthur, and I moved back to the crossroads to wait. The men discussed the case in low voices.

When they went quiet, I asked something that had been nagging at me. “Can I ask you two a question?”

Arthur and Nick exchanged a look and then Nick said, “Is it about black bear shifters being Black humans?”

Arthur shook his head, his focus on Arwyn, who didn’t appear to be doing anything other than touching the road with one finger.

“Yeah, that was it. Is that a dumb question?”

Nick shook his head. He tore his attention from Arwyn and met my gaze before I remembered and looked away. “There’s no connection. Some black bear shifters are white, some Latino?—”

“I know an Asian grizzly family,” Arthur added.

“Hey,” Nick said to his cousin, “remember when I took that vacation in northern Canada a few years ago? I met a Yupik man who was a polar bear shifter. Nice enough guy. Kept to himself.”

We fell into silence again and then I whispered, “How long does this usually take?”

Nick shrugged as Arthur said, “As long as it takes.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

FIVE

Odd

On a sigh, I remembered that I'd left my book on the table in the bookstore. Maybe I should run up there and get it.

The quiet shush of soft-soled shoes on pavement had me turning to find Harold, one of my regulars, pointing a flashlight at his feet as he shuffled up the road. I left the bears and met the old man at the base of my hill.

"Good evening," he said. "How strange to find you out here. I have a hard time thinking of you anywhere but in the bookstore with your nose in a book."

"She's an odd one," I heard Arthur murmur to Nick and felt my cheeks flame. Yeah, that was me. The odd one.

I walked with Harold slowly up the hill, trying to put odd out of my head and remember what Harold had just asked me. "I guess someone got into a fender bender last night and they wanted to know what I'd heard or seen. They're done with me now. So, what did you think of Parable of the Sower?"

He chuckled. "You remembered. When you said Octavia Butler was one of the sci-fi greats, I wasn't sure if I believed you." He shook his head. "Silly of me to doubt you where books are concerned. I read a lot of sci-fi and I'd never heard of her."

"Yeah, well, she was a Black woman writing in a genre that's very heavily white and

male. I have more of her books, if you'd like to read them."

"I would, indeed. Which one would you recommend next?" We were almost to the top of the hill, but he was slowing down. "I swear," he said, "I think this road gets steeper every time I climb it."

I slowed with him. "We can take a break, if you want?"

"No. I'm not that old yet. I'll make it."

He was breathing harder, so I slowed a little more. "If you're interested in a historical sci-fi mashup, *Kindred* is wonderful. The main character is a modern woman in the 1970s who gets stuck time traveling back and forth to Maryland, starting in the early 1800s. Which, as you might imagine, is a dangerous place and time for a Black woman. It becomes clear pretty quickly that she's getting pulled back when this one white boy—the plantation owner's son—is in danger of dying."

"That's interesting," he said. "What makes him so important?"

"That is the question. One I assume you don't actually want me to answer. If that doesn't fit your mood, she has more traditional sci-fi books." I held out my arm to steady him up the steps.

"Now you've got me interested in this other book. Let's try that one next," he said.

I pointed to the bench on the porch. "Have a seat. I'll go grab it for you."

He slowly made his way to the bench and sat. "I do seem to be worn out tonight."

After I grabbed the book, I went to the kitchen to fill a glass with water before going back out and sitting next to him.

When I passed him the glass and the book, he said, “Oh, thank you. I hate for you to fuss, though.”

I stretched out my legs, crossed my ankles, and pretended not to notice the tremor in his hand as he took a sip of water. “It’s no fuss to enjoy the night air.”

He took another small sip. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without a book in your hand or under your arm.”

Nodding, I watched the investigative group walk through the trees, no doubt to circle around to the back of my place. Harold hadn’t noticed, though Arwyn was making a lot of noise. When the sound cut out, I assumed Declan had picked her up.

I stretched out my hands, palms up, the lack of a book quite obvious. “That must be why they feel so weird.”

He huffed out a laugh and then struggled to get his wallet out of his pocket.

I tapped his knee. “You can pay me next time. I’ll remember.” I heard my back door open and close, but I stayed with Harold. “Would you like me to drive you home? I don’t drive my Jeep often enough. It’s going to die on me soon.”

He waved away the suggestion. “Nonsense. You go ahead in. I’m going to read the first few pages, rest a bit more, and then head home.”

Nodding, I stood. “Okay. If you need anything, just call. I’ll hear you.”

“Not to worry. I’m just going to start this very interesting book.” He opened to the first page and did just that.

I went in, leaving the door ajar. Harold—or any human—couldn’t have heard the



group murmuring in the back, but I could. Even amongst supernaturals, my hearing and vision were unusual. Odd had taken some of the shine off the evening, but it wasn't like I hadn't heard it before.

When I came around the bookcase, the talking stopped. Nick was sitting on the floor in my spot, leaving the couch open. Nodding to him, I took his vacated seat.

“Orla,” Arthur said, “my wife tells me I can be a real asshole, saying things without considering how they’ll land. Nick chewed me out earlier for calling you odd when you’ve been bending over backwards to help people just showing up on your doorstep.”

He sat straighter in his chair. “I apologize. I want you to know I didn’t mean it in a negative way. I’ve never met an owl shifter. The only raptor shifter I know is Kaknu and you two are very different. My focus at the time was on Arwyn and whether or not she could tell us anything, so I wasn’t thinking about how I phrased a throwaway observation. Nick’s right, though. That part doesn’t matter. I said something insulting and I apologize.”

Apologies were new for me. I’d gone to regular school when I was younger. The number of times they had meetings with my parents, asking if they could test me, was ridiculous. They thought my parents were being willfully obtuse, pretending they hadn’t noticed their daughter was on the spectrum.

The school counselors and administrators had the best of intentions. They wanted me to get the services they felt I needed. My parents, on the other hand, knew I was behaving just as a little owl shifter should. Children and adolescents can be cruel to the odd quiet kid with big yellow eyes who rarely blinks, wears dark glasses, winces at loud noises, and often falls asleep in class. After a while, it became clear a normal life wasn’t in the cards for me.

My parents signed me out of school and then picked up textbooks for me on various subjects. I began studying at night, when my brain was naturally more active. It was lonely, but I taught myself about every topic that caught my interest. As much as I missed out on normal human interactions, I got to experience them through books. I've been to countless proms, fallen in love, had my heart broken, been betrayed by a best friend, and survived many a battle. It all felt real in the moment, on the page, until I put the book down and was again alone.

And now here was Arthur apologizing for what I'd heard all my life. Feeling decidedly off-balance, my throat tightened as I nodded. "It's okay." I turned to Arwyn, who was sitting beside me, and asked, "Did you see anything?"

"I did," she said, taking one of my hands and holding it between her two gloved ones.

I probably shouldn't have been remembering difficult things while sitting next to a psychic. All the focus was on her and what she saw, thankfully. I blinked rapidly to get rid of the sudden tears the apology and her kindness had brought. When I looked up, I found Nick watching me. After a moment, he gave me a sad smile and then turned his attention to Arwyn.

"He's been doing this for a while," Arwyn said. "I don't think he's a local," she said to Declan. "The vision seemed to be connected to the truck. I couldn't see anything beyond what he saw from his seat in the truck. The landscape changed, though, sometimes big city, sometimes country."

"A lone wolf?" Declan guessed.

She nodded. "I think so. He definitely has a type. I kept seeing him pulling up on young women wearing jeans. He likes the way their butts look in tight jeans. And he likes long hair. The rest of what they wore didn't seem to matter. There was one woman walking alone on a country road. She had his preferred thin athletic body type

and long red hair, but she was wearing a sundress. She was almost perfect and there was nowhere for her to run for help before he caught her. Still, she wasn't quite right, so he gunned the engine and drove off, frustrated and angry."

"Did you see anything that would help us identify him?" Arthur asked.

She thought about that a moment. "It was an old truck. A long gear shaft coming up out of the floorboard. An AM radio. Clean. He keeps his truck clean." She paused again. "He's not too tall. When Declan's driving his truck, his knees are close to the dashboard. This guy's weren't. He had a decent amount of room. He wore battered cowboy boots and blue jeans."

"What you saw," Declan said, "was it like looking through his eyes?"

She nodded. "There was a moment, though. He looked in the rearview mirror, saw a police cruiser following him, and kept on driving, ignoring a woman in jeans waiting by a car with its hood up. The cop stopped to help her. The man's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel as he had to leave his perfect victim in his rear view."

"What did you see in the mirror?" Arthur asked.

Arwyn considered. "He has light blue eyes. That kind of ice blue that looks painful."

"Could you get a sense of hair color?" Nick asked. "His eyebrows maybe?"

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Light. His hair is kind of a sandy color. He's tan but has little white lines." He pointed to the outside corner of her eye. "Like he works in the sun and spends a lot of time squinting."

"Makes sense," I said. "Lighter eyes are more sensitive to the sun. I have to wear dark sunglasses if I go out in the day."

“So we’re looking for a guy, medium build, maybe five foot ten,” Arthur said. “He has light brown hair, light blue eyes, and doesn’t like sunglasses.”

“It may not have to do with liking,” I said. “People can be wary of who’s behind the sunglasses. They get uncomfortable if they can’t see your eyes. If he has an open, friendly face, he wouldn’t want to cover that up because it disarms the women he’s after.” I turned back to Arwyn. “In the vision, does he mostly hunt at night or during the day?”

She thought a moment. “Most were during the day and I think you’re right. I couldn’t see him, but I could see the reactions the women gave him. They started off worried and then relaxed almost at once, relieved to have help, get a ride, whatever.”

“Can you tell,” Declan asked, “if he’s still around here or has he moved on to another town?”

Arwyn squeezed my hand and then let go. “No idea.”

Nick stood and began pacing up and down the row of bookshelves. “Is there a pattern of locations where he likes to hunt?”

Arwyn closed her eyes again, remembering. Finally, she said, “If he’s in a city, it’s an empty, industrial area. If he’s in the country, it’s a long, lonely road.”

“So,” Arthur said, “it’s somewhere a woman would feel vulnerable and relieved she’s been found and is getting help.”

“It could also be places where cell phone service is spotty,” I said, “like this neighborhood. Most people around here have a landline because they can’t rely on their cellphones at home. If these women we’re talking about were in trouble and cut off with no signal, that would put them on edge and desperate for help.”

“Okay, Mr. Policemen,” Arwyn said to the cousins, “where are the dead spots in Monterey? It sounds like we need a woman with long hair, wearing jeans, to walk around in that area to lure him out.”

“No,” Declan growled.

“No what?” she said.

“You are not offering yourself up to some serial killing wolf,” he ground out.

She was turned away from me, looking at Declan, but her hair moved, the curls tightening. “A. You’re not the boss of me, so quit trying to order me around. And B. What am I, an idiot? I can’t have some random psycho touch me and drop me into a vision.”

Declan blew out a breath. “Sorry.”

“Besides,” she continued, “I told you what his type is. He likes tall, willowy women, not short, curvy ones.”

“I can do it,” I said.

Arwyn and Declan were still bickering, and perhaps I’d said it too quietly, more thought than speech. When you don’t talk much, it can be tricky to do it right.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I wear jeans. I have long hair and am tall and thin. I can do it.”

They all turned to study me with varying expressions of doubt.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

SIX

Challenge Accepted

“U h. Well. That’s an idea,” Arthur said cautiously.

“Orla, this is going to be really dangerous,” Nick said. He gestured between himself and Arthur. “We smell like bears. Shifters recognize the scent. We can’t stay close to protect you.”

I nodded, annoyed that they were talking to me like I was dumb. “I realize that some people view owl mannerisms as evidence that we’re slow or mentally diminished. We’re not. I can assure you I’m quite intelligent and understand the risk. Unlike all of you, I don’t carry an easily identifiable scent, and I know how to mimic humans. I doubt he’ll pick up on my being a shifter at all. Once you all leave, I’ll go shower off your scents and drive to wherever you tell me to go.”

Arwyn nodded. “Yes. This is a good idea.”

“Do you see something?” Arthur asked. “Do you know this will work?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I trust Orla. She knows herself. If she says she can do it, then she can do it.”

“Could you help?” Declan asked Arwyn. “Could you spell her to change her scent?”

She thought a moment and then looked at me. “Would you want me to do that?”

I considered. “No. My own scent being different or absent will make me uncomfortable and what I’m doing is already outside my comfort zone. If I’ve never met another owl shifter, what are the chances he has? I just need to know where I should pretend my Jeep broke down.”

Nick walked over and crouched down in front of me, looking into my eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nodded, unsure but determined. I doubted this was what my mother meant when she told me to live a little, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. This was what had dropped into my lap, so this was what I’d do.

Nick stood and held out his hand. I took it and he pulled me to my feet. Embarrassed, I meant to drop it right away, but it felt safe and warm. And thrilling. He gave my hand a quick squeeze and then stepped back to discuss locations with Arthur.

I picked up the mostly empty tray and walked it back to the kitchen, taking a moment to compose myself. When I turned around, Arwyn was standing in the doorway.

“Is there anything I can do to make this easier or more comfortable for you?” she asked.

I thought about that. “I don’t think so. I’d just like to go do it so I can shake this jittery feeling and get back to reading.”

Smiling, she said, “I get that,” and started back down the short hall. “They have a spot picked out for you. If he’s still around, we think it has a good shot of being where he’ll prowl.”

Nick had a map pulled up in his phone. He and Arthur sketched out the plan. Face blank, I nodded, ignoring the pressure building in my chest. Arthur handed me a big,

jagged-edged hunting knife in a sheath.

“Just in case,” he said. “Keep in your bag. We don’t want you defenseless out there.”

They laid out the plan and while I saw multiple flaws in it, it seemed doable. I worried I’d freeze when I needed to act, but I knew the only way I’d become the hero of my own story was to woman up and face the challenge I’d been given. I really hoped I survived living a little . If for no other reason than all the books I still had to read.

After they left, I locked up and turned off the lights. Closing early was becoming a habit. When I stepped into my room, my left hand twitched. Normally, this was when I’d put my book on my nightstand, but I’d left it downstairs. My head swam. I never forgot my books.

Shocked at myself, I went into the bathroom to shower off the evening’s scents. Instead of twisting my hair up in a bun, as I normally did, I dried it and left it long. I found an old pair of jeans that had been worn thin in spots and paired it with a long-sleeved thermal top. It was going to be cold where I was going.

Standing in the doorway of my closet, I stared down at red cowboy boots. Why did I own them? A momentary weakness. I saw them in a shop window a few months after my parents passed. I’d heard Mom’s voice in my head and bought them. Have I ever worn them? Of course not, but now seemed like a good time to start, as the truck man wore cowboy boots himself.

I slipped into them and then walked around my bedroom, feeling far too conspicuous. Why were they so loud? Okay, fine. I wasn’t going to let the noise bother me. I needed to get moving. I also needed something to cover any lingering owl scent.

Hmm. I didn’t own perfume. Some women used to use vanilla, but I didn’t really



bake so I doubted I had any. I didn't grow roses, so I couldn't rub a petal on myself. Not to mention I hated the scent of roses.

Oh! I knew. I grabbed my phone, keys, wallet, knife, scarf, and went downstairs. The door to the garage was beside the kitchen. I went in, hit the button to lift the garage door, and flinched, seeing a tall, broad-shouldered man silhouetted in the faint moonlight. Then I recognized him.

"I just showered off bear, wicche, and wolf. Why are you back?"

"I'll keep my distance," Nick said, his voice deep and warm in the cool early morning hours. "I came to drop off the tracker and to make sure you didn't volunteer for this because of what Arthur said." True to his word, he moved back as I came closer. "You don't have anything to prove to him or anyone else."

"I want to try," I said. "McKenna was lucky. I doubt all the other women Arwyn saw in her vision were as lucky as she was."

He stared at me a moment and then shook his head. "They weren't. Arwyn gave us specific descriptions of the women and locations she saw. Arthur and I have already found two of his victims, one in Seattle and the other in Tahoe. They were both sexually assaulted, the bodies left in rough shape. He hid them under leaves and trees."

"He didn't bite or maul them?" I thought about it for a moment. "That's surprising. Maybe he isn't a wolf." Considering, I hopped into my Jeep and started it up. It took a couple of tries, but I got it going.

Nick had moved to the side, out of sight, so I threw it into reverse and parked outside the garage, letting the engine run. I didn't want to break down for real out there. He moved farther away. Supernatural hearing being what it was, we continued speaking

in low voices.

“I going to hose it down,” I said, “and then open a can of motor oil and take it with me. That scent should cover whatever owl scent might linger, assuming he is a wolf and has ever met an owl shifter.”

“Now I’m even more concerned,” he said. “If he’s not a wolf, we have no idea what we’re dealing with.”

I went around the side of the house and dragged back the hose.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t you have a top to this thing? You’re going to get the seats wet.”

I moved up close to the Jeep, pointed the nozzle down, and rinsed off the vehicle frame and tires. “No top helps with scent. You’re a worrier, aren’t you?”

He grumbled something, but I didn’t hear it over the engine and spray. When I finished, I put the hose away and then said, “What was that?”

He sighed and walked closer, stopping about six feet away. “I said I’m not normally a worrier, but something about this whole situation has me twisted up. I don’t want you to get hurt.” He tossed me a plastic evidence bag with a small round black dot in it.

“Thanks,” I said. He was probably too close, but it was nice. Having someone be concerned about me was nice. “I’ll be okay.”

“See that you are.” He gestured to the bag I’d picked up. “The tracker is magnetized. Attach it anywhere to his truck and we can follow him. Then Arthur, Declan, and I will take him down. You’re stronger and faster than the human he’s expecting, but it’s still dangerous. We can’t get too close, but we’ll be able to monitor you until you

put the tracker on him.” He blew out a breath and then his gaze traveled over me. “You look really—” He cleared his throat. “You look nice.”

I shrugged. “Jeans. Long hair.”

He stared down, grinning. “Boots. I like your red cowboy boots.”

Embarrassed, I busied myself by taking the tracker out of the bag, placing it in my jeans pocket, and then putting the bag in the garage trash can. “They just seemed like something he might like,” I mumbled. I slipped the sheathed knife down the top of my right boot. “Oh! I forgot.”

I jogged back into the garage, grabbed a can of motor oil, found a Post-it note, and wrote Broke down. I went to find a signal. I came back out and hit the garage door button and then stashed the note in my glovebox for later. I didn’t want a police officer to find my Jeep and ticket me for abandoning it by the side of the road.

“You know where you’re going?” he asked.

“I do.” My fingers quickly got to work, braiding my hair. Since hair was important to this man, I needed to keep it from flying all around in a topless Jeep. Once I was done, I wrapped a scarf around my head. I’d undo all of this when I got to the breakdown road.

“You probably need a coat for the drive,” he suggested.

“I only have a couple of coats and they’re too long. They cover my butt, which is apparently a key factor for this guy. This is a thermal top. It’ll be chilly, but it’ll be fine.”

He took off the flannel shirt he wore over a t-shirt and tried handing it to me. “At

least put this on while you're driving. Leave it in the Jeep when you start to walk."

"Thanks, but that smells a great deal like you. A bear," I said.

Frustrated, he shook his head. "Right." He put the shirt back on, letting it hang open.

"I appreciate you worrying about me, but the sooner I leave the better. For me. So I don't get too anxious."

Backing away, he held up a hand in surrender, letting me go. I climbed in, put the Jeep in gear, and headed to Sunset Drive, near Asilomar Beach. Nick and Arthur had said this area would be dark and deserted in the middle of the night and that cell service was spotty at best.

The freezing wind tore at my scarf. I had the short drive to seriously question the advisability of volunteering for this job, but I just kept coming back to someone needing to stop him and my being someone.

I parked on the side of the road, near the Point Pinos Lighthouse, affixed the note to my dashboard, and then used the big knife to stab a hole in the top of the motor oil can. I tipped it, getting oil on my fingers, and dabbed a little behind each ear. That ought to do it.

Facing the wind coming off the ocean, I took off the scarf and unbraided my hair, stuffing both the scarf and hair tie under the driver's seat. I caught sight of my sunglasses on the dash and grabbed them. I was going to need those when the sun rose.

Okay. Time to lure a killer.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

SEVEN

Blue-Eyed Bastard

H opefully truck man wasn't watching me yet. It made no sense for me to walk along the ocean, rather than back into town where I could have more easily found some kind of help.

The moon played hide-and-seek behind the clouds. Thankfully I didn't need to rely on moonlight to keep from stumbling.

It didn't take long before I was shivering, but that was all right. I needed to stay alert and on edge. Being nocturnal, this was normally the hour when I'd start to droop and long for bed. Instead, I trudged slowly in the cold, following the curves of the ocean.

I wasn't sure what to make of Nick or how flustered he made me. I'd gone through life on a nice even keel, my emotional highs and lows tied to the books I read. Now, though, I was getting distracted thinking about him and how it felt when he looked at me. I wasn't sure if I liked it. This fizzy electrical feeling was uncomfortable. He was very handsome, though. And his voice made me want to burrow into his arms. Which was a ridiculous thought that, again, made me uncomfortable.

When a bright ray of light hit my eye, I shook off the daydreaming, embarrassed to have let it go on for so long, and put on my sunglasses.

I scanned my surroundings. Where was I? I'd left the ocean and was in the middle of tall pine trees. There were a few scattered houses in the vicinity, but I was clearly on

the edge of a wooded area. Feeling like an idiot, I turned around and headed back. I knew I hadn't turned a corner. I'd just followed the road I'd been walking on while my mind wandered.

Stupid . I checked my phone. No signal.

Pocketing it, I tried to keep my tired mind focused on the task at hand. That was when I heard the sound of tires on pavement, moving up slowly behind me. It could have been someone leaving early for work, but I didn't think so. The engine was too quiet, and he was following me too closely.

I reached into my left front pocket and gripped the tracker between my index and middle fingers. When the truck stopped, I'd rest my hand on the side and leave the tracker behind. His approach made the hairs on the back of my neck rise. This was it.

A dark gray truck slid up beside me, stopping when the open passenger window was level with me. I flinched, as though surprised by his appearance, and turned to finally see the man who seemed to have made a profession of hunting women.

Grinning, he gave me a quick nod, his blue eyes dancing in the dawn light. "Good morning." He paused a moment, his eyes traveling over what he could see of me. "It's chilly out there. Why don't you let me give you a lift?" He was gorgeous: tousled sandy brown hair, a chiseled jaw, bright white teeth, and a smile that said trust me .

Oh, no. We'd thought I'd be dealing with another shifter. We were wrong. The truck itself had a faint wolf scent, but the man was fae and I was in a world of trouble.

I tried to lift my hand to place the tracker, but my limbs didn't move.

After a moment of my silence, his brow furrowed. "Hello? Did you hear me,

beautiful?”

No longer under my own control, my head jerked up and down, nodding.

“Excellent.” He caressed the passenger seat and then patted it. “Climb on in then. I’ll take you wherever you need to go. I’ve always got time to help a pretty lady.”

The light blue of his eyes now swirled with a deep ocean blue, drawing me in and holding me in its spell. I tried to look away but couldn’t. I was no match for the fae. Leaning across the cab, he pushed down the handle, opening the passenger door. “Honey? Are you still with me?”

After a moment, my head did a jerking nod again. My limbs moved of their own volition, climbing into the cab of his truck. Terror gripped me, but then he smiled his sharp smile and the fear floated away.

He stared at me a moment and then made an annoyed sound in the back of his throat while reaching across me to slam the door shut.

“I’ll ease up soon,” he said, his voice bright. “It’s no fun if you’re comatose.”

I sat mutely, hands in my lap, staring into his kaleidoscopic eyes, wanting nothing more than to be of service to this beautiful man. Unbidden, the image of Nick came to mind, but I pushed it out. He had no place here.

The man held up a finger and slid my sunglasses down my nose so he could see my eyes. “Oh, my, my, my. Those are the prettiest amber eyes I’ve ever seen. The last time I saw anyone with eyes like yours, I was back home, not around here. You’re a special one, aren’t you?”

His gaze moved to the top of my head. “Look at all that long, beautiful hair of yours.”

He ran a hand over my head and then pulled my hair forward to look at it in the sunlight.

Staring at it with him, I watched his hand turn over and clutch it in his fist. He gave a sharp tug and then let go. The sudden hurt clouded the euphoria for a moment and then faded. He seemed to be waiting for a reaction but as I didn't know what he wanted, I just stared blankly into his beautiful eyes. He winked and patted my knee.

“When we get where we're going, I'll let let you free.” He chuckled. “I sure do enjoy it when you all run and cry and try to fight me off.”

“That's good,” I said, and he laughed.

Putting the truck in gear, he drove, his hand still on my knee. I stared at it, at the way he tightened his grip. It hurt, but I didn't respond. Instead, I lifted my head and stared out the windshield, ignoring the trees and houses we passed, my gaze fixed on the far horizon, wishing I was riding the air.

The sun was too bright. It hurt my eyes, but my sunglasses were at the tip of my nose and my hands didn't want to work right now. I tried closing my eyes and thankfully that worked.

After a few minutes, he said, “Why are your eyes closed?”

“Sun,” I responded.

“Well, push your glasses up, dummy.”

With a quiet sigh of relief, my hands moved. I pushed up the glasses and opened my eyes. He'd driven us away from town and other people. Away from observation and responsibility. It reminded me of H.G. Wells's novel *The Invisible Man*. What would



one do if no one saw, if there were no repercussions? The book took me longer than normal to read because I kept stopping to wonder what it was that kept people from letting their id run wild. Was it really only fear of discovery?

My heart sank now as it had when I'd read the book. Like all the women before me, I was going to be taken somewhere he wouldn't be discovered so he could do whatever he wanted, free from consequences and reprisals. How many of me had there been? How many mes would there be if I failed or before he bored of this game and moved on to another?

It wasn't long before he pulled off the main road onto a much narrower one. Trees and bushes pushed into the path. The truck shimmied and bounced over broken concrete before the road gave up and became rocks strewn over dirt. Thankfully, his hand had moved from my leg to the vibrating steering wheel.

He flicked on the radio and drummed his fingers on the wheel. "So," he said, glancing over at me, "how's my American accent? Did I fool ya?"

I nodded obediently, wiggling my toes in my boots. The compulsion to adore him, to do whatever he said, was waning.

He stopped in front of a rusty gate, blocking the path. Hopping out, he pulled a key from his pocket. I tried to move my body while he worked the padlock on the gate. He glanced over his shoulder at me with a grin and a wink. I braced, assuming I'd be paralyzed again, but I wasn't. Perhaps we were close to the end of my road.

Flexing my hands and feet, I lifted my shoulders and moved my knees. I didn't have faith in my ability to run from him. The fae were scary fast and powerful. If I gave away my lack of paralysis now, he might increase his control over me, and I'd have fewer options.

I couldn't help but feel I was failing as a hero. In books, I knew the hero would survive, would come up with a plan at the last moment. They wouldn't screw up and drop the linchpin of the plan, like I had. The tracker was no longer between my numb fingers.

If I'd dropped it in the truck, okay, but I was pretty sure it had fallen on the road when I looked into his eyes and lost control of my own body. I had the knife in my boot, but it did me no good if I couldn't move my arm to reach for it.

He pushed the narrow gate open, climbed back in the truck, and drove under the low-hanging trees. Once through, he slid out and pushed the gate closed before getting back in and driving down what might generously be called a deer path. When the trees opened into a small clearing, he parked.

"Almost ready. Hang tight while I get my toys for us." The joy in his voice made my skin crawl.

While he threw open his truck box and start pulling things out, I leaned ever so slightly to the right, willing my arm to move. It took far too long for it to obey the electrical impulses my brain was sending.

Light flashed in the rearview mirror. I looked up to see the sun glinting off the head of a hatchet. My stomach dropped to the floorboards under my boots. I was going to die. Painfully.

My fingers wrapped around the knife handle. Barely breathing, I slid it from my boot, trying not to move my shoulders or head, which was what he could see of me through the rear window.

He continued unpacking his tools, whistling a jaunty tune.

Gripping the knife in my lap, I pulled off the sheath and let it drop into my left boot. My eyes kept cutting to the mirror as I willed my racing heart to slow. When he lifted his head and winked at my reflection, my heart stopped. Now I knew how rabbits felt when I snatched them off the ground as they raced for their warrens and safety.

I dropped my right hand to the seat. The knife clutched beside my leg, I waited for an opportunity save myself. If he went back to the driver's side, he wouldn't see what I had. If he came to my side of the truck, I'd have one chance. Sweat gathered at the base of my spine as I waited to see what he'd do.

With a spring in his step, he walked toward the driver's door, and I braced. He didn't open it, though. He swung an open duffle bag, weighed down with my torture and death, onto his shoulder and then strolled around to the passenger side.

When the blue of his eyes began spinning again, I closed my eyes behind the sunglasses. I couldn't lose what little autonomy I'd recovered. Relying on my acute hearing to tell me when to spring, I blew out a deep breath. Muscles relaxed, face expressionless, I waited.

He made no noise when he walked. Focusing, I heard the quiet shush as blades of grass bent beneath his boots. He was close. He had to be close by now, right?

He exhaled a breath near my ear and I sprang, leaping through the open window. Moving faster than any human, I knocked him to the ground. My gaze on his chin, I registered his shock, not anger or suspicion, just surprise that I'd done something so unexpected.

It was one fluid move. I brought him to the ground while my arm arced down, driving the long, jagged blade through his chest, drilling it into the ground beneath him. Blood bloomed on his shirt, but I was already up, snatching the hatchet from his bag and swinging, bringing it down on his neck.

His shock turned to fear for one split second and then his head rolled to the side. Stock still, I stared into his lifeless eyes, unsure if it was over. Had I done it?

A moment later, his body disappeared altogether.

Shaking, I backed away from the bloody knife and hatchet until I was leaning against the side of the truck. I'd never killed a person before. I didn't like it. In books, people felt triumphant or relieved or righteous. All I felt was cold and hollow.

I needed to strip off these stupid clothes and fly away, never see this clearing, that truck, or that duffle bag ever again, but that wasn't the way. I'd agreed to do my part in this group—the first group that had ever wanted me. I'd even volunteered for this job. I couldn't fly away and leave a serial killer's kit sitting out here for a hiker to find.

My phone still had no signal. The keys were no longer in the ignition. I looked all around the truck but couldn't find them. I tried the grass where I'd beheaded him, but only the knife and hatchet remained. The keys must have been in his pocket and disappeared with him.

I'd read about hot wiring a car but had no idea how to do it. It looked like I'd be walking out of here. Shaking out my arms, trying to lose the tremors, I fished the sheath out of my left boot. The hatchet and knife went in the duffle and then I checked the truck box for any other dangerous items. Everything went in the bag. Hefting it over my shoulder, I started the long trip away from my almost-death, heading toward the city and a cell phone signal.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

### EIGHT

#### Never a Dull Moment

I was sure I'd killed him. His damn head had rolled away from his body, but the fae were scary powerful. The fact that he disappeared had me on edge.

I had finally made it back to the section of road by the ocean's edge when an SUV pulled up beside me. It had an official police seal on the door. The passenger window slid down, and a concerned-looking Nick was there, waving me into his vehicle.

I dropped the huge duffle onto the floor of his SUV and then slid in, bone weary and shaky.

Nick didn't pull back into traffic. He laid a warm hand on my frozen arm. "We were following you. The tracker stayed in the same spot so long, we chanced getting close enough to see you and instead found an empty road. Arthur recovered the tracker but you were gone." The hand not touching me rubbed his forehead. "We've been frantic, trying to find you. Arthur went to Arwyn to see if she could get a vision of your whereabouts and I've been driving up and down these streets, searching everywhere."

He closed his eyes a moment, squeezing my arm, and then continued. "Arthur broke into the back of your bookstore and Arwyn touched a few things. She said her visions seemed to be blocked. She saw you beside a truck, but then the vision went dark. She knew right away, from your perspective, though, that he was fae."

He blew out a breath. "Collectively, we had a heart attack. You were taken by a fae

serial killer? How were we supposed to stop him—hell, find him?”

His hand slid down to mine and he held it. “But then she touched your book—the one you left downstairs on the table—and she saw you walking on this road, a heavy duffle bag on your shoulder. And here you are.”

He paused, probably waiting for me to tell him what happened, but I wasn’t ready. I knew he could feel me trembling, so I asked, “Can you turn on the heat?”

“Of course.” He turned a knob and directed the vents at me. “I can drive you home.”

I shook my head, pointing down the road. “I need to get my Jeep. Thanks, though.”

“Okay.” He sounded unsure, but he put the SUV in gear and started driving.

We rode in silence, but I couldn’t shake the sound of the fae man’s gleeful whistling in my head. I wasn’t sure I ever would.

Nick pulled up beside my Jeep, which had a ticket under the windshield wiper. He got out when I did. “Here. I’ll take care of that.” He snapped the ticket out before folding it and sliding it into his pocket.

I nodded my thanks.

He gestured to the SUV. “Is that bag yours?”

Shaking my head, I climbed in my Jeep and turned the ignition. With a cough and a rattle, the engine fired. “Not mine,” I said. “That’s his. It’s filled with the tools he was going to use to torture and kill me. I didn’t want to leave it lying around.” I had to swallow the tightness in my throat. “I don’t want to think about him now, please. I’ll tell you later.”

“But—yeah, of course. You can tell us later.” He looked up and down the busy road. “I’ll follow you and then hang out, keep guard until we get this guy.”

I shook my head. “He’s gone now.” I put the Jeep into gear and started driving. I probably should have thanked him for the ride, but I was barely holding it together. I needed out of this skin. I needed to ride the air, high above it all, far from that clearing and that bag. Free from the fate he’d chosen for me.

I wasn’t sure how I made it home. I was shaking with the need to shift, to not be this person who could be overpowered and violated. Once I’d parked and closed the garage door behind me, the tremors lessened. I was in my safe place, surrounded by my books.

Trudging up the stairs, exhaustion swept over me. I stripped out of the clothes he’d stared at and touched, and felt the fire roll through me as I shifted. I hopped onto the window ledge and then soared out the window and over my forest. Gliding through the trees, I found my favorite pine, perched on a nice steady branch, and settled in for a long sleep.

A crow cawing nearby woke me at dusk. Jerk . Still, I needed to head back and get cleaned up so I could open on time. I was dragging from the lack of a full day’s rest, but a brisk shower ought to fix some of that.

Once I was cleaned and dressed, my hair back in its usual bun, I went to the main kitchen on the top floor. I hadn’t eaten yet, but my stomach was still a little wobbly. After staring in the refrigerator for far too long, I decided to just heat up a can of soup and call it good. It’d take care of the hunger pains—shifters needed to eat regularly—without overtaxing my currently sensitive stomach.

I headed downstairs a few minutes before eight and found a familiar silhouette on the porch. Not bothering with the outdoor light, I unlocked the door and stepped out into

the cool night air. The wind must have been gusting straight off the ocean. The air smelled of salt and rain. I looked up at the thick clouds and wondered how long until it began.

Nick turned and smiled. “Hello again.” His deep rumble of a voice settled some of my lingering nerves.

Sitting on the top step, I nodded to him, an invitation to sit beside me. He did. The stairs on the old Victorian were wide, but so were his shoulders. We didn’t touch, but my right side was warmed by his presence.

“How are you feeling?” He glanced over and then went back to looking out over the city. He was giving me the room to share what I could.

Pausing, resisting and confronting the memories, I told him what had happened. All my life, people have tried to finish my sentences or made hurry-up gestures to get me to speak faster. All that ever did was make me more self-conscious and less likely to talk.

Nick, though, moved down a step so he could lean back on his elbows, his long legs stretched out down the stairs. He’d settled in to listen, with no push to hurry me along.

When I finished explaining what had happened, Nick looked over his shoulder at me, his gaze sympathetic. “Scary.”

I nodded.

He looked back down the dark hill. “Hopefully this will put your mind at ease. When the fae die in this realm, their bodies disappear and return to Faerie. You killed him. That’s why he’s gone. Which officially makes you a fae-vanquishing badass.”



I let out a chuff of breath and smiled at that assessment. At least I wouldn't spend every day on edge, fearing I'd hear that whistle again.

"When Arwyn told us he was fae, my stomach dropped." He sat forward, his elbows on his knees. "I don't remember ever being that scared." He scratched his short beard. "We just dropped on your doorstep, roped you into helping us out, and then lost you when you were in a fae serial killer's truck. I don't think I've prayed that hard since my high school girlfriend told me her period was late."

He turned his body to the side, leaned up against the railing, and found my eyes in the dark. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"I volunteered," I reminded him

He nodded slowly. "You did. You left your safe, quiet home and volunteered to get up close and personal with a killer. What you did saved future victims from this guy. On their behalf and ours, thank you."

We settled into a comfortable silence, during which the tension from reliving what had happened began to drain away. "I figured out how McKenna got away from him."

He waited, eyebrows raised.

"It was dark, and she wasn't wearing her glasses. She couldn't see him, couldn't get trapped in his eyes. He probably only had a moment to do it when she looked into the truck. He didn't snare her, and I bet that pissed him off."

Nick nodded. "Blind luck."

"Literally. So, do you need me to take you to where his truck is?"

He shook his head. “No need. We already found it. We think his death broke the ward hiding that section of the woods. We also found two bodies in the brush. At least we can give those families an answer and a body to bury.”

I sat with that a moment. Those poor families. “Do you know how long he’s been doing this in our realm?” It was terrifying, him having that kind of power and a complete lack of conscience.

“Arthur took the duffle bag to Arwyn. She passed out. She hadn’t even touched any of the weapons; just bringing it close to her put her on the ground. He called her boyfriend Declan to run over and take care of her. When she came to, she was swearing at Arthur for bringing that filth into her home. Apparently she kicked him out so she could sage the place.”

He grinned. “I would have loved to see little Arwyn kick my big cousin out. I’m told she’s scary powerful, so he went. The boyfriend called about an hour ago to tell Arthur she saw hundreds of dead, all over the world, for probably at least a century, based on the women’s clothing.”

A chill ran down my spine. That soup I’d eaten earlier threatened to reappear. So much horror. So much terror and death, all laid at the feet of one man who appeared to see it as a bit of fun.

I shivered and Nick moved closer, his warm, strong arm brushing up against me. Staring down at my white-knuckled hands clutched in my lap, I said, “I’m okay.”

He nodded. “I know. A car’s coming.”

I looked up at the headlights approaching. “Oh. That’s Malcolm. He’s one of my regulars.”

“I’ll let you get back to work then.” He stood and held out his hand, pulling me to my feet. We stared into each other’s eyes a moment and then he said, “Do you think I could take you to dinner sometime?”

Frozen, I realized too late that I was still holding his hand. Malcolm parked his car and got out, nodding an unsure greeting to us both.

“I’ll be right in,” I said and he passed us, moving into the bookstore. I looked down at our hands and considered the question. Did I want to spend more time alone with him? Finally, I asked, “What happened to your high school girlfriend?”

His grin warmed me down to my toes. “False alarm. We were using protection, but accidents can happen. Thankfully, in our case, one did not. Last I heard, she’d married her college sweetheart and was living in upstate New York.”

I heard my mother’s voice in my head again, telling me to live a little . It felt as though I’d been living a whole lot the last couple of days. Strangely, I didn’t hate it. Even more strangely, given my desire for solitude, I was finding the company of this particular gentleman caller welcomed.

“Okay,” I said quickly, not wanting to change my mind. “We can go to dinner.”

“Good.” He squeezed my hand. “I’m going to head home. I haven’t slept in a day and a half and I’m beat. I’ll contact you later to make a plan, okay?”

I nodded.

“Good. Oh, and Arwyn is going to be reaching out. She said something about wanting your help to find her sorcerer cousin.”

“Sorcerer?” There were actual sorcerers in the world? I’d thought they were only in

high fantasy novels.

“That’s what she said.” He jogged down the steps. “Never a dull moment around here.”

I blew out a breath. “Can’t wait.”

### Chapter One:

#### It's a Talent That I Always Have Possessed

Opening night of The Sea Wicche gallery and tea bar was finally here. I'd been planning it since I was little and saw the abandoned cannery for the first time. At first, I wanted to live here, but when I got a little older and would sneak down here to break in and run around, leaping over stagnant ponds of dirty water and playing with rusty machinery, I saw it for the potential it had. I started bringing my sketches with me, taping them up on the walls.

And now look at me. The cannery remodeled into a huge, forty-foot-tall gallery with my studio and apartment taking a quarter of the space. The floors were dyed concrete that looked like a deep ocean blue. I'd painted the walls to look like water as well, from deep sea to surf.

If one looked closely enough, high on the wall above the front door, in the deepest part of the ocean, there lurked a sea monster, watching and waiting. The exterior of the gallery told us he wasn't waiting long. I'd built thirty-foot long tentacles coming from the water under the cannery, appearing to be pulling the gallery into the ocean. It gave the local fisherman quite a start when they'd first seen them.

I'd also painted one whole side of the building to look as though the gallery were still an old condemned building that had tentacles breaking through the rotting boards. There'd been a number of articles written about the exterior of my gallery, which probably had something to do with why there were so many people packed in here tonight.

On the one hand, I'd done it. Having my own art gallery was a dream come true. On the other, having all these people touching and judging my pieces was making my stomach churn and causing my head to pound.

I don't do well in crowds. I'm a Cassandra wicche, meaning I can see the future. And the past, come to that. I'm an empath, who keeps covered neck to fingertip and toe, because psychometry is also a gift of mine. I wear gloves always, as I don't want to touch someone and drop into a vision, learning every hidden thing in their lives. Unfortunately, far too many people here tonight seem intent on shaking my hand.

What I hadn't anticipated, though, were the hugs. Yes, my body was covered, but my face wasn't. Hugging meant my highly sensitive skin touching cheeks or hair. I didn't want to drop into a vision, so my boyfriend Declan, the werewolf Alpha of Monterey, and my agent Mary Beth, were flanking me, keeping people at a safe distance.

I'd been working with Mary Beth for some years. She was half fae, like me, but her other half was human. She was one of the most respected agents in the art world. She had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of all art. No matter the medium, the time period, or the location, she knew it. Most saw her as a hard-ass agent who knew all the major players and always got her clients the best deals, but I knew her as my slyly funny friend who was also my biggest champion, refusing to let me undersell myself.

She'd arrived four days ago because she didn't trust me to price my own art. She was clearly right to do that, as I would have gone much lower. As it was, pieces were still flying out the door and I was going to be set for a few years.

"Okay, shorty, I see a couple of live ones," Mary Beth said. "Where did your mom go?" She glanced around and then made a quick movement with her hand. "She was talking to your Aunt Hester. Okay, Mom's on her way." She glared at Declan. "Do not leave her side." She glided off, the masses separating before her.

In my defense, I'm not short. Am I as tall as my six-and-a-half-foot, super hot, bearded boyfriend? No. No, I was not. I'm five-three and a half, which is a totally respectable height. Did I usually round up to five-four? Of course. I was simplifying.

Mary Beth's mom was a beautiful Black woman who was herself an artist. I'd met her once when I went to New York to work with Mary Beth. Her mom was free and funny and open to the world. She was also a gifted sculptor. I was pretty sure Mary Beth's father was a warrior elf, given she was at least six feet tall, with long, white-blond hair, luminous golden-brown skin, and piercing gray eyes.

She arrowed through the crowd, stopping beside an elderly couple in windbreakers and walking shoes who looked as though they'd wandered in by accident.

"Do you know who they are," Declan asked quietly, his arm protectively around my waist.

I shrugged. "No idea."

My mom stepped in front of a wild-eyed man coming straight at me. Her fingers twitched at her side and he turned sharply, wandering off.

"Thanks," I said.

Because it was opening night, we also had waiters weaving through the gallery, offering wine and appetizers. Mom was sipping the wine, but I couldn't handle alcohol on a queasy stomach.

"I worry, darling," she said. "I know you've always wanted your own gallery, but this gives people too much access to you. And that security guard you hired isn't watching people to make sure they don't steal. What is he even doing?" My mom was used to being in charge and I'm sure this all felt too chaotic to her.

“You look beautiful,” I said. “I told you the blue dress would be perfect tonight.” Mom was gorgeous to begin with, with shoulder-length black hair, fair skin, and Corey green eyes. It had taken some doing, but I had talked her out of her very conservative black suit and into a flowing, wraparound silk dress in blues and greens.

“You do look very pretty, Ms. Corey,” Declan said.

Staring out at the crowd, she said, “Yes, well, that’s nice to hear, but I’d rather discuss your security.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I said, bouncing on the balls of my feet. “I haven’t told you. Bracken and I created a ward. If someone tries to steal one of my pieces, tries to hide it and walk out—that part’s important—it disappears from their pocket or bag and reappears in its original spot.”

Mom’s focus snapped to me. “What? How—that’s amazing. You need to share it with me so I can share it with the family. Excellent,” she said, nodding. “No more pilfered goods in our shops.” She thought a moment. “So, is your guard just for show?”

“No,” I said. “That’s Carter, Detective Osso’s younger brother.” Like Declan, he was six and a half feet tall, with shoulders even broader than a werewolf’s. He was a dark-skinned Black man who, like his brother, wore a perpetual scowl. “He’s working on a PhD in Marine Biology. We’ll only be open a couple days a week, so it won’t cut into his dissertation time too much. The ward should keep my artwork safe. He’s here to watch people.”

“Oh,” Mom said. “Good. But I still don’t see how you can possibly make a living only being open two or three days a week.”

“And by appointment,” I said. We’d already had this discussion a few times.



“Collectors prefer private viewings. Anyway,” I said, trying to change the subject, “that earpiece Carter’s wearing? It’s not hooked up to a security system or whatever. He’s listening to audiobooks.”

Declan laughed. “Nice.”

“Are you sure he can handle one of your obsessed stalkers?” Mom asked.

Carter turned to us from his spot across the gallery, eyebrows raised.

Leaning into my Mom, I whispered, “He’s a bear shifter. He can handle any of them; probably all of them.”

He nodded and went back to surveying the room.

“Mary Beth’s walking them to Cecil 2,” I whispered.

“Who?” Mom followed my gaze, studying the couple for a moment. “Oh. Your agent is very good, darling. The Winslows look like middle-class tourists, but the wife’s from serious old money and the husband used it to make them even more. They’re committed philanthropists, so at least they’re doing a lot of good with it.” Mom elbowed me. “You should feel honored they’re here. They live on the East Coast. Connecticut, I believe.”

“How do you know all this stuff about them?” I asked.

“I read an article on the charity work they do. I never would have recognized them if your agent hadn’t singled them out.”

“Aaaand there they go.” My hopes sank. Not only did they not buy my five-foot glass rendering of Cecil, they didn’t even pick up a starfish paperweight. Damn.

Mary Beth moved back to us, the crowd parting and then coming back together behind her. “Sybil, that dress is gorgeous on you,” she said as she went behind the cash wrap.

My aunt Elizabeth’s kids Frank and Faith were working the cash register, ringing up and wrapping purchases.

Mary Beth went into a drawer and pulled out a roll of Sold stickers.

“Did they buy something?” I whispered, hope bubbling up.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, you sweet summer child. It would be easier to tell you what they didn’t buy. Cecil is gone. They’ve put in an order for one hundred and seventy-five of the large octopuses.” At my look of shock, she said, “I explained you’d need time for an order that large. They’re planning to give them to the top executives in their companies as holiday gifts. I told them we could deliver by November fifteenth. That works, doesn’t it?”

She was referring to the twelve-inch octopuses. There was only one five-foot rendering of Cecil. I considered and then nodded.

“We’ll hire a team when it’s time to ship. We do not want them arriving with broken tentacles. They also bought three of the paintings, seven of the framed photos—your underwater series—and an assortment of this and that. They want to come back tomorrow before opening so they can browse properly. We’ll pull out any of the big pieces you still have in the fire room for them to see.” She stopped. “No. We’ll take them to the fire room so they can see what you do. That’s better. They get to feel themselves close with the artist. Ten tomorrow morning. I’ll get here first.” She looked out over the crowd. “It’s going well. Let me get these stickers on.

“And we have another collector who just walked in. He’s going to be very annoyed

the Winslows got here first.” She hurried off, stickers still in hand.

I was reeling, doing math in my head.

Declan picked me up and kissed me soundly. “Congratulations, Ursula. Looks like The Sea Wicche is a success.” When he put me down, I had to hold on so my knees didn’t buckle.

“I’m so proud of you, Arwyn. And you were obviously right about only needing to be open a couple of days a week.” Mom looked as dazed as I was feeling.

I felt it when he walked in. The air changed. Mom made a noise and I followed her gaze to the door. He’d come. He’d promised he’d come, and he did. Dad.

Larger than life, he stood just inside the door, taking it all in. He wore a dark gray suit with a snowy white shirt and a watery blue tie. His hair was cut short, making his aqua blue eyes stand out even more.

I grabbed Mom and Declan’s hands, giving patrons a mental push out of the way so we could go to him. Mom resisted, but I pulled harder. She hadn’t seen him since before I was born, since she’d done what the family said and broken up with him. To say this meeting was fraught was an understatement.

He met us halfway across the room. “Daughter, I like your gallery very much.” He may have been speaking to me, but his eyes were on Mom. “Sybil, it’s good to see you.”

She swallowed and then nodded.

His focus swung to Declan. “And you. Are you strong enough to protect my child?”

Declan said, “I am,” just as I said, “I’m strong enough on my own, thanks.”

“That’s true,” Dad said, taking my gloved hand. “You have a lot of me in you.” He tucked my hand into the crook of his arm and moved us away from the other two. “Show me what you’ve created.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:43 am*

### The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore & Bar

#### Sam Quinn, Book 1

Welcome to The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore and Bar. I'm Sam Quinn, the werewolf book nerd in charge. I run my business by one simple rule: Everyone needs a good book and a stiff drink, be they vampire, wicche, demon, or fae. No wolves, though. Ever. I have my reasons.

I serve the supernatural community of San Francisco. We've been having some problems lately. Okay, I'm the one with the problems. The broken body of a female werewolf washed up on my doorstep. What makes sweat pool at the base of my spine, though, is realizing the scars she bears are identical to the ones I conceal. After hiding for years, I've been found.

A protection I've been relying on is gone. While my wolf traits are strengthening steadily, the loss also left my mind vulnerable to attack. Someone is ensnaring me in horrifying visions intended to kill. Clive, the sexy vampire Master of the City, has figured out how to pull me out, designating himself my personal bodyguard. He's grumpy about it, but that kiss is telling a different story. A change is taking place. It has to. The bookish bartender must become the fledgling badass.

I'm a survivor. I'll fight fang and claw to protect myself and the ones I love. And let's face it, they have it coming.

The Dead Don't Drink at Lafitte's

## Sam Quinn, Book 2

I'm Sam Quinn, the werewolf book nerd owner of the Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore and Bar. Things have been busy lately. While the near-constant attempts on my life have ceased, I now have a vampire gentleman caller. I've been living with Clive and the rest of his vampires for a few weeks while the Slaughtered Lamb is being rebuilt. It's going about as well as you'd expect.

My mother was a wicche and long dormant abilities are starting to make themselves known. If I'd had a choice, necromancy wouldn't have been my top pick, but it's coming in handy. A ghost warns me someone is coming to kill Clive. When I rush back to the nocturne, I find vamps from New Orleans readying an attack. One of the benefits of vampires looking down on werewolves is no one expects much of me. They don't expect it right up until I take their heads.

Now, Clive and I are setting out for New Orleans to take the fight back to the source. Vampires are masters of the long game. Revenge plots are often decades, if not centuries, in the making. We came expecting one enemy but quickly learn we have darker forces scheming against us. Good thing I'm the secret weapon they never see coming.

## The Wicche Glass Tavern

## Sam Quinn, Book 3

I'm Sam Quinn, the werewolf book nerd owner of the Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore and Bar. Clive, my vampire gentleman caller, has asked me to marry him. His nocturne is less than celebratory. Unfortunately, for them and the sexy vamp doing her best to seduce him, his cold, dead heart beats only for me.

As much as my love life feels like a minefield, it has to take a backseat to a far more pressing problem. The time has come. I need to deal with my aunt, the woman who's

been trying to kill me for as long as I can remember. She's learned a new trick. She's figured out how to weaponize my friends against me. To have any hope of surviving, I have to learn to use my necromantic gifts. I need a teacher. We find one hiding among the fae, which is a completely different problem. I need to determine what I'm capable of in a hurry because my aunt doesn't care how many are hurt or killed as long as she gets what she wants. Sadly for me, what she wants is my name on a headstone.

I'm gathering my friends—werewolves, vampires, wicches, gorgons, a Fury, a half-demon, an elf, and a couple of dragon shifters—into a kind of Fellowship of the Sam. It's going to be one hell of a battle. Hopefully, San Francisco will still be standing when the dust clears.

## The Hob & Hound Pub

### Sam Quinn, Book 4

I'm Sam Quinn, the newly married werewolf book nerd owner of the Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore and Bar. Clive and I are on our honeymoon. Paris is lovely, though the mummy in the Louvre inching toward me is a bit off-putting. Although Clive doesn't sense anything, I can't shake the feeling I'm being watched.

Even after we cross the English Channel to begin our search for Aldith—the woman who's been plotting against Clive since the beginning—the prickling unease persists. Clive and I are separated, rather forcefully, and I'm left to find my way alone in a foreign country, evading not only Aldith's large web of hench-vamps, but vicious fae creatures disloyal to their queen. Gloriana says there's a poison in the human realm that's seeping into Faerie, and I may have found the source.

I knew this was going to be a working vacation, but battling vampires on one front and the fae on another is a lot, especially in a country steeped in magic. As a side note, I need to get word to Benvair. I think I've found the dragon she's looking for.

Gloriana is threatening to set her warriors against the human realm, but I may have a way to placate her. Aldith is a different story. There's no reasoning with rabid vengeance. She'll need to be put out of our misery permanently if Clive and I have any hope of a long, happy life together. Heck, I'd settle for a few quiet weeks.

## Biergarten of the Damned

### Sam Quinn, Book 5

I'm Sam, the werewolf book nerd owner of The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore & Bar. I've always thought of Dave, my red-skinned, shark-eyed, half-demon cook, as a kind of foul-mouthed uncle, one occasionally given to bouts of uncontrolled anger.

Something's going on, though. He's acting strangely, hiding things. When I asked what was wrong, he blew me off and told me to quit bugging him. That's normal enough. What's not is his missing work. Ever. Other demons are appearing in the bar, looking for him. I'm getting worried, and his banshee girlfriend Maggie isn't answering my calls.

Demons terrify me. I do NOT want to go into any demon bars looking for Dave, but he's my family, sort of. I need to try to help, whether he wants me to or not. When I finally learn the truth, though... I'm not sure I can ever look at him again, let alone have him work for me. Are there limits to forgiveness? I think there might be.

## The Viper's Nest Roadhouse & Café

### Sam Quinn, Book 6

I'm Sam, the werewolf book nerd owner of The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore & Bar. Clive, Fergus, and I are moving into our new home, the business is going well, and our folly is taking shape. The problem? Clive's maker Garyn is coming to San Francisco for a visit, and this reunion has been a thousand years in the making. Back



then, Garyn was rather put out when Clive accepted the dark kiss and then took off to avenge his sister's murder. She was looking for a new family. He was looking for lethal skills. And so, Garyn has had plenty of time to align her forces. When her allies begin stepping out of the shadows, Clive's foundation will be shaken.

Stheno and her sisters are adding to their rather impressive portfolio of businesses around the world by acquiring The Viper's Nest Roadhouse & Café. Medusa found the place when she was visiting San Francisco. A dive bar filled with hot tattooed bikers? Yes, please!

Clive and I will need neutral territory for our meeting with Garyn, and a biker bar (& café, Stheno insisted) should fit the bill. I'd assumed my necromancy would give us an advantage. I hadn't anticipated, though, just how powerful Garyn and her allies were. When the fangs descend and the heads start rolling, it's going to take every friend we have and a nocturne full of vamps at our backs to even the playing field. Wish us luck. We're going to need it.

The Bloody Ruin Asylum & Taproom

Sam Quinn, Book 7

I'm Sam, the werewolf book nerd owner of The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore & Bar. My husband, Master vampire Clive, has been asked to go to Budapest to interview for a position in the Guild, a council of thirteen vampires who advise the world's Masters. The competition for the recently vacated spot is fierce. I worry about Clive, as it quickly becomes apparent that the last person to hold the position didn't leave voluntarily.

Ever the supportive wife, I'm tagging along. I researched Budapest and had a long itinerary of things to do. That is, I did. When we arrive, we find out that the Guild headquarters is in the ruins of an abandoned insane asylum. Awesome. If there's one thing I love, it's being hounded by mentally unstable Hungarian ghosts.

Let's just say this isn't the romantic getaway I'd been hoping for. With Clive in top secret meetings and a bunch of creepy Renfields skulking around corners, nowhere is safe. I want to help Clive because I know he really wants the job, but the other Guild members are ancient and scary powerful. Between you and me, I thought Vlad would be taller.

Wish us luck! We're going to need it.

The Mermaid's Bubble Lounge

Sam Quinn, book 8

The vampire Guild is in shambles. My husband Clive and I might have given more than a few Masters their final deaths—allegedly—so it's fallen on us to fix the problem. Mostly on Clive, that is, as he's the Master vampire. I'm Sam Quinn, werewolf book nerd and owner of The Slaughtered Lamb Bookstore & Bar.

Vlad (yes, that one) and Cadmael are the houseguests no one would want, but we're trying to grin and bear it because the Guild must be rebuilt, and we must make haste as rogue vamps are becoming a big bloody problem.

Finvarra, the fae king who had it out for me even before I helped cause his brother's death, is coming to do what none of his assassins have managed: end me in as painful a manner as possible.

In other news, Stheno and Vlad have been hooking up and we're all a little afraid of those two together.

Bewicched: The Sea Wicche Chronicles

Sea Wicche, Book 1

We here at The Sea Wicche cater to your art-collecting, muffin-eating, tea-drinking, and potion-peddling needs. Palmistry and Tarot sessions are available upon request and by appointment. Our store hours vary and rely completely on Arwyn—the owner—getting her butt out of bed.

I'm Arwyn Cassandra Corey, the sea wicche, or the wicche who lives by the sea. It requires a lot more work than I'd anticipated to remodel an abandoned cannery and turn it into an art gallery & tea bar. It's coming along, though, especially with the help of a new werewolf who's joined the construction crew. He does beautiful work. His sexy, growly, bearded presence is very hard to ignore, but I'm trying. I'm not sure how such a laid-back guy got the local Alpha and his pack threatening to hunt him down and tear him apart, but we all have our secrets. And because I don't want to know his—or yours for that matter—I wear these gloves. Clairvoyance makes the simplest things the absolute worst. Trust me. Or don't. Totally up to you.

Did I mention my mother and grandmother are pressuring me to assume my rightful place on the Corey Council? That's a kind of governing triad for our ancient magical family, one that has more than its fair share of black magic practitioners. And yes, before you ask, people have killed to be on the council—one psychotic sorceress aunt stands out—but I have no interest in the power or politics that come with the position. I'd rather stick to my art and, in the words of my favorite sea wicche, help poor unfortunate souls. (Good luck trying to get that song out of your head now)

Wicche Hunt: The Sea Wicche Chronicles

Sea Wicche, Book 2

I'm Arwyn Cassandra Corey, the Sea Wicche of Monterey. Want a psychic reading? Sure. I can do that. In the market for art? I have all your painting, photography, glass blowing, and ceramic needs covered in my newly remodeled art gallery by the sea. Need help solving a grisly cold case? Unfortunately, I can probably help with that too.

After more than a decade of being nagged, guilty, and threatened, I've finally joined the Corey Council and am working with my mother and grandmother to hunt down a twisted sorcerer. We know who she is. Now we need to find and stop her before more are murdered.

The evil the sorcerer and her demon are doing is seeping into the community. Violent crimes have been increasing and as a result Detectives Hernández and Osso have brought me another horrifying case. I'll do what I can, because of course I will. What are a few more nightmares to a woman who barely sleeps?

Declan Quinn, the wicked hot werewolf rebuilding my deck, is preparing for a dominance battle with the local Alpha. A couple of wolves have already left their pack to follow Declan, recognizing him as the true Alpha. Declan needs to watch his back as the full moon approaches. The current Alpha will do whatever it takes to hold on to power, including breaking pack law and enlisting the help of a local vampire.

And if Wilbur, my selkie friend is right, I might just be meeting my dad soon. Perhaps he'll have some advice for this wicche hunt. I'm going to need all the help I can get.

## Wicching Hour: The Sea Wicche Chronicles

### Sea Wicche, Book 3

I'm Arwyn Cassandra Corey, the Sea Wicche of Monterey. My new art gallery is finally open, my boyfriend is the new Alpha of the Big Sur pack, and my sorcerer cousin is still on the loose. It's been a lot. I'm just sayin'.

Detectives Hernández and Osso are asking for my help again. Bodies have been found torn up in the woods in a manner that has those in the know thinking werewolf. Declan, as Alpha, will need to investigate his pack and help hunt the killer.

We're narrowing in on Calliope and her demon. She can't hide forever, and my uncle might just have the map to where she's been holed up. If it's the last thing I do, I'll make her pay for her treachery.

Did I mention there's a new podcast, hosted by a human, who is coming dangerously close to telling the kind of secrets the supernatural community kills to keep quiet? His latest season is about a certain artistic wicche.

Oh, and I finally met my dad. Like I said, it's been a lot.