

Blood

#1. Falcon's Escape

by

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The Setting

A town defined by thick green hedges. Is there something they don't want us to see?

A girl most strangers think is a boy. Falcon is the star of her high school hockey team and the only girl ever to play on it. Too bad the opposing fans usually chant, "Get the girl! Get the girl!"

A truth about vampires that most vampires don't even know.

And a coming of age story involving retractable fangs and the realization you're descended from a hidden lineage of highly specialized hunters: *Hunters of rogue vampires*.

Too bad agents from Homeland Security are hunting the vampire hunters...

Meet Falcon, who (so far) knows nothing about all this.

Chapter 1

The Man at the Door

I had no idea that Great Uncle Wolfgang was still alive until he rang our doorbell. I'd only ever seen him in a faded black-and-white photograph.

Mom was still at work, and my school was out for the day. I went straight home, since I wasn't welcome at practices or the lifting room anymore. Not since I got kicked off the hockey team and became *persona non grata* at my high school. But that's a different story. At least I hope it is.

And there he was at the front door, a tall, thin man in an old-fashioned summer suit and hat. Behind him, a sleek black car pulled away. His ride from the airport, I assumed.

His suitcase was covered with destination labels—Paris, Istanbul, Casablanca—like something from a really old movie. His hat looked antique too. A fedora, I think they called them.

"I am venerated to meet you," he announced.

"Uh, don't you mean honored? Venerated suggests that people revere you, which maybe they do, but I just met you and I certainly don't." (My favorite subject is English, and I hate it when people use the wrong word.)

"You should be honored to meet me." He gave me a stern glare down his longish nose. "And I am, ah, honored to meet you," he added, unbending enough to smile slightly, which had the unfortunate effect of offering a glimpse of long, yellowed teeth.

"You look just like your photo," I said, staring at him in disbelief.

"I should hope so," he said.

I kept staring. See, it just didn't compute. Mom puts family photos on the fridge. (Her family only. She threw away Dad's last month.) Uncle Wolfgang is in one of them, a faded black-and-white of a man in a fedora at the rail of an old-fashioned steamship. My mom had written Great Uncle Wolfgang on the bottom of it. I'd assumed it was some boring ancestor. Apparently not.

“You look like your photo too,” he said, eying me as critically as I was eying him.

“Wait, what photo?” I asked.

“From the newspaper,” he explained.

“Shit!” I hadn’t meant to curse, it just slipped out. Had he actually seen the article from our local paper? The one that showed me in hockey gear with a black eye? The one that read, ‘Star center and only girl on high school team thrown out for gratuitous violence,’ which I’d like to say was an exaggeration, but it wasn’t.

“Not my best game,” I said.

“Blood on the ice?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I shrugged. “I kinda punched a kid in the nose.”

“And then?” he prodded.

“Why are you here?” I asked, eager to change the subject. “Mom didn’t mention your visit. In fact she almost threw your picture away. Bad blood between you?”

“I’m here because you’re in high school,” he announced. “Important time in a girl’s life.” He looked me up and down and added, “Or whatever you are.”

I guess I didn’t look much like a girl to him with my stocky build, short hair, old jeans, and wrinkled T-shirt. Not to mention that he was pale skinned like my mom, while I took after my dad. I hear her relatives disapprove of me.

“I thought you could benefit from my help,” he added, which seemed strange.

“Why would I need *your* help?” I demanded.

“Your transition, of course.” He smiled knowingly and looked me up and down. “May I come in?”

I glared at him. “Look, I may seem to be dressed like a ‘boy’ to someone as old, uh, fashioned as you, and obviously I keep my hair short, but I’m not transitioning! I’m happy as I am. Is that what you heard? From who?”

He looked startled, but just for a second. “Oh no, you misunderstand me. I’m talking about your transition to . . . Well, perhaps you should invite me in and we can discuss it in private.”

“Transition to what?” “It’s *misunderstand*, not misunderstand!” I nearly shouted, and if not my gender, then what in the world do you think I’m transitioning to!” He really was annoyingly strange.

“To a superior species, of course. Shall we enter?”

I sighed. “Seeing as your a relative, you better come in, but don’t people usually ask to be invited before they come all the way from Casablanca or wherever? Where did you come from?”

“Thank you.” He strode past me, suitcase in hand, without saying anything more. Weird.

But to really understand just how weird it all was, you need to know what happened the night I got kicked off my hockey team. This isn’t a story about hockey, far from it, but you see, that was the night that something inside me began to go very, very wrong.

Chapter 2

Blood on the Ice

I love hockey, it's so graceful and brutal all at once, but this isn't a sports story, so just hang on while I explain what happened as fast as I can.

I didn't play the first two periods of that game. Coach wanted to give the second string more experience, which left us down by three at the beginning of the third and final period. But he didn't look worried. He just looked at me.

I got two goals right away.

It's not that I'm big. I'm damn strong 'for a girl,' whatever they mean by that. But I'm not as heavy as most of the guys. What I am is very fast and a little bit mean. I like to pick out their weakest skater and knock him over. Clean, no whistle. I just go through him and take on the goalie. If my fake works, I bury the puck in the net. If it doesn't, I bury the puck in the goalie. Next time I shoot, he flinches and I get my goal.

The other teams' fans liked to single me out. This time the chanting started as soon as I stepped on the ice. "Get the girl! Get the girl!" Of course it got louder with each goal.

I won the face-off after my second goal, but as soon as I started down the ice, two really big defenders knocked me over. They'd brought football players to use on me.

I sprang back up. I don't usually lose my cool, but this time I wanted blood. I think it was the chanting. I was getting sick of it. So I took the first one down with a few fast punches, then I landed a good one on the second's nose.

Blood sprayed everywhere. I even tasted it on my lips.

I'd already won the fight and earned a penalty. It was time to stop. But the crowd was still chanting and I completely lost my head when their center took a swing at me. I dodged, then punched back. As he went down, I spun and caught another player with a punch that sent him sprawling too. Coach didn't get out there to hold me until I'd decked most of their team, including the ones who jumped onto the ice to join the fight.

Too bad a photographer from the local paper was there...

The thing is, I think it was the blood. Not the sight of it so much as the smell. It made me crazy. To tell the truth, I've been having nightmares about that smell ever since.

But how in the world did Uncle Fedora see my local newspaper? That was what was bugging me most. "Where do you live?" I demanded.

He sat down at the kitchen table like it was his and popped the cap off one of my dad's old beers. (You'd think Mom would've tossed them, but she never cleans the fridge. And I don't drink. Too serious an athlete for that.)

"You're obviously not from around here," I repeated. "So how'd you see our newspaper?"

He laughed, which bugged me even more. I'm mean, I'm not that funny.

"And what did you mean about 'transitioning to another species'?" I continued, my voice rising. "Was that your idea of a bad joke?"

He swung one of the kitchen chairs to the side and stuck his boots on it. The boots were old fashioned and very black. "No," he said. And then he took a slow drink from the bottle of beer.

"I really think you should explain yourself," I growled.

"It is manifest that your parents have failed to tell you," he announced.

"Manifest?" I repeated, outraged. "Do you mean apparent? Never mind. Does my mom know you're here?" Although I wasn't going to get into it with this weirdo, I hadn't heard from my dad since their big fight last month. Not once.

"She'll be exercised."

"Excited?" I offered.

"That too," he said with a half smile. He sipped the beer again, then went on. "I don't know your father. I visited your mother when she was your age, but I haven't returned. She was ungrateful."

"At least you go away when you're not wanted," I said. "That's something."

"Has it occurred to you," he said, "that your name is, ah, unusually?"

“Unusual? Of course. Who names a baby Falcon? But you’ve met my mom. She means well . . .” I shrugged.

He laughed again.

“I really don’t see what’s so funny.”

“I’m referencing your family name, not your first.”

“Valvenandi? It’s Italian. So what?”

“Ancient Latin, actually,” he said. “And it is your mother’s name.”

“So? My parents weren’t married until after I was born. She used her name on my birth certificate.”

“Valvenandi is a compound of two ancient Latin words,” he said. “Have you never heard of the Valukar?”

“*Heard of.* And no, dead languages aren’t my thing.”

“Not yet,” he said. “Do you wish to know what Valukar means?”

“No.”

“It means vampire.”

That surprised me. “They had those in Ancient Rome?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” he said. “We did.”

“They did.”

“They. The second half of your family name comes from—wait, is that your mother?”

“*They* did.” My best subject was English. It bothered me to hear him butcher it.

“As you say. Now, the second half of your family name comes from the word—wait, is that your mother?”

Chapter 3

Unpacking the Family Baggage

He'd heard it too. The *tap tap* of footsteps on the walk and the jingling of keys. I was surprised. Usually I'm the one who hears things before anyone else does. I've got exceptionally good hearing. Maybe it came from him.

The front door swung open and I could hear Mom shedding her overcoat and dropping her shoulder bag full of whatever real estate agents carry around. Listing sheets and business cards, I guess.

"How was school, honey?" she called. Then she reached the kitchen doorway and said, "Shit!"

There was a loud shattering noise. She'd dropped her latest expensive cell phone on the tile floor and broken the glass cover, but she didn't seem to notice as she stared. "What the *hell* are you doing here! You're supposed to be DEAD!"

"Ah," he said. "The memorial service." He put the beer bottle down. "That was years ago, and you didn't come."

"Did you fake your own death?"

"There was a bit of unpleasantness I needed to leave behind."

"My parents were very upset that your life insurance went to some cousin nobody ever heard of in Morocco. A million dollars! I suppose it was actually you?"

He shrugged.

"Figures! And here I am with a deadbeat for an ex-husband, and still paying off my college loan debt!" She was really worked up.

"Wait, did you and Dad divorce?" I asked.

"What are you doing alive and why are you *here*? You can't stay here! Have you been talking to her? Has he been talking to you, honey? He's crangerous, uh, dangerous! Dangerous *and* crazy! And he's leaving. Now."

“Nice to see you, too,” he said. “Sorry about your ex-husband. Is he suing for support? He was sponging off you all along, I beat.”

“Bet,” I interjected. Couldn’t help myself.

“You’re one to talk!” my mom hissed, ignoring me. “And you even drink the same *beer* as him!” she glared at the bottle in his hand. “I’ll call you a taxi. You’ll be back at the airport in an hour.”

“There are no flights until tomorrow morning. Shall I take care of your ex-husband?” He raised a long, thin eyebrow. “You and I are bound by blood, after all, and it is traditionalized to take care of one’s own.”

“Take care of?” My mom looked horrified. “God only knows what *that* might entail! Give me your suitcase. I’ll put it out on the sidewalk. You can wait there until a taxi comes.”

“Uber, my dear,” he said. “All the taxicab companies have gone out of existence in this parochial little town. What’s for dinner? I’ve been traveling for days. I’m ravaging.”

“Ravenous,” I corrected. “Hordes ravage. People who are very hungry feel raven ___”

“We’re vegetarians,” my mother interrupted. “I’m raising Falcon on vegetables. No red meat!”

“And yet you named her Falcon.” I had to admit he had a point there.

“It might be nice to just *try* a little meat, Mom,” I suggested.

“Go out and mow the lawn, Falcon. Now!” she shouted.

“What?”

“Or, uh, clean up leaves or something! I need to deal with this unwanted intruder. Run along, honey! *Now.*”

My mother never talked like that. In fact, she rarely spoke to me at all.

“The mower’s out of gas,” I countered, and I stayed where I was. It was too good a show to miss.

Uncle Wolfgang didn't move either, except to reach over and pull the fridge open and grab another beer. "Cheers," he said as he popped the lid off with his bare hand.

Dad likes—liked—old-fashioned bottles without a screw top, so that's what was still in the fridge. I didn't know where the bottle opener was, but it didn't seem to matter to Uncle Wolfgang.

"You can't stop her from changing just by keeping her away from meat," he added after a swallow.

"Quiet!" Mom shouted, advancing on him. "I don't want her exposed to *any* of your crazy ideas. And get your boots off my kitchen chair!"

"Can she drive?" he asked. "If so, you may send her out to acquire us some T-bone steaks from the nearest butcher. I will not to let you feed her grass clippings."

"You're talking about me like I'm not here," I objected. "And Mom isn't going to eat a steak. No way."

He stood. "We shall go to the market now, Falcon. You may pilot your mother's autovehicle. She needs some time to cool over."

"Down," I corrected. "Or off. And its automobile." But they both ignored me.

"Now wait one damn minute!" my mom said, her voice still raised. "She's not going *anywhere* with you! Nowhere. Do you understand?"

"Calm down," he told her. "I promise I won't tell her anything. Unless she starts to change, of course. You wouldn't want her going through that on her lone, now, would you?"

"I can handle her! And *you* can crawl back into whatever grave you crawled out of. I expect you to be at the airport first thing tomorrow morning!"

He came to my side so quickly I hardly saw him do it. "Come along," he said, tugging my arm. "We're going to shopping."

"Tofu!" Mom objected as we headed for the car, leaving her standing over the bits of broken phone glass. "And don't tell her about culling!"

“Tell me about culling.” I was driving down Main Street, and he was sitting in the back seat like I was his chauffeur.

“This is a border town,” he pointed out.

“Do you want to chase immigrants out of town?” I demanded. “Are you one of *those* crazies? Because if that’s why you came here—”

“Becalm yourself, Falcon. I have no hostility toward immigrantis.”

“Then why did you bring them up, just to change the subject?”

“What subject?” he said.

I rolled my eyes. Obviously he didn’t want to tell me about culling. I’d just have to try again later.

I pulled up to Red Owl Groceries and stopped. “You’re crazy, aren’t you?” I asked, eying him in the rear view mirror.

“Who is not? If you shall pick up a couplet of large, juicy, raw steaks, I shall relax right here.”

I turned and held out my hand. “Money.”

He shrugged. “Does not your mother provide you with funds?” But when I didn’t reply, he fished a bill out of a leather wallet and handed it to me.

It was a hundred. I raised an eyebrow. “This’ll do,” I said. And I wasn’t planning on giving him the change.

Chapter 4

The Hedges of Remoteville, USA

Obviously Remoteville isn't the real name of our boring little town. It's true, however, that it's a border town. But think six months of winter, and no border patrol.

My town is up north and close enough to walk to Canada. In fact, the next exit on the highway going north *is* Canada. Not a big deal. The rest stop has a customs counter if you want to get a visa, except usually there's no one staffing it. I don't know what my weird uncle was talking about because we don't really have a border problem here, although the feds did come in and start putting up a massive cement wall on the edge of town last year. Then they left, leaving it halfway done.

I don't think the border wall is even on the border. They got that wrong. Or else Hedges's yard crosses the border because the wall runs right through his backyard.

Hedges is actually my best friend's last name. His first is Hieronymus, so of course we don't use it. Except for the goofs who say "Hi, Hi!" when they see him in the hall.

He's in my class, and he's kind of a genius. One of those absentminded ones who forgets to study for quizzes so the school doesn't know how smart he is. We've been friends since before anyone knew who the jocks and the nerds were. He doesn't play hockey, or anything at all. But he builds interesting things in a shed in his yard, which is right smack up against the border wall. The wall actually presses against the back of his workshop, as he calls the shed. I'm surprised they didn't demo it when they built that section of wall.

After I made it back home without scraping any mailboxes, and parked the car in the driveway, I rode my bike over to see Hedges. I'm not actually allowed to drive Mom's car. I do have my learner's permit, but she's always too busy to take me out. Anyway, my uncle and the grocery bag went into the house while I rode away as fast as I could. I wanted to tell Hedges about him.

I circled past the long garage where Hedges's dad has his tow truck business. It's much bigger than their house. Hedges's mom left when he was three, so he basically

raised himself while his dad ran the business. Crashed cars were left in the field out back, and Hedges pirated transformers and alternators and switches from them. The field was recently cut off by the massive new border wall, but, as I said, Hedges's shed is still there.

As I leaned my bike against the tall cement wall, a loud motor sound came out of the shed. It whined into some sort of high gear as a skylight on top of the shed burst and glass rained down the roof shingles.

Out of the skylight came a cube-shaped thingy with a motor at its base, a lawn chair above it—empty, fortunately—and a metal-bladed fan or propeller spinning on top, plus big wheels with rubber suction cups on them. *Whine!* went the fan and *plup plup plup* went the suction cups as it worked its way over the roof and began to climb the cement wall.

It got close to the top, but the wheels got tangled in razor wire and it stopped. The motor hiccupped and smoke and flame belched out.

Hedges burst out of the door and stood shading his eyes and staring up at his newest invention as it incinerated itself. When the suction cups began to burn, it fell off the wall and plopped onto the tar-paper roof of the shed.

“Uh, you're going to need a fire extinguisher,” I said. “And maybe a ladder?”

“Oh!” He darted back into the shed and came out with his arms full of red metal cylinders, black rubber hoses, and shiny chrome handles. “Help me put these together,” he called, but I just shook my head. Of course he'd taken them apart. It's what he did.

The fire had caught the roof now, so I went over to the rear of his dad's house and grabbed the garden hose. It had a sprayer on it. I soon had the roof dripping wet and the fire out. I got Hedges with the spray too, just to see him jump. Then I turned off the hose and put it away.

He was still standing in the yard, looking at his burned invention where it sat steaming on top of the shed roof.

“Test run?” I asked.

He nodded glumly.

“Good thing you weren’t riding it. Was it supposed to carry you over the wall?”

He shrugged.

“Why?”

“That’s my yard back there. And most of Dad’s old junkers.”

The dead cars Hedges used for parts were behind the wall. Now I guess they belonged to Canada.

“My Uncle Fedora is visiting,” I said. “I want to talk to you about him.”

“Fedora? What kind of name is that?” He turned to stare at me.

“What kind of name is Hieronymus?” I demanded. “Actually, his name is Wolfgang, but he always wears an old fedora.”

“You don’t have any uncles,” he said.

“I didn’t think so either.”

“Is he from Bavaria?”

I shrugged. Hedges probably knew something obscure about the origin of the name Wolfgang, but I sure didn’t. “He looks European, like, white, you know?” I said. (My mother is light skinned but my dad is Black, so I’m in between. I wonder if I’ll see him again. My dad, I mean. Whom my mom is so mad at that I almost don’t blame him for leaving, but I’m getting off topic.)

Hedges led the way into his shed. “If you just met him, how do you know he always wears the same kind of hat?” he asked.

“It’s in an old photo of him.” A freshly severed electric fan base caught my eye. “You cut the motor and blades off this for your thingy?”

“Yeah.” He frowned.

I fingered a piece of scrap iron pipe on one of his junk-covered workbenches. “Fresh cut on this pipe too,” I said. “And how did that cinderblock get cut in half?”

“I was just, uh, testing a new saw.” He looked embarrassed.

“A saw?”

“The fire department got a grant last year to buy a rescue saw that goes through anything. Diamond-tipped blade. It’s amazing.”

“And?”

“Yeah, so, they forgot to apply for a training grant, and you aren’t supposed to operate it unless you get everyone certified.”

“Your dad’s a volunteer firefighter,” I said.

“Right. And he said he’d store it in his garage until the funding comes through to do the training. So—”

“So you borrowed it. Can I see?”

He pulled an oily cloth off a lump on one of his workbenches and there it was, about the size of a vacuum cleaner, with a really big shiny blade.

“It’s just a saw,” I said.

“It cuts anything. If you drop it, it’ll cut your leg off, then cut a hole in the road and bury your leg in it.”

“For real?”

“Well, basically, yeah.”

“And you want to get into your field?”

He nodded.

“Sometimes smart people are so dumb!” I picked up the saw. “Is this the on switch?” The thing roared to life, nearly jumping out of my grip.

“Hey!” Hedges shouted, but I pretended I couldn’t hear him. I went to the back of the shed where an old metal rack held God knows what forgotten rusty parts. I raised the saw and pressed the blade forward. It cut through the cluttered shelf like butter and then sliced the plywood rear wall. Next it slowed and began to make a grinding noise. Cement, I guessed. *Pop*, it got through the cement—also a guess but a reasonable one. I began to slide it downward.

In a minute, I'd sliced a three-foot cut all the way from waist height to the floor. I pulled out the saw and, hip-checking the weakened shelving to one side, began to lengthen the cut going upward.

Hedges was screaming and waving at me to stop, but I kept the motor running and began to cut across.

In another minute, it was time to cut down again. It really was an amazing saw.

When I reached the bottom of the shed wall, I turned the saw sideways and cut across near floor level to meet my cut on the other side. Then I put the thing down. "Nice," I said. "I like it."

"You cut up my shed!"

"I cut you a door." I turned and gave it a kick. It thudded outward onto long grass and a bright rectangle of sunlight came in. "Welcome to Canada," I said.

"What if they're patrolling the border?" he demanded.

"Canada? Not likely." I stuck my head through. "It's just your old field," I said. "And hundreds of miles of forest. Nobody outside of Washington, DC, gives a you-know-what."

"Really?" He leaned in to look, then went through. "Hey! This is good!"

I rolled my eyes.

I should explain that the Hedges family is the oldest family in town. My friend Hedges is part of history. And the way the Hedges family tells history, they invented the hedge. You know that row of bushes people prune and use like an outdoor wall? Our town has hedges everywhere. Low ones, fat ones, tall ones, ones as high as a house with an arch for the driveway. And almost everyone in the Hedges family, except for Hedges and his dad, are landscapers.

There are landscapers in most towns, I guess, and usually what they do is mow lawns. Here you have to mow your own lawn. The Hedges think that's idiot work. They maintain hedges. They trim them and fertilize them and pull out old bushes and put fresh ones in. If you want, they'll carve your hedges into fancy patterns like waves or a parade of animals.

We moved here when I was in kindergarten. The house my parents bought had a hedge that was so big that it shaded our tiny lawn. My mom likes to grow flowers, or at least she used to, so she got my dad got out his chainsaw and cut the hedge down.

When I made friends with Hedges—not the bushes but Hieronymus—his family was quite shocked. They didn't know us, but they sure knew who we were: the new people who cut down a hedge. I've never been welcome in any Hedges house, not even Hedges's dad's house. But Hedges doesn't care. Like I told you, he's an inventor. Not into landscaping.

That's just a little background on Hedges. He's a freethinker. A freethinker in a town that doesn't have freethinkers. So I value his advice. That's why I went to ask him about Great Uncle Wolfgang.

I followed Hedges out into the field and we stood there looking back at the massive cement wall with barbed wire on top. It was just plain cement on our side, but on the Canadian side, someone had painted it. Probably the contractors from Washington, DC. It was striped red, white, and blue. I groaned.

Here in Remoteville, the philosophy is live and let live. We don't ask where someone's from when they come into the grocery store. But I had a feeling that was starting to change. The wind was beginning to blow from a different direction.

And the wind had blown Uncle Wolfgang into town. "I want you to meet him," I said.

"What, here? Did you bring him?"

"Of course not. He doesn't even know I'm here. I mean, unless he's following me, and why would he do that?"

"How did you say you're related?" Hedges asked.

"I guess he's my mom's uncle. Actually, she called him her great uncle, so I'm not sure how old he is. Maybe really old. When did people travel by steamship?"

"You're only as old as you feel," came that strangely accented voice from the new hole in the cement wall.

"Damn it!" I exclaimed. "Are you following me? How did you get here?"

“I see what you mean about the fedora,” said Hedges.

Great Uncle Wolfgang looked Hedges over with a critical expression, then said, “Is this your boyfriend?”

I rolled my eyes and Hedges snorted. I could see he was trying not to laugh.

Unphazed, my uncle looked around and remarked, “There are a great many automotive carcasses in Canada, it appears.”

“Those are mine,” Hedges said.

“You keep your dead autovehicles in Canada? *And* surround them with green walls?” Uncle Wolfgang stared Hedges. “What else do you do? Because I’m just wondering why it smells like disgusting smoke. Almost as if someone lit tar on fire, then extinguished it out. Is that something you do also?”

“Nice to meet you,” Hedges said, not sounding like he meant it. “I’m Hedges. And your name is?”

“You may call me Sir. Is it customary, Mr. Hedges, to surround fields with such high, uh, hedges?”

Hedges turned to scan the view behind him. Long grass dotted with rusting cars stretched almost to where the trees rose up. But just before the forest, defining the field, was an overgrown green hedge.

“Yeah,” Hedges said. “Completely normal.”

“Whilst they may be normal in your world, young man, hedges only offer an illusion of security,” my uncle said, shaking his head disapprovingly. “You think they give you privacy, but they actually give your enemies coverage. See?”

“See what?” Hedges sounded confused.

I, however, had just caught a very wild-dog sort of scent along with the faint sound of a low growl. Something was out there. “What was that?” I demanded.

“Now you?” Hedges snapped. He sounded like he thought we were just trying to scare him.

“Look out!” I shouted. A wolf had broken through the hedge and leapt over a rusty car. It trotted toward us while two more broke through the hedge behind it.

I didn’t know whether the wolf was aiming for Hedges or me, but Hedges was in front of me so it was going to reach him first. He turned around, saw it—and froze. Good at thinking, my best friend, but not so good when it comes to action. If I’d known him less well, I would’ve shouted “Run!” But I knew it would do no good so *I* ran—past Hedges and straight at the wolf. Almost straight. I saw a rusty shovel in the grass and grabbed it as I ran.

I met the wolf just before it reached Hedges, and the shovel met the side of its head with a *smack* followed by a metallic ringing. The wolf yelped. He looked truly startled, like he couldn’t believe I would do that to him.

I reversed course and pushed Hedges down. Standing over him, I swung the shovel above me, making a whistling sound.

The wolf stared at me, growling. I had the odd feeling it was trying to tell me something. Then it turned and ran off toward the left side of the field.

I kept my eyes hard on it and that shovel singing in the air until it pressed into the hedge and disappeared.

“What about the other wolves?” Hedges asked from where he lay on his back looking up at me. As usual, all thinking and no action, but it *was* a good question. I’d forgotten about them.

A quick scan of the field showed me a fedora-covered head behind a rusted pickup. “Are you okay?” I called as I hurried toward him.

I stopped in shock. He was standing beside two wolves. Correction. Two wolf *carcasses*. They lay limply on their sides, lifeless and dead.

“What the Hell happened to them?” I demanded.

“They were too friendish,” he said. And then he turned to look at me over his shoulder and his eyes were— Okay, this is going to sound crazy, but they were glowing an intense brownish-gold. He blinked and they went back to normal, with human-looking

whites and regular-sized pupils in the same light brown as my mom's. But I know what I saw. They were like wolves' eyes, I swear. (My eyes, if you're curious, are very dark brown, like my hair.)

"How did—?" I bit the question off as the scent of pungent wild blood reached my nostrils. "Did you *bite* them?" I demanded. I could see now that there was blood on each wolf's neck, and a little blood dotting my uncle's leathery chin too. How did it get there???

He took me by the arm. "They must've come to your scent. You are beginning to change. You'll be attracting all sorts of unwanted attention from now onward. It's your mother's fault for not preparing you."

What about your scent, I thought. He smelled as animal as they did, although more old and stale. But I didn't say that. Instead, I said, "They weren't exactly *attacking* me. I was afraid the other one was going to attack Hedges, but it didn't actually try to bite either of us. Didn't you notice?"

"It doesn't matter. Wolves are dangerous."

"The wolves around here don't come into town to attack humans. Especially in broad daylight. This was different."

"They may have thought he was a threat to you."

"He?" I repeated. "You mean Hedges? That's stupid. But two of them apparently acted like *you* were a threat—and I guess you were." I glanced down at the bloody carcasses again.

"I've never gotten onward with wolves. All right than, let's—"

"On, not onward. Then, not than." I glared at him. Correcting his grammar was useless, obviously, but it helped get my annoyance out. He was amazingly annoying, as well as amazingly not what he appeared to be. "What was with the eyes?" I demanded.

"Let's get your friend back to safety *then*," he said, ignoring my question. "Ah, Mr. Hedges! What an exciting place Canada is! And now there are two new carcasses for your rusty graveyard."

"What the hell is going on?" Hedges demanded, flushed and upset.

“What is going in is that you are going to look through your pilage of scrap junk for hinges and a latch,” my uncle said, “while Falcon and I lift this concretion here and place it back in that opening. It appears you are going to desire a heavy portal between you and your field.”

“Door,” I said. Although I don’t know why I was bothering. Word choice was the least of my problems with him at this point.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Hedges said, turning to go back into the shed.

“That chunk of cement is six inches thick,” I pointed out. “Let’s just use the plywood.”

“You think we can’t lift it?” Then he reached out and slapped me.

I *really* didn’t expect *that*. My temper flared and I almost swung at him.

“Save it,” he said, “for the cement.” Then he took hold of one side of the cement slab.

The rush of adrenaline felt familiar, like when I’d beaten up that hockey team. Maybe he was right? I leaned over and grabbed the other side, and we carried it on edge through the opening and leaned it up inside, as if it wasn’t way too heavy to handle like that.

“As I suspected,” he said. “You’re ripe for transformation. It will be interested to see—”

“Interesting,” I corrected.

“Interesting to see what you transform into. Your athletic childhood suggests you may be *very* interest, uh, -ing.” He grinned.

It was a toothy grin and I didn’t like it. “You talk about me like I’m some sort of specimen,” I snapped.

“You are,” he said.

I would’ve demanded he explain that, but Hedges interrupted us. He had his arms full of rusty iron hinges and an impact drill.

“Falcon will drill the holes,” Uncle Wolfgang said, and I did. In almost no time, I had three big hinges and a latch mounted on the slab door.

Hedges laid a thin piece of wood in the opening to make sure the door would be high enough off the floor to swing, and Uncle Wolfgang braced it in the opening while I punched holes in the cement wall. Hedges drove big screws into the holes I’d made and there it was, hanging on its hinges. A door big enough to stop a bulldozer, so I figured we’d be safe from wolves.

I leaned against a workbench.

Hedges studied me. “You’re back to normal. No more weird eyes. What the Hell was that all about?”

“I dunno,” I said.

Uncle Wolfgang shot right up into Hedges’s face and said, “Are you expected to ask any most questions?” His voice was hard and his eyes were funny again.

“Hey!” I said. “Leave him alone!”

“I can leave him alone in Canada if you like, until that pack of wolves definish him off!”

I put my hand on his shoulder, real gentle, but my eyes were as hard as that cement wall. “Maybe Mom’s right,” I said. “Maybe you should leave. Now.”

He went to brush my hand away but I gripped his shoulder and we faced off, eyes boring into each other. He was a head taller than me, but if he thought I would back down, he was dead wrong.

Finally he stepped back and, with a raised an eyebrow, said, “If that’s how you feel, than he’s *your* responsibility, which means,” he continued, “if he talks to *anyone* about us, *you* have to get riddance of him. Understood!?” And then he was gone.

I heard Mom’s car start up out at the curb. I guess he could’ve driven himself to the store after all. Probably everything he’d said was lies. Except the transitioning part. What the Hell was happening to me?

Chapter 5

Stranger Things

“Goddamn it, Falcon! What was *that*?” Hedges exclaimed, staring at me.

“The weird uncle thing?” I replied.

“No! I mean yes, but more the animal eyes and the lifting too-heavy things and the fighting wolves like they’re just hockey players and, and...” He sputtered to a stop, apparently unable to find words for just how strange everything had suddenly become.

“I think I’m some sort of freak,” I said shakily, brushing bolts off a stool so I could sit down. I didn’t feel so good.

“And did your uncle just threaten my *life*?”

“Afraid so.”

“What’s with the *eye* thing? Are you both turning into zombies or something?”

“Vampires, I think.”

“I’m serious! Did you see yourself?”

“How would I do that?”

“Not to mention that you cut a hole in my wall, and almost got me killed by wolves!”

“Uh, I think it’s the US government’s wall. And you were doing fairly well at putting your life at risk before I even got here. Were you actually planning to ride that crazy chair?” But I was just trying to deflect his questions, and he knew it.

“You better try to calm down, Falc,” he added, studying me. “Your eyes are starting to do that thing again. Check it out.” He pointed to a cracked mirror in the corner and I hurried over to it.

Shit! He was right. My eyes have been deep brown all my life and basically normal. Now the irises were almost as large as my entire visible eye, like a cat or dog or

some wild animal. Yeah, more like some wild animal. *Very* wild. The outer ring was golden brown. The inner ring? A mix of earthy brown and flecks of bright gold. I mean really bright, as in glowing. “What the . . .”

“You’re freaking me out,” Hedges said. “But not as bad as your uncle. Is he gone, or is he lurking outside?”

“He’s gone or I’d smell him, but the wolf pack’s still out there somewhere.”

“*Smell* him?” He came over and stared at me. “What’s happening to you?”

I blinked. Hard. Repeatedly. My eyes slowly faded back to normal, and the pungent scents flooding me faded into the distance. I felt weak. I stumbled back to the stool. “That’s the question I came to ask *you*,” I said. “There’s something in my mom’s bloodline, at least if Uncle Weirdo is to be believed.”

“Is your mother, uh, like this?”

“No. Strangely normal. I would’ve guessed it was my dad who had an unusual background because when he was a kid, he was a top climber. He competed regularly in the bouldering nationals until a few years ago.”

“You should talk to him if you can, and your mom too,” he said.

“He doesn’t have a cell phone and she doesn’t talk. To me. She mostly talks to clients.”

“Find out what she knows,” he said. “And I’ll look into your uncle.”

“You will? How?”

He pointed at his homemade and very powerful desktop computer. “In case you weren’t paying attention, I ran my own fiber optic cable to the main one under the sidewalk. I’ve got super-high-speed access, and I’m exceptionally good at online detection.”

“Of course you are,” I said. “I’ll send you a snap of the family photo of him.”

“And take pictures of his luggage tags, his license, and any other IDs.”

“Okay. What did you think of him?”

“He’s the strangest person I’ve ever met and I think he was responsible for those wolves. I’ve never had trouble with wolves before. They don’t come this close to town. But why would he do that? Just to make you, uh, what did he call it? Transform?”

“Maybe.” I frowned. “But if he did, then the bigger question is *How?* Can he call wolves out of the forest at will?”

Hedges shrugged.

“All right,” I said, standing again, “I better go. If I get home before him, I can work on your list.”

What I didn’t tell Hedges was how strange *I* was. I hadn’t told him what set me off on the ice that time, and I wasn’t going to tell him about how I smelled the blood from those wolves. Or how it was still making me want to bite something meaty—maybe in the neck.

When I got home and parked my bike in the shed, I could smell the grill. There was meat on it.

The steaks, I thought. He’s grilling them.

We hadn’t used that grill since my dad left. Mom’s a strict vegetarian.

I headed for the rear door, which was next to the grill, but Uncle Freaky came out before I got there. He was wearing a flowery chef’s apron Mom kept on a hook in the kitchen. With his fedora. Not a good look. His sleeves were rolled up and he had a big two-pronged fork in one hand.

“Denial won’t work,” he announced as soon as he saw me. “You have to learn to manage your urgesses. That’s—”

“Urges, not urgesses!”

“\Because that’s what sets us above them.”

I didn’t know what part of that to ask about first. All of it, I decided. “What urges? Above whom?”

He lifted the lid off the grill and stuck the fork into a steak. *Plop*, he flopped it onto a platter he’d laid out on the side of the grill. Then he did the same with the other

steak. They were thick and big and hot but still leaking red juice. Barely cooked. But oddly, they smelled so good I wanted to bite one.

Mom wasn't home yet. She'd written something about an open house on the kitchen calendar, so I expected she'd be late.

We didn't wait.

I hadn't eaten meat before. I vaguely remember my mom saying I shouldn't because of my "meat teeth" being unusually long and she didn't want me to "hurt myself." Did I actually believe that when I was little? People don't have meat teeth. What was she talking about?

Now I knew.

When I raised that first fork of dripping red meat to my mouth, I felt my canines sliding down out of my gums. Like, for real, getting longer! My canines are unusually sharp. I remember once the dentist cut himself and cursed. But they didn't used to be unusually long. Until now.

I was surprised. Alarmed, even. And in some pain. But the urge to sink them into bloody meat was overwhelming.

I forgot about the neatly cut bite on my fork and just leaned over and bit the steak. And slurped! Disgusting.

I don't really remember how I ate that steak but it was gone in a minute and I was licking the plate when Mom came in.

"Has he left?" she called from the front hall as she hung up her overcoat. "And what in the world is that smell?" She came into the kitchen. "Jesus!" I guess she'd replaced the broken phone, because the new one shattered on our kitchen tiles just like the last one had.

"I thought you didn't swear," I said. A good offense is the best defense; that's always been my motto on the ice and sometimes it works with my mother too.

"Go clean up!" she shouted. "Now! We're having *salad* for dinner."

"Clean up?" I repeated, puzzled.

“You’re covered in blood!”

“Oh.” I stood. I could feel my new fangs sliding back. “Uh, sorry, Mom.”

“She has to experience the urge in order to learn how to control it,” Uncle Wolfgang said. He’d been watching us with an amused look on his face. Now he cut a slice of beef and raised it neatly to his mouth.

“*I was controlling her!*” Mom shouted, her hands balling into fists. “I had her under control until *you* showed up!”

“By feeding her salads and not telling her the truth?”

“Yes!”

“She’s coming of age.”

“So what! *I* didn’t need you, did I? You only succeeded in traumatizing me for life!”

“Perhaps, but you don’t have the hunter’s instincts. The family traits are latent in you. With the right stimulus it’s still possible you could transform, but it would have to be very str—”

“No, I won’t! It’s a matter of principles and you don’t have any so just leave my daughter alone! You’re a monster, do you know that? A monster!”

“Am *I* a monster?” I asked.

She opened her mouth and closed it.

“Am I?”

“She needs to know,” Uncle Wolfgang said. “Why don’t we all sit down and have a very overdone family discussion?” He pulled a chair out for her. It scraped the tiles.

“Overdue,” I corrected without even thinking about it.

“We were fine before you came!” my mother hissed. “Get that meat out of my kitchen, and Falcon, go clean up! I’m going to change out of my work clothes and make a salad.”

“If I was born to be a salad eater, then why didn’t you name me Rabbit?” I asked.

“Jesus!” my mother hissed. Then she turned and stomped off to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her and leaving her newest phone broken on the tile floor, bits of its screen scattered all it.

“Deep denial,” Uncle Wolfgang said. “But you can’t denial the truth forever.”

“I don’t want to be a vampire,” I said. “Am I going to *bite* someone?”

“If you’re still here tomorrow, we’ll have steak and salad for dinner,” he said. “And you will only eat the salad.”

“Huh?”

“Then we will see if you can keep your teeth in. Do you think you can do that?”

“But why do I have fangs?” I demanded. “And don’t you mean if *you’re* still here tomorrow? *I’m* not going anywhere.”

“Go change your garment,” he said, “before your mother returns back.”

And I did. It’s not like I enjoy being covered in blood.

After I threw my T-shirt into my laundry bin and washed my face at the bathroom sink, I studied myself in the mirror. I looked . . . normal enough, I guess. Not pale and undead, anyway. My skin was medium brown, my cheekbones kind of high, my nose kind of wide, and my eyebrows dark and thick, just like always. Not the pale, hook-nosed, black-eyed look of some old vampire movie. But what did a real vampire even look like?

I leaned closer to the mirror and opened my mouth. It was just like usual. Nothing weird about my teeth that anyone would notice. But there *was* a funny tingling in my gums, like something had woken up in there.

I visualized a raw steak. Nothing. So I imagined the smell of it too. And that’s when it happened. Those two teeth slid out, very long and sharp. It felt strange, but not painful like the first time.

I stared at my reflection. *Now that’s what a real vampire looks like*, I thought. The teeth were damn scary. But why in the world did I have retractable fangs?

A car must've backfired on the road in front of the house. It made me jump and I guess it got my adrenaline going. When I looked at the mirror again, I couldn't believe my eyes. Literally. I looked like a damned mountain lion again!

My nostrils flared. I could smell a hundred things. The steak juice on my dirty T-shirt all the way from my bedroom. Mom walking past the bathroom door in clothes that smelled like they'd just come out of the clean laundry. Uncle Fang's stale musk mixed with hops from the beer he was drinking in the kitchen. The hot metal of the grill. And . . . What was that? An unfamiliar aftershave lotion that was way too strong combined with mints to cover bad breath and a gunpowder-and-oil smell that I guessed was from a gun.

Some asshole with a gun was sneaking around the back of our house!

I wanted to crash through the window and tackle the intruder, but a little corner of my brain said, *That's stupid. You're not a rabid watchdog. Use your head!* So I gently lifted a corner of the curtain and peaked out.

A man in a dark suit was kneeling behind a bush. The bush hid him from view if you were to go out the back door to the grill, but I could see him from the bathroom. He was holding a pistol in his right hand. A pistol with a silencer like movie assassins use. He had something gripped in his left hand too. I wasn't sure what it was that he held so tensely, but he looked prepared to throw it as soon as someone appeared.

Is that what a stun grenade looks like? I thought. And there was a bulge under his coat at his waist that suggested another weapon holstered there. Who the hell was he after? Us?!

"Did you clean the grill?" my mom called to Uncle Wolfgang. Her voice came from the kitchen. "I don't want it to stink like burnt meat next time I go out in the yard. Of course you didn't. Forget about it! I'll just do it myself while *you* pack. Uh, where'd I put that old wire brush . . ." Then I could hear her opening kitchen drawers.

Oh no!

I slipped out of the bathroom, sprinted to the front door, opened it as quietly as I could, and tiptoed out. Another brand of cheap aftershave caught my attention and I spotted a dark van parked up the street. Someone was in it, watching. I'd been planning to run around the house and take the gun guy by surprise, but I remembered he'd had a

wire going into his ear. Probably some van guy was already telling the backyard guy about me.

New plan. I grabbed one of my mom's big clay flowerpots—it had a dead geranium in it—and I tossed it over the roof.

It's a ranch house, not very high, and I knew where to throw the pot.

It cleared the peak of the roof and disappeared. There was a surprised shout when the pot crashed down and then a *POP!* and a bright flash I could see above the roof even though I was on the opposite side of the house.

I figured I must've startled the backyard guy pretty badly and he'd set his stun grenade off on himself. Hah! I also assumed the sound would get my uncle's attention and he'd be as effective with the gun guy as he'd been with the wolves. So I sprinted straight down the street toward the van. Divide and conquer.

As I neared it, the driver-side door opened and a man in a dark suit jumped out. He reached back into the van and brought out a pistol and a silencer that he began to put together, but I got to him before he finished. He tried to block me with his right arm, which was holding the pistol. It went off toward the sky as I smashed into him, then he bounced off the van and back toward me. There was a confused moment when he swung at me, still holding that gun, and then it was coming right at my face and I didn't have time to get an arm up to block it.

I guess I bit his arm instead.

He cursed and dropped the gun and fell back into the open door of the van.

I kicked the gun away (it had landed on the pavement at our feet).

He sat back in the door opening and used his left hand to try to stop the blood from gushing out of two slashes on his right wrist. They were bleeding pretty badly.

I could taste his blood in my mouth. I began to spit it out. It was disgusting. I couldn't believe I'd cut him like that. I hadn't meant to.

Another man got out of the van using the rear doors. He blinked in the sunlight and gaped at me and the guy with the bleeding wrist. The new guy was in khaki pants, wrinkled from too much sitting down, a wrinkled blue dress shirt with rolled up sleeves,

and a big set of earphones and attached mike. He had thick glasses. He did not seem to be armed.

“Oh my God,” he exclaimed. “What happened to Agent Morrissey?”

“He’s bleeding out,” I said. Which you’d think would’ve been obvious. Nerds!
“Do you have a first aid kit?”

“Uh, yeah, somewhere.”

“Wrap his arm. Tight. Do you have a phone?”

“I’m the radio operator,” he said.

“If that’s a yes, call for an ambulance. If not, drive him to the emergency room.”

The man stood there looking shocked, and didn’t move.

Like Hedges, I thought. *Brainy but no good in an emergency*. “Now!” I shouted.

He jumped like I’d kicked him and scrambled back into the van, slamming the doors behind himself. I could hear him calling for help. I could also hear him locking the rear doors.

Since there was a metal divider behind the front seats, I figured I wasn’t going to get hold of that first aid kit anytime soon. “Damn!” I said.

The agent guy was moaning.

When I looked at his blood, my teeth slid out again and I had to think really hard about it to get them to go back.

When I thought I was ready, I reached out and tore a strip of cloth from his white dress shirt. He looked terrified. I hissed “Hold still!” and began to wrap the cotton fabric around his wrist.

The bleeding slowed to a trickle.

“Wh-wh-why are you keeping me alive?” he asked, obviously terrified. “Are you going to bite me in the neck now?”

“Jesus!” I said. “What do you think I am?”

He didn't answer.

"Look," I said, "I didn't bite you. It was an accident. Your wrist scraped across my teeth. And you were trying to shoot me!"

"Just get it over quickly," he said.

"Shut up and hold your arm above your head. If I wanted to kill you I would've, but I'm obviously not a killer. Speaking of killers, why are *you* and your *asshole friend* trying to kill *me*?"

He clamped his mouth shut and got a stubborn look on his face that told me I wasn't going to get anything more out of him.

"Hedges'll figure it out," I muttered. I just had to grab some clues for him to work with. "Stand!" I ordered. And he did. Go figure. I guess he was that scared of me. "Wallet," I demanded. But he wasn't *that* scared.

With all the blood, my teeth were just itching to come out again. I let them. Right up close to his face.

He gasped and hurried to reach around with his left hand and pull his wallet out of his right front pocket.

I grabbed it. Then I spotted a manila folder and a cell phone in the van and grabbed them too.

A siren sounded from around the corner. I ran into the woods.

Chapter 6

In the Woods

I'd only gone about fifty feet into the forest when I stopped short. Uncle Asshole was standing there. He must've been spying on me while I was dealing with the van. And limp on the ground beside him was the backyard agent, with dirt and old leaves on his fancy suit.

"You dragged him all the way here?" I exclaimed.

He nodded.

"Is he . . . dead?"

"Unconscious. He knocked himself out with his own stun grenade. I don't think you're supposed to drop them at your feet, but somebody smashed a flowerpot behind him." He smiled.

"Who are they?" I demanded. "Assassins?"

"Actually, yes. Government-sponsored assassins."

"Why?"

"Let us start with who." He displayed a wallet he must've taken from the guy's pocket. It had a very official-looking shield inside it. Government agent of some sort, I deduced, although I didn't recognize the name.

The siren stopped and the ambulance pulled up. I could hear another siren in the distance too. Probably the police chief following up on the ambulance call. It's a small town. Soon the volunteer fire department would be there.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked.

“Let’s relocation him into the roadway for them to discover,” he said, butchering the sentence and setting my teeth even more on edge. “I’d kill him, but it won’t do any goodness. Obviously they know about you already.”

“Me?” That seemed strange. After all, *he* was the one who’d just showed up. I figured they must be following him.

He was already dragging the unconscious agent by one arm, so I grabbed the other. By the time we got to the edge of the trees, a police car was racing past and I could see Burt, the police chief, behind the wheel. He went around the corner and squealed to a stop as we dragged the agent into the road. His eyelids were beginning to flutter, so we hurried back into the trees, where we stopped to listen.

The radio operator guy was talking a mile a minute and the EMTs were telling him to move so they could get the agent with the cuts onto a stretcher.

Uncle Assassin Magnet was going through the wallet he’d taken. “I’ll keep the cash, but you can have his I.D.,” he said, holding it out to me. “Just as I expected. He’s with V-I-E-U.” He pronounced it like “view.”

“And that is . . .” I asked, trying to read the ID, which had very small type and didn’t seem to say VIEU on it that I could see.

He took it back and put it in his own pocket. “VIEU stands for Vampire Identification and Elimination Unit,” he said. “They are not as a rule active in such a remotely location.”

I glared at him. “They weren’t! Not until *you* showed up. Obviously they followed you!”

“Shhh! Don’t raise your voice or they’ll hear you.” He tossed the wallet minus the cash into a bush, then turned and strode off through the trees.

“They’ll probably go back to the house,” I said, “so we shouldn’t.”

“I’m going to tell your mother she has to pack a baggage and go to a hotel,” he said. “And rent a suite of luxury rooms for us. It’s important to be comfortable in emergency situations.”

“Make sure she’s safe!” I said. I watched him disappear, then I jogged off toward Hedges’s house. I still had the other agent’s wallet and cell phone in my back pocket, plus his folder under my arm, and I wanted to see what Hedges thought. Clearly, Uncle Jerk uncle wasn’t going to be much help.

Chapter 7

The Bread Box

I didn't bother stopping at Hedges's house, I just hurried around to the shed again. I knew he'd be there. He's always there. Sometimes he even sleeps there in a sleeping bag on top of a workbench.

"Is that your uncle's stuff?" he asked when I came in with the folder in my hand.

"No," I said. "But I need you to check it out."

"Show me," he said, holding out a hand.

I handed him the folder. "And this," I said, pulling out the wallet.

"You picked someone's pocket? Whose?"

"Oh, and this phone. Darn! I've been pocket dialing. I didn't realize. I guess he had the sound turned off when he tried to sneak up and kill me."

"What! Wait, if that phone's in use, it's going to be a no brainer to trace it." He grabbed the phone and rushed across the workshop to a messy bench with a bunch of old mixers and blenders and other kitchen appliances on it. Pushing them aside, he lifted the lid on a large metal bread box and put the phone in it. "That'll block the signal," he said.

"Is it dialing again?"

"No, I think it's on hold." He pulled it back out and listened to it. "Yeah," he said. "Hold music. I'll hang it up." He placed it back in the box and closed the door.

"Wait! You have to look at it before it locks you out."

"Oh." He stuck his head inside the breadbox and began tapping at it with one hand. "Uh, this is a government phone," he said. "It's probably a federal offense to take it."

"What can you tell me about the agent's mission? Why was he trying to shoot me?"

“Shoot you?” His head came out of the breadbox. “Damn!”

“What can you learn from it?” I asked.

His head went back in. “His calendar says he’s staying at the Pine Tree Inn for two nights. Isn’t that out by the freeway?”

“Yeah. They have a conference center there. And a heated pool, according to their sign anyway. What else?”

“It says ‘Strike Team Active Status’ on today’s date. Wonder what that means.”

“Nothing good. Anything else?”

He pulled his head back out. “He uses abbreviations on his calendar and doesn’t go into details. And his contacts are just last names and phone numbers, no addresses. But I think I can get into the emails.” He stuck his head back in.

After a while, he came back out. “These emails are encrypted,” he said. “I bet you have to run them through a key app to read them.”

“A key app?”

“Yeah, spies use them. I tried to open the app, but it’s got its own password. Same with most of the other apps. I can’t read his notes or look at his finances. Password protected.”

“How about his voicemail?”

“I’ll check. Darn! Now I’m locked out of the phone. Oh, but I can still get into his basic tools. Here’s a flashlight.” He blinked it on and off. “And a night vision camera. Wow. That’s clever. And some kind of tracker app. Huh! It’s showing a map of the county with a blinking spot on it. Must be a transmitter sending out a signal. Looks like it’s in our neighborhood. Actually, it’s at your house . . .” He pulled his head out to give me a worried look.

“Uncle Wolfgang!” I said. “I knew it! They followed him here. What a jerk!”

“Who followed him? Why?”

“Uh, here, look at this,” I said. I’d opened the folder. It had head and shoulder shots on each page. My uncle’s picture was on top, along with records of sightings in Casablanca, Paris, Rome, and lots of other places. “These records go back into the 1930s,” I said. “But on the more recent dates, it says ‘meets’ instead of ‘sightings.’ I wonder what the difference is.”

“I don’t know. What’s this stand for?” Hedges asked, pointing at the acronym on top: VIEU.

“Uh, you’re not going to believe it,” I said.

“Some sort of border patrol?” he asked.

“No. Some sort of vampire patrol, actually. It stands for Vampire Identification and Elimination Unit.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Shit.” He stared at me. “For real?”

I opened my mouth and remembered the steak. Szzzp. Out came my fangs.

“Jesus, Falc! What the hell? Uh, how long have you been able to do that?”

I slid them back in. “Today.”

“Are you going to, uh, *bite* anyone?”

“Do I look like—okay, maybe I do, but really? How long have you known me?”

He frowned. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to drink people’s blood,” he said.

“Aren’t you a vegetarian?”

I nodded. I didn’t tell him about the steak.

“Do you think there’s others like, uh, you? ‘Cause I could do a dark web search for them I guess.”

“To find me new friends who can swap stories involving razor-sharp retractable fangs?”

He shrugged. “Something like that. Maybe there’s modern vampires living among us, and maybe they could help explain things. Like how to avoid being identified and eliminated by the feds!”

“Hmm. Yeah. Not a bad idea. Except we probably know who they are already.”

“We do?”

I pointed at the manila folder. “We have the agency’s targets,” I said. “No need to search for them. Their names and addresses are right here. We probably should warn them they’re on the strike team’s list. Uh, that’s weird. This is *my* Facebook photo.”

“What about your mother? Is she in danger?”

I shook my head. “She’s not in the folder, and she doesn’t have fangs. But Uncle Wolfgang is taking her to a hotel just to be sure. Damn! They’ll go to her hotel room if he’s with her. That tracker’s probably in his old suitcase. Can I send her an email to warn her?”

“Better if I do it.” He went over to his computer and tapped away at the keyboard.

“Do you have her email address?”

“I’m a hacker. I know everyone’s email address. Okay, I just told her to stay away from him.”

“Did you tell her it was my idea?”

“No. She thinks I’m smarter than you.”

“You are, actually.”

Chapter 8

The Girl on the Roof

“Okay, now what?” I asked. Even though it was my adventure, but I was in the habit of asking Hedges for advice.

“We get out of here,” he said. “If they can’t trace that phone, they’ll probably look for you at your best friend’s house. You hang out here almost every day, after all.”

“Well, *someone’s* got to be in charge of the fire extinguisher,” I said.

“Ha ha,” he said, heading for the door. “We’ll take my truck. Uh, speaking of which, can you bring a fire extinguisher? One I haven’t taken apart? I’ve been having a little trouble with a fuel leak.”

I rolled my eyes, but went back to look for one.

Last year, we got back from school to find that Hedges’s dad had his oldest truck hooked up to his newest one and was about to tow it to a junkyard to sell for scrap. Hedges talked him into giving it to us. Well, to Hedges mostly. I usually had hockey practice or was about to lift weights whenever Hedges said it was time to work on the truck. After a month of tinkering, he got it going again. That was last year. Since then, he souped up the engine and added a bunch of special equipment—most of which I didn’t really pay attention to. We use it to get around whenever we think the police chief is busy somewhere else, which is easy to figure out because of the police scanner radio in the truck. We try to avoid the police because Hedges is driving on a learner’s permit too. His dad’s always too busy to do official practice, just like my mom.

The only thing is, Hedges hasn’t found a key cylinder to put in the truck, so he has to jump it whenever we want to drive. I haven’t mastered the trick, but he’s good at it.

After fiddling with some loose wires, he got it going. “What’s the nearest address?” he asked.

“Let’s go to Pine Street,” I said, flipping through the sheets of paper in the folder, each of which had a picture, name, and address. “It’s a high number, so it must be down

at the end,” I added. Which meant, in our town, near the border. When a local road got there it usually stopped.

The engine roared and gravel flew behind us as Hedges accelerated.

It took us five minutes to get there. He slowed and we rolled down Pine Street.

“Who’s the target?” he asked.

“Amira Abbasi. According to her birth date, she’s twenty-one. Too old for us to know her from school.”

“This must be her house,” he said, braking. “Looks normal.”

“So did mine,” I said. “Wait here.”

“Why?”

“And honk if you see any suspicious vans. Or people. Or anything at all.”

“Be careful,” he said.

“Too late for that,” I said as I got out.

The doorbell rang from somewhere inside, but no one came to the door. I tried again. Still no answer.

Hedges was watching from the truck. He pointed toward the upstairs. “Someone’s looking out a window,” he said. “Second floor right.”

I smiled. Did I mention I like to climb? Trees when I was little, then the rock-climbing gym two towns over whenever I could, which was fairly often because my dad used to work out there. Getting to a second-floor window was a piece of meat. Cake! I mean cake!

I slipped along tight to the wall until I reached the gutter downspout at the right front corner. In a few seconds, I was up it and leaning over to look in the window. But the window was wide open and the room looked empty.

“She went to the roof,” Hedges called from the truck, pointing up.

I hurried up the gutter and swung myself onto the roof. I didn't see anyone, but I heard scraping sounds. *She must've gone over the peak*, I thought as I climbed toward the chimney.

Sure enough, someone was at the far end of the roof where a long garage joined at a ninety-degree angle. Whoever it was, they were dressed in black jeans and a black hoodie.

Long legs and very good balance, I noted as they ran along the peak of the garage roof.

I was after them in a second and did a pretty good job of balancing, too, as I ran along the peak.

I slowed. They'd run out of roof. As I got close, moving carefully now, they spun around to face me.

She had the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. Honestly, I found myself staring at her with my mouth hanging open like an idiot. She had long, glossy black hair flowing down from her hood. Her eyes were dark, too, and incredibly beautiful. And her scent was wonderful! I was more aware of scents than before, I guess. She was fine boned and tall but gracefully curved.

The opposite of me. I'm sturdy not pretty, I guess you'd have to say. And never seriously attracted to anyone so far in my relatively short life, but my stomach lurched at the sight of her. I think I was instantly in love. I just stood there staring. God, I was being stupid!

She frowned and took a step toward me. Her scent was even stronger now and I was so breathless that I started to lose my balance and almost fell. But then she opened her perfectly shaped lips and, holding my eyes captive with hers, slid out a long, pearly set of vampire fangs.

Oh shit, I thought. *She's threatening me!*

Those perfect eyes were narrowed into perfect thin slices of dark menace and a low growl came out of her perfect throat.

I took an awkward step back and said, “Uh, are you Amir—ow!” My fangs had sliced down into my tongue as I was trying to say her perfect name. What an idiot I was. Jesus!

I saw her shoulders drop and her jaw muscles relax. Her eyes un-slitted at least partway. “You’re Val too?” she asked.

I nodded. “Seems like it,” I said.

“We Valukar are supposed to keep a very low profile,” she said, frowning at me. “Which begs the question, why are you chasing me over my own roof?”

“Uh, I didn’t mean to, sorry. I’m, uh, Falcon. I didn’t expect you’d be so, so, uh, beautiful!” *Shit*, I thought. *I really didn’t mean to say that out loud.*

“It’s a bother, trust me,” she said. “Especially when you’re trying to fit in. How old are you, Falcon?”

“Fifteen.” I was starting to feel very outclassed by now.

“Well, you’ll get over it.”

“What, being fifteen?”

She laughed. “That too, but I mean the crush. I can see it in your eyes and smell it on you. Any Val could tell. You’re oozing warm and eager pheromones. Kinda cute, actually.” She sniffed the air thoughtfully as if she was at some wine tasting.

Then she frowned. “Wait, you’re not a boy, are you? At first, I thought you smelled like one, but you’re actually a girl.” She raised one of those perfect dark eyebrows. “You’ve got my attention now, Falcon girl. Let’s sit down and enjoy the view while you tell me about yourself. I don’t think I’ve ever had a puppy admirer quite like you.” She smiled and let her teeth slide back.

“Is that why you think I’m chasing you?” I asked, feeling more than a little confused.

“Well, you *were* peeking in my window,” she said.

“I came to warn you.”

“About . . .” The playful smile was replaced by a frown.

I’d folded her page and stuck it in my pocket. It had a really bad copy of a copy of a picture of her that hadn’t prepared me at all. Now I pulled it out, unfolded it, and handed it to her. “This,” I said.

“Agents!” she hissed. “Shit! Are they in town already?”

I nodded. “Strike team. I lifted this from their van.”

“Damn it! Disabled?”

“For now. Calling for reinforcements though.”

“Next time, kill them before they can make any calls. It buys time. Come on!” She swung past me, grabbing hold of my hand to balance herself as she went by, then tugging me behind her as she sprinted along the peak of the roof.

I couldn’t help thinking how perfect her hand was even as my stomach knotted at the thought of more agents.

She ran back to the end of the garage roof then leapt all the way to the lawn. I followed, surprising myself with a good landing too. I seemed to be even more athletic than usual.

“Your boyfriend,” she said as she slipped around the corner. “He’s Val too?”

“He’s neither,” I said, but I don’t think she heard me.

She ran ahead to the truck and stood by the driver’s side window, which was open, with Hedges staring at her like a wide-eyed and very stupid fish.

Oh no, I thought. He’s crushing on her too!

She reached in and grabbed him by a handful of hair. When she turned to look at me, I saw her fangs were out again.

“He’s human!” she snapped. “Why did you drag him along?”

“Don’t bite him,” I said. “He’s my best friend and he’s helping.”

She let go of him and he rubbed his head, but he was still looking at her like he'd just seen a goddess.

“Uh, look, I didn't even know what *I* was till yesterday, so hey.” I shrugged.

“The local council doesn't know about you,” she said, “or else I'd know about you. Your family must've chosen to stay secret. Some do. But why?” She eyed me narrowly, then added, “Oh well, we're going to find out soon enough. Get in and slide over, both of you. I'm driving.”

“Hey, this is my truck,” Hedges objected, but Amira leaned her head close to his and whispered, “Please?”

I've never seen him look so entirely smitten before. He just melted.

“Sure thing,” he said. “Whatever you like!” And then he actually let her climb in and take the driver's seat. I couldn't believe it.

Annoyed, I stomped around the front of the truck and tugged the rusty door open.

She didn't wait for me to get in. The truck was already rolling by the time I got a foot on the running board and a hand on the handhold to swing myself in.

“What the hell?” I said as I slammed the door.

“No time to waste if it's agents,” Amira hissed. “How'd they get my address? *You* didn't tell them, did you?”

This was aimed at Hedges, who shook his head no.

“What about your family?” I asked her.

“Away,” she said. “Except my grandfather, but he's still at work. I'll call everyone on a secure line when we get where we're going. They have emergency equipment there.”

“Where *are* we going?” I asked as she turned down the first cross street.

“If you don't know where the nearest Hide is, I can't tell you.”

“Hide?” I repeated, puzzled.

“Hide. Where we go to . . .” She swung her perfect head around and gave me a look. “Hide. Get it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But we’re not going there. Pull over for a sec.” And I grabbed the folder and opened it.

She braked and swerved to the side of the road. “More targets? How many?” she demanded.

“I’m not sure,” I said as I leafed through the sheets looking for the next nearest address.

“Eleven other addresses,” Hedges said. “Thirteen in all, counting yours and Falcon’s.”

“Oh no!” she said, revving the motor as she popped the clutch and lurched back into high speed.

“Don’t you want an address?” I asked.

“I know all the addresses,” she said. “There’s only twelve families in our local council. The agents must know about every family in town. Even yours. Someone sold everyone out. But who? And why *hit* squads? They usually leave us alone unless there’s trouble. Did you bite anyone?” This was directed at me.

“Of course not! Not counting the agent I bit today.”

She gave me a disapproving look.

We rode in tense silence for a couple of miles, hanging on for dear life as she fishtailed and bounced along country roads to a neighborhood I didn’t know very well.

We went by a pasture full of sheep. I wondered what it would be like to eat one, then pushed the thought away. We skidded around a curve—the pavement had given way to packed dirt—and stopped in a cloud of dust in front of an old white clapboard farmhouse.

“Uh, can you at least put on the emergency brake?” Hedges said. It was obvious he hadn’t approved of her driving.

“Come with me!” she called as she jogged across the wide lawn shaded by old sugar maples.

“Not you,” I said as I pushed Hedges back.

“Hey!” he objected, but he got back into the truck as I ran after Amira, who’d already reached the front door and was just raising her hand to knock on it.

“Wait!” I hissed. I’d noticed tire marks in the grass coming and going, and I didn’t think anyone who kept such a neat yard would crush their own lawn. “Someone’s been here already,” I explained.

She looked very worried. “I’m going in,” she said. “Wait here.” And then she sprang up one of the columns supporting the porch roof and slipped in a second-floor window.

A minute later she came out the front door. “Gone,” she said. “And signs of a struggle. I hope they weren’t captured, but . . .” She held out her hand. On it was a little blue cylinder with a sharp silver tip.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Silver bullet?”

“Don’t be stupid! It’s a tranquilizer dart. This one missed.”

“But you think there were more?”

She nodded. “And one set of those tire tracks is deeper.”

“More weight when they were leaving?” I asked.

“Yes. Was there anyone *in* the van you robbed?”

“Only a tech guy in khakis. No tranquilized people tied up in back, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then there must be multiple teams. We’d better hurry.”

Chapter 9

Missing

“You’re the second-best driver I’ve ever seen,” Hedges said from the driver’s seat. “But I rebuilt this truck myself and I’m actually the best driver I’ve ever seen, at least in this old thing, so why don’t you tell me where to go and I’ll get us there?” He’d slid back behind the wheel while we were exploring the farmhouse.

“Are you even old enough to have a license?” she demanded.

He shrugged. “Learner’s permit. You can get one—”

“At fifteen, yeah, I remember. If you sign up for an incredibly dull driving class.” Amira slid into the middle of the bench seat and let him stay where he was. “Just make it fast,” she snapped. “Head north till you reach Pond Road, then turn west.”

“The Hollow?” he asked as we roared up the bouncy road.

The Hollow was a little old village of its own with historic houses and farms and a little old library and a little old hall where they still held little old square dances on the night of the full moon. Most of the houses had been bought by rich people from the city who liked to come up on weekends to do that kind of stuff.

We braked to a screeching stop in front of one of the houses fixed up by city folk—you could tell by the fancy new stonework and the rest of the designer landscaping. A Mercedes SUV was idling in the driveway, one of its doors open. The front door of the historic farmhouse was open too.

“Someone broke a window,” Hedges said, pointing.

“Damn!” Amira said. “Damn!”

“Should we try to call the rest of the people?” Hedges said. “Do you have a cell phone?”

“I left it,” she said. “Too easy to trace.”

“Should we at least check out the house?” I asked.

Amira frowned. "We need cover. If they realize we're trying to warn the others, they might come back. Can this thing go off-road?"

Hedges pulled a lever. "Four-wheel," he said.

"Drive around back."

He looked worried but determined as we bumped up onto the lawn. We looped around the house, studying it, as Hedges turned this way and that to avoid shrubs and expensive teak furniture. He crushed one by accident, but it was just a chair.

"Stop here," she said. "I'll run in and use the landline to try the others."

Hedges and I parked beside a fancy lap pool while Amira went in the back door. I could see her through a window. It looked like she was in the kitchen using a wall phone with an old-fashioned spiral cord.

Rich people from the city like to make their weekend houses look old-fashioned. Go figure.

Amira came out shaking her head and looking grim. "Nobody's answering. I know most of their numbers, but not a single person seems to be home."

"Gone to the Hide already?" I suggested.

"Maybe." She was tight-lipped and upset. We all were. "Go left," was all she said. "Now right."

She didn't speak except to give directions until we'd gone all the way past the high school and through the newer neighborhoods to the far end of town. She guided us down a narrow lane that I'd never been on. It sloped downhill and I guessed we were going to the lake.

The road turned sandy with grass growing down the middle, and Hedges had to put the truck in four-wheel again.

We came up a little hill and Amira said, "Left here." It was barely a road. Weeds and grass a yard high.

I said, "Nobody's been here lately, huh?"

“That’s the point,” she said. “Stop at the cabin.”

It was an old summer place made of pine logs with broken windows and a rotting front porch.

“We can examine the Hide from here,” she said as we got out. “I want to scope it out before we go.” She led us away from the cabin and under some tall pine trees to where slabs of stone showed through dried pine needles, and a rocky cliff fell twenty feet down to more pine trees below.

You could see the lake, looking blue through the pines. And there was an island close to shore with lots more pines on it and a sandy cove with rounded rocks on either side. It was pretty. Someplace you’d want to go for a picnic. In the middle of that island was a much bigger log building.

“Is that the Hide?” I asked.

Amira nodded.

“No boats on the beach,” Hedges said. “Isn’t that where they’d land?”

“No,” she said. “There’s a boathouse on the other side. We drive our boats into it to keep them out of sight.”

“Do you usually come from the marina?” Hedges asked.

There was a harbor where people kept motorboats for fishing and skiing. It was at the other end of the lake, near the center of town.

Amira nodded. “Okay, let’s go.”

“How do you know it’s safe?” I asked.

“If anyone tried to break in they’d set off an alarm, and I don’t hear it.”

“So it’s definitely safe?” Hedges asked.

I realized this was kind of a stretch for him—the whole thing about racing around with people trying to kill you. Not his pace. He’s better when there’s time to think about things. Preferably in his own shed. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Not really, but we’d better go.”

Amira was already scrambling down the rocky slope.

We exchanged looks and he added, “You first, Falc. I’m not much of a climber.” Which was true.

Amira was waiting beside a canoe. It was upside down at the top of a little beach. I helped her roll it over. There were paddles under it.

Hedges arrived out of breath as we were sliding it into the water.

“Push off before you jump in,” she told him.

He looked down at his sneakers and started to untie one, but she said, “Now!” and he jumped and started to push us off, getting his sneakers and socks and the bottom of his jeans wet.

I reached back to help him in. He’s never had good balance, so I made sure he sat down and didn’t tip us over. Then I grabbed a paddle and helped Amira get us heading toward the island.

“I’m not supposed to bring a human here,” she said as she paddled.

“I’m not supposed to be stalked by crazy men with silencers on their guns,” I pointed out.

She stopped paddling and turned to look at me. “Silencers?” she repeated. “That doesn’t make sense. They don’t use silencers on dart guns. I was at a house that got raided once, out in California. The agents use air guns for their darts. Effective but quiet. I barely made it out of there.”

“Uh, not at my house,” I said. “Definitely real guns. And my uncle called them assassins. The agents, not the guns, but I guess it’s all the same.”

She looked really worried. “Why would they want to kill on sight?” she asked. “Usually they interrogate Vals first to find out if they’re dangerous. Unless you’ve been hunting humans?”

“Me? Of course not!”

“Can you even *kill* a vampire?” Hedges asked. “I thought they were, you know...”

“Already dead?” Amira snapped. “Sleeping in coffins? You watch too many B movies, Bushes.”

“Hedges,” he corrected. “So, you’re not the, uh, undead? Do you . . .” He paused, embarrassed.

“Suck people’s blood?” she completed for him. “These are teeth, not straws. Christ.”

“Well then, no offense, but what are you?”

“Hunters,” she said. “Highly evolved predators capable of living at the top of the food chain. A very useful subspecies back in an earlier stage of human evolution. Who do you think killed those giant animals in the old cave paintings? Not some lame weak humans waving sticks. However, in modern times we have to keep a low profile. Our talents are no longer appreciated. No need to slice a moose’s jugular open when the grocery store sells fresh steak.”

“Really? I mean, that’s all? Nothing supernatural?” Hedges asked. He seemed disappointed.

Amira didn’t answer. I think she felt insulted.

“But you can’t be killed just by a regular bullet, right?” he persisted.

“Jesus,” she said.

“Huh.” Hedges frowned. “I guess it’s not the first time the old stories about something turned out to be wrong.”

I didn’t say anything, but I was thinking. Hard. I’d always felt like a misfit. The idea that I was actually evolved to be a highly skilled predator might explain a lot. Although I don’t, or didn’t, like to hunt, so go figure. But it occurred to me that some of the top professional athletes might actually be vampires in hiding—like me.

If I live through this, I told myself, I’m going to find out. But I knew that was a big ‘if’.

Chapter 10

The Island

We pulled the canoe up the beach. Hedges slipped and got even wetter, but he didn't say anything.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

"It's my truck," he said.

"I don't want to get you killed," I said.

"Shut up, you two," Amira snapped.

We followed her over the beach and up a mossy bank to a pine-needle-covered path that wound around some big tree trunks and came out at a stone patio littered with a lot more pine needles. There was a big door made of rough-cut pine boards varnished amber, and a bunch of windows with shades so you couldn't see inside.

Amira tried the door, but it was locked. "This way," she said and led us around the building to where a wider walk came up from a distant structure down by the water.

Boathouse, I thought. But we didn't go there. She was aiming for the front entrance to the main building.

We went up stone steps and under a porch roof, and she flipped up the cover to a black metal box and tapped in some code. There was a click and she pushed the door open.

Complete anticlimax. The room was boringly empty. A dark red rug muffled our footsteps as we entered. Little clusters of brown leather armchairs around low coffee tables filled the room, along with a gigantic stone fireplace that was cold and unused.

"Looks like a summer camp for the wealthy," Hedges said.

"The Council pays for it. We come here in the summer for training."

"What kind of training?" I asked.

“The basics, mostly. Self-defense, self-control, weapons practice, evasion.”

“Huh,” I said.

“Where are we going?” Hedges asked as she led us across the room and down a set of stairs.

“Control room,” she said. “Encrypted phones. And I want to try to track the Council members.”

The stairs led to a long underground room. A row of soft circular lights ran down the middle of the ceiling. There were monitors and keyboards and big black phones on a long table. At the far end, behind heavy, padlocked wire doors, a rack held weapons, from antique guns and rusty swords to modern rifles and pistols.

Amira picked up a phone receiver and poked at a number pad. “I’ve never used this,” she said with a frown. “I help my grandfather with the computers, but I use my own cell for calls.”

“Let me see,” Hedges said, taking the receiver from her. “Password protected,” he added. “Same kind of security interface as the front door. You entered six numbers there. What were they?”

“I can’t—”

“Tell a human,” he interrupted, sounding annoyed. “So tell Falcon instead.”

She hesitated, then turned to me. “1-1-5-4-3-2.”

Hedges tapped it in. “That’s not it,” he said. “But . . .” He tapped again. “No. But this is the *second* phone in the row.” *Tap tap tap tap tap tap*. The keypad lit up and we could hear a dial tone coming from the receiver.

“What did you do?” she demanded.

“I tried 2-1-5-4-3-2. That didn’t work so I tried 3-1-5-4-3-2. I bet we can get into everything here because the passwords aren’t random. They usually aren’t. Too hard to remember.”

“They just changed the first number?” I asked.

He nodded. “Based on position in the room to make it easy to remember.”

“Shh,” Amira said. She was entering a phone number.

It rang only once and then a man’s voice said, “Agent Smith here. Is this the cleanup team?”

She hung up in a hurry.

“Someone’s home phone?” I asked.

She frowned and dialed again. The number rang and rang. She went through the entire list. No one else answered.

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“It’s late afternoon. Someone should be home,” she said.

“Who bothers to answer their home phone?” Hedges asked. “It’s usually telemarketers.”

She frowned. “A red light comes on if it’s from the Hide. They’d answer if they could.”

“What about that agent who answered?” Hedges asked.

She looked down. I thought she might be fighting back tears. Girls do that sometimes. Feminine girls. *I* tend to punch something when I get upset.

“And what’s a cleanup team?” Hedges added, not noticing how upset she was. Which was typical of guys, of course, but I don’t know why. Even I can tell when someone’s upset.

“It means,” she said, her voice a little shaky, “that it got messy.”

“Huh?” Hedges still wasn’t getting it.

“They must’ve fought back. There’s probably casualties.” She gripped the edge of the table. “I grew up with Amelia. She’s away at college now, but her parents . . .” She couldn’t go on.

“Oh. Sorry.” Hedges was finally getting it. “What’s the rest of this equipment?” he asked.

She waved toward the biggest monitor. “Tracking,” she said, “and access to all of the main systems.”

“Four, five, six, seven. This is the seventh keypad in the row so 7-1-5-4-3-2. And we’re in. Whoever set this up should hire me as a consultant.”

“My grandfather,” Amira said. “He’s older. Computers are difficult for him. Do you want me to . . .” She gestured toward the computer.

“No, I got it,” Hedges said. “Wow. Did you know everyone’s car is bugged? But none of them are moving right now. Mostly they’re parked at home. Okay, what’s this?”

“Those are family names,” she said. “You shouldn’t be seeing this.”

“Right. Same names as those target sheets Falc found. But according to this, the head of each family has a Val tracker device on them. Your family’s tracker is listed as being in San Mateo. Your parents must still be in California. That’s good, right?”

She shrugged. “I’ve got to warn them not to come back. Do you think their cell phones are being tracked?”

Hedges nodded. “They should ditch them. Hey, what’s this?” He was manipulating a mouse. A menu popped open from a tab marked “Notifications.” One of the options was “Emergency Ping.”

“What does this do?” he asked.

“One person in each household has a tiny receiver embedded under the skin on their arm,” Amira explained. “They installed them a few years ago.”

“Can you use it to send a warning?” he asked.

When she nodded, he said, “Okay, let’s give it a try. Anyone who hasn’t bumped into these agents yet might not know they’re at risk. Like your parents and grandfather.”

“Signal sent,” the screen announced in bright-red letters.

“Okay,” Hedge said, “now let’s take a closer look at the tracking map.” He enlarged the map to fill the screen. The map showed our county, including several neighboring towns and most of the lake—but not the far shore, which is Canada.

“This is the Hide,” Amira said, pointing to a green island. “No signals here, which confirms what we see. Nobody made it here.”

“But there’s a cluster of signals downtown,” Hedges said. “Where is that?”

“I think that’s the police station,” I said. “Which is strange.”

“Are they taking shelter there?” Hedges asked.

“I doubt it,” Amira said, frowning.

“They’re in the rear wing,” I said. “Where those new jail cells are.”

The mayor is into applying for grants. A couple years ago she got funding to build holding cells, one for women and one for men. I dunno what they do with anyone who’s neither, but hey, it’s an old-fashioned town.

“How many do you count?” Amira asked, leaning over to study the screen.

“Uh, looks like eleven,” Hedges said. “Wait, one’s moving away from the others. Maybe into a different room. Never mind. It’s probably an error.”

“I hope so,” Amira said, frowning. “Because it’s gone out now, and, uh, I’m afraid it only works when you’re alive.”

“What?” Hedges sat back and stared at her. “How?”

“Self-destructs if the heartbeat stops so it can’t be used to trace backward.” She sat down heavily in the closest chair and buried her head in her hands.

“We can try to break them out,” Hedges said.

“Uh, you mean go there and, well, maybe have to fight?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Neighbors in need,” he said.

It was an old expression in our little town. People went to each other's aid, they didn't just wait for outside help. I guess he was brought up that way, but I admit I was surprised. "Are you sure you want to—"

"Yes." He looked grim but determined. "And there's some toolboxes under that table."

"Tools?" I stared at him. "Are we going to pinch the agents with needle-nosed pliers?"

Reaching under the table, he came up with a really big pair of bolt cutters.

"Or maybe you can threaten to snip someone's finger off?" I still wasn't getting it.

Hedges rolled his eyes. Then he went to the far end of the room and clipped the padlock on the gun cabinet. "Shotgun, I think," he said as he pulled one down. "And some shells." He stuffed them into his jacket pockets. "You?" he asked, looking at me.

Even though we live in the country, I don't know much about guns. My dad took me to a shooting range exactly two times when I was younger. They start kids on single-shot .22 rifles, and that's the only thing I ever shot. I took down a Browning lever-action .22. It looked like the one I'd used as a kid.

"Here," Hedges said, handing me a small box of ammunition.

"What about you?" I asked Amira, who had gotten up and come over to join us. I expected her to grab one of the big black guns like they use in movies, but she reached up and took down a short, curved sword. It looked like an antique.

"This'll do," she said. "I like to work close up."

Hedges and I exchanged a look.

"Uh, I'll drive," Hedges said, hurrying after Amira, who was jogging up the stairs.

"Not unless you know how to drive a speedboat," she said.

"What about my truck?"

“Too obvious,” Amira said. “They’ll be looking for it, and anyway, the boat will be quicker. Straight shot to the marina. The center of town is only five blocks from there.”

“So we run up Main Street with guns?” he asked.

“If you’d taken something short, you could’ve hid it under your jacket,” she said.

The boathouse was open. No security at all. Hedges looked deeply offended. I think he was looking forward to another challenge.

It was basically a big shed over docks that ran down each side and had parking spaces for boats. All empty except one: a longish boat under a dusty canvas cover.

“They keep this here for grocery runs during summer training weeks. Help me get the cover off,” Amira said.

It was an old-fashioned speedboat made of varnished mahogany, bobbing there like something out of a movie.

“Wow,” Hedges said.

“Untie the dock lines,” she said, jumping in.

The key was in the ignition and a garage door opener sat in the driver’s seat.

“Actually,” Hedges said, “I do know how to drive it.” He reached over to turn the key.

Amira got to him before he could do it. She moved fast. Gripping his wrist, she hissed, “Blower first. Gas accumulates in the bilge, especially with the cover on!”

“Oh.” Hedges frowned. “I forgot about that.”

It took her just a minute to vent the engine box, kick the big motor on with a sudden roar, back us out of the slip and open the garage door.

“Sit down,” she said as she aimed the boat at the door. Then she slammed the lever forward. The engine thundered and the boat kicked up a wave that slapped over the docks as we burst out of the boathouse at high speed.

“Damn,” Hedges said.

I smiled.

It was a cool fall afternoon in the middle of the workweek, so the lake was empty except for a few kayakers close to shore. We went down the center, staying what we hoped was more than a gunshot away from land, just in case. Amira kept the throttle wide open until we got to the town marina, which was quiet except for a few people cleaning their boats.

Once we'd tied up at a guest dock, I said, "Now what? Do we just go into the police station lobby and ask where they are?"

Amira's eyes narrowed. "No. The agents are probably in charge now."

"Why would Burt let the feds take over his fancy new police station?" Hedges asked.

We all knew the police chief. As I said, it's a small town. We have three officers, but Burt's the only one who works full-time. The other two split night duty between them.

"If those agents are there, they'll recognize Amira and me," I said. "They have our photos."

"Wait in the diner across the street," Hedges said. "I'll go in to report my truck."

"Report it?" I asked. "For what? A broken taillight?"

"Stolen," Amira said. "By us."

Hedges nodded.

It seemed like a plan. We started walking.

I'd left the .22 under a seat on the boat. Amira's sword was tucked under her sweatshirt. But Hedges was walking down the sidewalk with the shotgun under his arm. People were definitely looking. I mean, lots of people hunt, but not usually on Main Street.

"Uh, do you want to put that down somewhere?" I asked.

“I’m turning it in. Unlicensed. There’s a new initiative in this state. Didn’t you see the notice?”

“If you say so. Hope the chief doesn’t shoot you before you get a chance to explain.”

“Burt never shoots anyone and he’s known me since I was a baby. My dad does the towing for the county.”

“You’ve got an answer for everything,” Amira said. “Hope you’re right.”

Chapter 11

The Pine Cone

We were on the sidewalk across from the police station. I counted four black vans like the one I'd seen by my house (all with similar out-of-state plates). They were in the lot reserved for the town's two police cruisers, parking them in. That seemed odd.

"Come on," Amira said, opening the glass door to the Pine Cone, which is a coffee joint with old black-and-white linoleum tiles on the floor and a pine counter with tall wooden bar chairs. Someone had cut the shape of a pine cone in the back of each chair. Cute.

The bell rang when the door opened and an elderly couple in a booth looked up.

"Don't go in if it looks suspicious," I called to Hedges as he crossed the street, then I followed Amira to the counter.

An elderly waitress I didn't know came out of the kitchen with an order pad and pen and said, "What'll it be?"

"Two eggs over easy, home fries, whole wheat toast, and do you have any hot sauce?" Amira said.

I was surprised. I thought we were just waiting. A coffee would've been fine.

"We don't serve breakfast this time of day," the waitress said.

"What *do* you serve?" Amira asked. "I'm hungry."

"The cook's all backed up with a delivery order," she said. "A dozen sandwiches to make. Why don't you try the blue plate special?" She pointed to a hand-lettered sign that said, "Today's blue plate special: Baked stuff chicken smothered by gravy, \$5.00."

"Okay," Amira said with a shrug.

"Love that baked *stuff*," I said.

"You want one too?" the waitress asked. I don't think she got the joke. Maybe she's the one who wrote the sign.

“No thanks,” I said. “I like my chickens cooked, not smothered.”

“Is he being rude?” the waitress asked Amira.

“She!” I snapped. “How about a cup of black coffee. Please.”

She frowned and scribbled on her pad. “I’ll go put your order in,” she told Amira.

I drummed my fingers on the counter.

“Stop that,” Amira said.

“Sorry. Guess I’m nervous. Do we have a plan?”

“No.” She glared out the front window toward the police station.

“Can you, uh, defeat those agents?” I asked. I was really hoping she had some superpowers or was inhumanly fast with that sword or something. *I’m handy in a fight on ice, but I’m not used to men with guns*, I thought. *That kind of fight is probably a lot—*

“Harder. You’re right.” She was looking at me and her eyes were animal again.

“Damn it! That freaks me out,” I said. “Wait, how did you know what I was thinking?”

She smiled.

“You can tell what I’m thinking? Jesus.” I was pretty embarrassed considering the whole crush thing. “Uh, can all vamp—I mean Val—do that?”

Not like me, Amira thought, pushing the words into my head. *Only a little. I’m particularly good at it.*

“I heard that in my head!” I exclaimed, so loudly that the old couple turned to stare at us.

“And *that* is a good demonstration of why hunters might need to be able to throw their thoughts instead of shouting them out loud,” she whispered as she stared back at them until they looked flustered and went back to their meal. “Why don’t you work on that?” she added, using her normal voice again. “Or at least try not to shout.”

“Sorry.”

“I only did it so you’d know what’s happening if I have to send you instructions when we’re fighting,” she added.

“Instructions?” I repeated. *I mean, sure, she’s older than me, but that doesn’t automatically put her in charge,* I thought.

She smiled.

“You heard that?”

“Of course. Or I might want to ask you a question,” she said. “Let’s just see how it rolls out.”

“He’s still in there,” I said, frowning.

“It’s only been five minutes.”

I tapped the counter again but stopped when she frowned at my hand. “Sorry. So what other special talents do, uh, Val have? Anything that might help us not get shot?”

“How did you overpower the agent you stole the folder from?”

“That’s easy,” I said. “Move fast, anticipate, act while they react. But that’s what I do in hockey. It’s no big deal. Works in karate too. I used to win tournaments.” I had gone to karate in the next town over until Dad left and I didn’t have a ride.

“Have you ever been injured by a puck?”

“Me? No. Of course not.”

“Because you anticipate and you move out of the way if it’s going to come toward your face?”

I nodded.

“But bullets go faster,” she said, eyeing me. “So . . .”

I reached out and slid her fork away from her. I’d noticed her glance at it and I’d spotted a tensing of muscles in her shoulder and arm like she was about to make a grab for it. “Were you thinking of stabbing me with this?” I demanded. “Because I might not be able to read minds, but I can read body language just fine.”

“Just checking,” she said, smiling. “I expect I’ll have to rely on *your* talents quite soon.”

We sat waiting in silence after that.

I tried not to feel nervous, but it was hard not to get tense. *It’s just like getting ready for a game*, I told myself. *Except the other team has guns instead of hockey sticks . . .*

“Don’t overthink it,” Amira said.

Damn. She must’ve been listening to my thoughts again. Good thing I was too nervous to think how attractive she—*stop that!* I thought angrily, hopefully only to myself.

The waitress came out carrying a plate and a glass of water and plunked them down in front of Amira. Guess she forgot about my coffee.

“Here,” I said, sliding the fork back. “You’re going to need this.”

Then the waitress came out of the kitchen again, carrying a large paper bag. It looked heavy. She looked annoyed.

“Wait, where are you taking that?” I asked.

“Across the street. They insisted on having it delivered.”

“Who?” Amira asked.

“Some task force from out of town. Setting up at the police station for a day or two. They better tip well.” She’d put the bag on the counter so she could get her coat on.

“We’ll walk it over for you,” Amira said. “You’re so busy. And we’ll bring you back the tip.”

She eyed us suspiciously. “How do I know you won’t walk off with it?”

Amira flashed a winning smile. “Because I’m coming right back to finish my chicken!”

“And my coffee,” I added, but they ignored me.

“If you really want to,” she said, hanging her coat on the hook again.

“Can we have our check?” It was the elderly couple.

Amira left it to me to carry the sandwiches as she led the way toward the police station. She really did act as if being older, more experienced, and drop-dead beautiful made her in charge. Go figure.

The lobby door was locked. “That’s not normal,” I said.

She took the bag and held it up to the security camera as she said, “Your order!” The bag blocked their view of her face.

There was a *buzzzzz* and I hurried to push the door open.

A man in a dark suit was reaching for the bag, but Amira handed it to me. His eyebrows went up; he must’ve recognized her from the photograph on her target sheet. But before he could get to his gun in its holster, she’d grabbed his tie and pulled him forward, kneeing him in the jaw as he stumbled through the door. He landed on the cement walkway. Before I could say anything, she had her sword at his neck.

“You can’t leave them alive or they’ll come back for you a second time,” she said as she slipped the sword under her coat again. “Come on.”

Chapter 12

The Police Station

The lobby has a counter with forms for dog and gun and fishing licenses. There's a couple of cheap armchairs and a coffee table with a fake plant. There's a water bubbler and a bunch of posters about CPR and gun safety. But the main focus is a wall with a locked door and a glass window with a little pass-through hole above a counter. You can pay a parking ticket there or hand over an accident report form.

Usually the chief sits back there with his feet up, listening to the radio and doing crosswords, but he wasn't looking so comfortable today. He was fastened to his chair with duct tape, and his arms were pinned too. There was even a piece of tape over his mouth. He frowned when we came in.

There was no sign of Hedges or his shotgun.

We stood there wondering what to do until an *ahem* got our attention. It was the chief.

I went up to the window and leaned down to talk through the half circle opening. "How do we get into the cells?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. Then he pointed with his chin.

I pointed too. "Over here?"

He nodded.

"What, a key ring or something?"

He shook his head.

"A button?"

He nodded.

Okay, I thought. Let's see if I can . . .

I reached my arm in up to my shoulder and felt around. Nothing.

The chief frowned and looked further along, but I couldn't reach that far. *Damn!*

“Hurry up,” Amira said from over at a metal door with a “Holding Cells” sign.

I spotted a heavy stapler and reached for it. Then I swung it, bang, where the chief was looking. There was a *click* and Amira said, *Got it!* Except she said it in my head. She held the door just a tiny bit open while she waited for me.

Ready? she asked, again in my head.

No, I thought.

You must be the girl who took out an entire hockey team, she thought back at me.

Darn. She'd read the article too. I guess everyone did.

Was there a lot of blood? she thought. And at “blood,” her teeth slid out.

Mine did too. I guess that's what she wanted.

Then her sword was out and she was pushing through the door and I was elbowing past her to get out in the open while men in black suits turned toward us, looking surprised. It was a visitor lounge and processing area, not the actual cells, which were through two more doors at the far end. The men had been making themselves comfortable, sitting at tables and desks, some with their feet up. When Amira whipped the sword out from behind her back, they started coming out of their chairs and reaching for their guns.

That's my cue, I thought.

I was already moving fast toward the middle of the room where most of the men were. I hit one of them low in his gut with my shoulder, and he went up and over me. I knew he was going to try to break his fall with his right hand, which was holding his gun. And I figured it would go off.

The gunshot was really loud in that enclosed space and the other agents couldn't help looking to see what happened, which meant eyes off me for a couple seconds. I punched the next one hard on the temple and he went down. Fighting people who weren't in hockey pads and helmets was surprisingly easy, but I wished I had a hockey stick.

There *was* a stick! Figures! We're obsessed with hockey up here on the Canadian border. There were two sticks in the room, actually, crossed on the wall on a plaque from last year when our high school team won state. That was my first year on the team, I'd scored most of the goals, so one of the sticks was actually *mine*. Ha! The other was a goalie stick, which was too bulky.

I saw the next man's shoulder tighten and his eyes narrow. I knew he was about to take a shot at Amira, who was giving a couple agents some trouble with her sword. I lunged at him, bringing my fist down and smashing his wrist. The gun went off into another agent's leg and then fell from his hand. I was almost past him by then but I didn't want him to pick up the gun, so I pulled out an old karate move and landed a kick—on his neck. You don't kick anyone in their neck in a tournament, but in a tournament the other guy isn't trying to shoot you.

I heard his body hit the floor as I ducked under another agent's swinging punch, then I jumped onto the table and grabbed my hockey stick. It was held up with hot glue. It popped right off the wall.

I spun around, swinging the stick, and *smack*—I hit an agent's hand and knocked another gun away. Then, since I was still up on the table, I kicked his jaw. Also not a move I'd ever used in a tournament or a game, but this was clearly not for sport. My kick laid him out flat, but two more agents tackled me before I could swing the stick again. And just like that I was pinned by really big arms squeezing the breath out of me.

Teeth! Amira shouted in my head.

Teeth? What did that mean? *Oh*. I brought a knee up so one of them would rear back to avoid it and then there it was: his left arm got close enough for me to slice into it with my fangs. It was disgusting but strangely easy because they're so sharp. He let go, screaming. I guess it's scary to get cut by a vampire's fangs. Anyway, that gave me a chance to squirm and drop, and I slid off the table before the other guy could get a proper grip on me again.

I think one of my fangs scraped his side through his white shirt, because a lot of blood was suddenly there. Messy but not disabling. I knew I had to do something to lay him on the floor because I could see Amira was having trouble with four agents now, so I came up fast, jumping into him, and I did the obvious. I bit his neck. That *really* grossed

me out and got bad-tasting blood in my mouth, but I see why mountain lions do that to their prey. He went down immediately.

I was in the open for the moment, but with more agents rushing toward me. Fortunately, these ones didn't just shoot me straight away. I guess because there were four of them they thought they'd be able to grab and hold me, so I decided to move fast enough to make that a hard job for them.

One of the agents pulled a dart gun out so I slashed his arm as I went past and he dropped it. Another agent pulled out a pistol. Guess they'd realized I wasn't going to be easy to grab and gone back to Plan A, shooting me. I dove onto the floor and scrambled under the table. Then I shouldered the table and threw it up into him. He hadn't seen that coming. He went over with the table on top of him and his gun arm pressed to his side, unable to line up a shot at me.

I'd lost my stick by now, so I jumped onto the upside-down table and slashed him with my fangs. In the neck. *So like a bad B movie*, I thought as I spat out the taste and rolled over, somersaulting to my feet.

Jump! came Amira's thought, so I kept going, springing into the air as gunshots sprayed beneath me. An agent on the ground near Amira was shooting, but his shots went under me and hit two more agents in the legs. They went down and then Amira's sword swung, taking off the shooter's hand at the wrist before he could line up a shot at me.

I gasped. There was an awful lot of blood.

She kicked the last standing agent hard on the side of his head and he went down next to the one without a hand. It was *really* disgusting, and I gotta say it's one thing to watch action movies or read manga about samurai, but it's another thing to actually *be* in a battle like that. As in, not a good thing. At all. I was sure I'd have nightmares for life.

But, amazingly, I wasn't injured and nor was Amira. I'd survived my first fight.

There were men in dark suits all over the floor, most of them very bloody.

I was breathing hard and my fangs wouldn't go back in.

"Ten," Amira said out loud. "Is that all of them?"

“Four vans, each with two agents and a tech? That makes eight so ten’s too many—and where are the techs?” The one I saw wasn’t in a suit.

“Your van was a kill team, which is different. And it’s not even here, is it?” she said. “Probably evacuated after you attacked them. These must be extraction teams. They usually have four agents so they can carry tranked bodies to their van,” she said. “Like the team I escaped from out in California.”

“Four vans, which means sixteen agents,” I said. “Six more to go.” I frowned.

“This is only the outer room,” Amira pointed out. “We still need to go into the cells.”

“Third period,” I said.

“Huh?”

“It means another chance to win. It’s a hockey thing,” I explained as I leaned over to retrieve my old stick from between two unconscious bodies. One of them was the agent who’d dropped his dart gun. I picked it up instead. It had a pump lever and a plastic clip sticking up that held a row of darts. “Before we do anything else?”

Amira nodded. “Right. Shoot any who aren’t dead. We don’t want them to have to fight them all over again on the way out.”

It didn’t seem right, walking through the room and shooting darts into injured and unconscious men, but I soon had them tranquilized. *Better than dead, assholes*, I thought.

“Not if you think of them as killers hell-bent on exterminating you,” Amira said, reading my thoughts again. “The smart thing would be to kill any survivors, you know.”

“Yeah but *I’m* not a killer,” I said. My fangs had gone back in and I was feeling drained and nauseated.

“They have your friend in there,” she said. “Probably your family too. Who was at your house?”

“My mom and an uncle, but they were planning to hide.” I frowned and picked up the hockey stick again.

“I don’t see the keys,” Amira said. “We’ll have to search them.” She pointed at the fallen agents with her sword. “Or—” she added as static came from a walkie-talkie followed by a man’s voice.

“What’s your status? Who were you firing at? Smith? Are you there? *Smith!*”

“Answer!” Amira hissed as she hurried to roll one of the agents over and extract a little black box with a short antenna from a holder on his belt.

“No, you.”

“Your voice is deeper,” she said.

It’s true my voice is deeper than hers. And I’d been in a lot of school plays—often playing a villain.

Oh well, worth a try, I thought. “Smith here,” I said as I pushed a button on the side of the thing.

“What’s your status?” came the reply, sounding tense. “Do we have a code red?”

“It’s contained,” I said in my best imitation of a deep male voice. “Code green,” I improvised, hoping that was right.

“Who were the intruders?” the voice said, still tense.

“Just a couple of girls,” I said.

“Repeat code status,” came the response.

“Code green. Situation contained. And, uh, lunch is here,” I added.

It was really late in the afternoon for sandwiches, and I was betting they were hungry. My experience with men is they’re easily distracted by simple, primitive things. Like food, and, well, other things that I’d prefer to leave to Amira if it came down to it.

“We’re coming out,” the voice said.

Take a door! Amira hissed inside my ear. Weird to hear her thoughts, but very helpful in a fight.

I got up next to one of the doors. Amira took the other. No windows in them. Seemed like a design mistake to me, but helpful if you wanted to lay in wait for someone. We did.

Hers opened. I guess they weren't fooled because a pistol appeared first and Amira dove to the side—I *hoped* in time—as it went off.

He fired only two rounds before my stick hit his arm and he swore and dropped the gun.

I was all fangs as I whipped through the door and sprinted into the big square room with only one high barred window and metal benches along the walls. I threw my hockey stick at the agents farthest from me to keep them busy while I shouldered into the nearest one and slit his neck. This was such an easy move and seemed to be instinctive, but I was still upset and disgusted by it.

Down he went, gurgling, as I ran past and bit someone's right arm so that he dropped his gun on the floor.

The agent furthest from me untangled himself from the hockey stick and tried to put his silencer on his gun—stupid, really, but he didn't know how fast I was.

I jumped on his back and, not wanting to kill him, I bit his shoulder. He tried to throw me and my fangs ripped long cuts in him as I fell. He went down, too, screaming and clutching his shoulder.

Door! Amira screamed in my head, and I scrambled up and sprinted to it as it was swinging closed.

Who would try to lock us in? Obviously not Amira. So I came out expecting trouble.

But, honestly, not *that* much trouble.

Chapter 13

Hostages

As I ran into the lounge area, I glanced through the door to the second holding cell which was open, and saw Val in there. I *hoped* everyone. I caught a glimpse of my mom. Bad she'd been captured but good she was alive!

Too bad an agent was standing in the doorway, aiming a gun at them.

But before I could deal with that, I had to focus on what was happening in the holding area. Three more agents had dragged out two people duct-taped to chairs.

My uncle.

And Hedges. *Damn!* I stopped short.

Amira was frozen too. She didn't have the sword anymore, and a fifth agent was pressing Hedges's shotgun to her side.

Double damn! I thought. *Didn't see that coming.*

"Mr. Valvenandi," an agent said to me. It was the one with his gun pointed at Uncle Wolfgang. "You're—"

"Ms.," I interrupted. It bugged me when people couldn't even look at me closely enough to get *that* right.

"You're holding one of our air guns," he continued smoothly. "Put it down."

I pretended to be surprised as I looked down at it. "Is that what this is?" I asked. "I was wondering. Never seen one. Don't even know how they work." I smiled innocently.

Sometimes that works with teachers. It didn't seem to work with him.

"So," I said, wanting to keep him talking, "I'm just curious. Since I'm new to all this, I can't help wondering why you want them. I mean, you tranquilized them instead of shooting them, and now I'm guessing you're going to drive them somewhere. No, wait—these vans aren't big enough for long-range transport are they, so you're waiting

for a bus, right? Probably like an armored one like prisons use with bars and locks on the windows, right?”

I was playing for time, but I could see from their expressions I was right.

“Which means,” I hurried on, “they must be useful to you. So, are you studying them or”—they hadn’t reacted to that—“*experimenting* on them?”

“Here’s how it’s going to work,” the agent beside Uncle Wolfgang said. “*You’ll* put the dart gun down and kneel with your hands behind your head, or *I’ll* blow your uncle’s head off. And at the same time, my associates will discharge their weapons into two dozen of your neighbors, along with your girlfriend and boyfriend, *Ms. Valvenandi*. Do I make myself clear?”

He did make himself clear, I thought, *but in more ways than he knew*. In the fight at the police station, more of the agents had been trying to catch me than shoot me. Odd. And now here he was, telling me to put the dart gun down instead of just blowing my brains out with *his* gun. I guessed maybe something about the way I fought had gotten their interest. Call it a hunch.

I had a kind of hunch about Uncle Wolfgang too. Hedges was as good as dead and so was Amira, but I had a different kind of hunch about her, having seen her in action. I just had to push a thought into her head.

You’re on your own, I pushed. *On my cue. And by the way, Hedges never loaded that shotgun. He’s really serious about safety.*

Okay, was all she sent back, but it told me she got my message.

“All right, all right!” I said out loud. “Here’s your silly air gun. Take it,” I said, holding it out sideways to the agent beside Uncle Wolfgang. I did it so casually that they didn’t notice the barrel was pointing toward another agent. “Oops,” I said as the thing went pop.

I’m good at fakes. I’ve scored a lot of goals that way.

The agent covering Hedges with his pistol frowned and looked down at his thigh. The end of a blue dart was there. He seemed puzzled.

And then he went down.

Amira went down, too, diving under him so fast that as the agent covering her dropped the shotgun, having gotten nothing more than empty clicks out of it, and pulled his pistol from a shoulder holster to push off two quick shots, his shots went right into the tranquilized agent instead of Amira.

The shooter shouted, “Shit!” really loudly.

Great move, Amira! I thought as I went into action too.

I love so-called chaos. If you can anticipate all the movement, it’s actually quite orderly. It only looks like chaos to the other people.

My first target was Amira’s agent since she was coming into his line of sight again, but he was focused on her, not me, so my kick to the neck did the trick. Then I pushed off the wall and came fast at the agent covering Uncle Wolfgang, slashing his arm deeply as I went by. Like I’d expected, he dropped his gun, but I didn’t know that it was going to go off on impact with the floor and put a bullet in his foot. Call that a bonus. Boy did he go down hard, but I was past him by then and jumping on the back of the agent covering the crowd in the holding cell. He tried to shoot me over his shoulder, but I punched his arm away and his shots went into the ceiling.

Sorry, I don’t like this either, I thought as I sank my fangs deep in his neck.

It was over. I untangled myself from the agent as he fell, and I saw that Amira was cutting Hedges free with her sword.

I hurried into the holding cell and went to my mother, the crowd parting hastily to let me through. “Mom,” I said, “I’m sorry you had to see that and sorry they mistook you for a vampire, but I’m really happy you’re okay!”

“Honey,” she said, “I’m sorry I kept it from you all these years,” and then she opened her mouth and goddamned *fangs* slid out for a second, then back in. “I’ve been in denial, I guess. I hoped having a human father would prevent you from transitioning. I just wanted us to be normal.”

“That’s why you avoid meat?”

She nodded. There were tears in her eyes.

“Probably would’ve been better just to tell me, huh?” Then I went back out to check on Hedges. He was just pulling off the last strips of tape while Amira was hugging her grandfather and asking how he was. He was dressed like a lawyer in a fancy suit and tie. I guess they’d picked him up at his office.

“Sorry!” Hedges said when he saw me.

“Hey,” I said, “I shouldn’t send a nerd into a gunfight. My mistake.” I gave him a smile and a slap on the back.

“Maybe,” he said, “but I’ve been thinking.” His eyes slid toward my uncle for a second, and I nodded to let him know I understood.

I turned toward Uncle Wolfgang. “Don’t cut him loose yet,” I said. Amira was approaching him with her blade. “I have a few questions.”

“It just goes to exhibit,” Uncle Wolfgang said, “that the government cannot be trusted.” He grinned at me.

“Show, not exhibit,” I snapped. But speaking of trust and honesty,” I continued, “just how old *are* you?”

“Close to retirement age by now, I should say!” He was making a joke of it.

Amira stiffened. I guessed she’d picked up more than what he’d said out loud, since she was a master thought-reader and all. “Grandfather,” she hissed. “Come over here, please.” And then she whispered in his ear.

“About culling,” I said to Uncle Wolfgang. “I don’t think we finished our conversation about it. Remember when my mom interrupted us? You’d wanted to tell me our family’s history.”

His eyes darted to Amira and her grandfather and then to the growing crowd coming out of the cell and forming an audience around us. “This is not really the time or space to unpack family baggages,” he said.

“Baggage,” I corrected out of habit. “And you were telling me about our name. Remember? Our *last* name.”

“Which is?” Amira’s grandfather asked. “We don’t seem to have any record of you in the local Council. That agent called you something odd, but I assumed he was mistaken.”

“Valvenandi,” I said. “From the Latin word Valukar for vampire, plus some other root word I don’t know. Yet. But we didn’t get to that part,” I snapped, eyeing my uncle suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Venandi?” Amira’s grandfather guessed, his eyes widening. “No *wonder* your family hid from the Council!”

There were some quick intakes of breath from all around us.

“Our name is nothing more or lesser than a relic of the old times,” Uncle Wolfgang said quickly. “There aren’t any true *Venandi* left, of course.” He flashed a toothy grin at the crowd gathering around us.

“Of *course*,” I corrected. “And about your vocabulary errors, Great, uh, Great, Great Great Uncle or whatever you are. They’re a sign of mental degeneration from extreme old age, I’m guessing. Just how old *are* you?”

“It’s fun to chat with my favorite niece, but this is not really the best temporal event for it. Untie me now before reinforcements arrive from Washington, CD, please.”

“Washington, *DC*, is a long way from here,” I said. Everybody was staring at us now, but I was determined to continue. “Mom, what did he tell you when you were young that made you reject the family tradition so strongly?”

“Oh dear.” She looked like she’d just tasted something rotten.

“Mom!”

“I’m sorry, Falcon, but *venandi* means ‘hunter,’” she said. “The Valvenandi family were the vampire hunters. We did the culling.”

“What does *that* mean?” I demanded, getting up in Uncle Wolfgang’s face.

“An important responsibility,” he said. “Unfortunately, sometimes Valukar fail to control their urges. They—”

“Urges!” I corrected.

“Urgeness, yes. And then they become a danger to human society, which is a threat to all Valukar because humans no longer need our talents like they once did. Not since they switched from hunting to farming, thousands of years ago. And when humans are afraid of us . . .” He raised an eyebrow. “Then *they* become the hunters, which is unpleasant, as we’ve just witnessed.”

“So our family *killed* other vampires?” I said, ignoring his vocabulary errors. “That’s horrible!”

“We were the best,” he said. “Best hunters, best killers. Don’t complain! Where do you think you got your impressive t—”

“Impressive!” I snapped.

“Impressiving talents,” he continued. “Very impressingive. That was quite a demonstration you just put off.” (His command of vocabulary seemed to be getting even worse as he got more stressed.)

“But it wasn’t *you* who hunted this town’s Valukar, was it, Uncle?” I let my fangs slide out—and I’m sure my eyes changed too—as I got closer to his leathery face. “It was *heavily armed federal agents*. How come they showed up right after *you* did?”

“Alas, they must have been insecting me,” he said.

“Bugging you,” Hedges corrected. “But they weren’t here just for you,” he pointed out, “because that would only explain one team, not four. Where did they get their list?” (Leave it to Hedges to odd the math, and he was obviously right.)

Uncle Traitor shrugged. He didn’t seem to have even a poorly worded answer to that.

“You’d read about my hockey game in our very local paper,” I said. “And you knew my mom lived here. You were doing research, weren’t you? Which suggests you must’ve been cooperating with them! Well? What do you have to say to that!?!”

I stopped. I was hoping for a confession, but he just sat there looking like I was a child having a tantrum. Darn. Because I couldn’t fill in the last and biggest blank. What could his motive possibly be?

Amira stepped forward. “My grandfather has just reminded me of a little-known fact from our deepest history. Certain Valukar, way back in Ancient Roman, discovered that a regular diet of Val blood fresh from the jugular vein stopped them from aging.”

What? I certainly hadn’t seen that coming.

“And so they began to cull even when it wasn’t necessary, just for their own benefit,” Amira went on. “Which explains the stories humans tell about vampires, right down to the fang marks on the neck. Sorry, Falcon,” she added.

I stood there, mouth open, completely shocked. *That* was my family history?

“That’s ridiculousness!” Uncle Traitorous Evil Bloodsucker said. “Old tall tallies! And if I’m not on your side, then why am I bound to this seat?”

“I’ve also heard that those are just an old folktales,” someone said. I think it was the local pharmacist. She was wearing a white lab coat. “As a modern Val with a medical education,” she went on, “I find that sort of story *very* hard to believe. But agents from D.C. are very real, and more may come. I say we untie him and get out of here before anyone else shows up.”

“I agree that time is of the essence,” Amira’s grandfather replied. “However, I’ve learned to trust my granddaughter. She has a talent for, shall we say, hearing hidden truths. If *she’s* worried about him, then I think it would be wise to leave this one behind.” He frowned at Uncle Wolfgang.

“If you leave him, he’ll escape and do it again,” I said.

“Don’t underestimate duct tape,” Hedges said, sounding annoyed as he picked a remnant off his sleeve.

“Don’t underestimate someone who’s probably been a traitor for two thousand years,” I snapped. “That agent holding the gun to his head was just pretending, or else he would’ve pulled the trigger when I made my move. Why didn’t he shoot you?” I demanded, glaring at my duct-taped uncle. “Unless you’re his informant! And why would you work with him? Unless, uh . . .”

There was a long pause. I realized I was still vague on the why. I guess the others were puzzled too.

“I’m afraid his motive is obvious,” Hedges cut in. “He did it for the blood. I bet they let him have some of their prisoners in payment.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Is anyone missing?” Amira asked.

A man I recognized as one of the janitors from high school stepped forward. “Agnes,” he said. “She was with me when they darted us.”

“The librarian?” I asked. “She’s your wife, right?”

He nodded. “But when I woke up in the cell, she wasn’t with me.”

Uncle Traitor’s eyes had darted ever so briefly to one side at the mention of her name. What was there? Just a bare wall. Beyond that, the parking lot.

“Amira,” I said. “You better go check those vans.”

Chapter 14

Very Bad News

I don't think anyone's ever waited more tensely than we did as Amira hurried outside. And then we heard her coming back and . . .

"I'm sorry," she said, looking like she was trying not to cry.

The man's eyes changed and he rushed at Uncle Murderous Asshole, and that's when another of my hunches proved true because my uncle pulled himself free. I guess the tape had been cut under the chair arms all along, and in a second, he was leaping for the door.

He was fast, I'll give him that.

But not as fast as an empty shotgun somersaulting through the air. I'd picked it up and thrown it. Not that I couldn't have caught up with him, but then what? I didn't want to have to bite him in the neck. (I didn't want to have to bite *anyone* in the neck, actually.)

Uncle Traitor went down hard in the middle of the police station lobby and everyone went out there and stood staring down at him.

I backed away, feeling really bad—I mean, it had been *my* uncle who gave them all away and *killed* one of them! I was almost to the exit when Amira appeared beside me and took me by the hand, pulling me back to face them. Darn.

"Falcon and her mother had no part in this," she announced. "And Falcon is responsible for freeing us. Judge the traitor, not his whole family."

"Uh, thanks," I muttered, "but I really should be going. With Hedges." It occurred to me that some of them might also have ideas about a human who knew too much.

"Not so fast," Amira's grandfather said. "This is a matter for the Council. Tape him thoroughly," he said, frowning down at my unconscious uncle. "Then hurry to the marina. You know the drill."

"Do we ditch our SIM cards now?" someone asked.

“Yes,” Amira’s grandfather said.

“Your GPS location can be tracked by your phone company even if you take the SIM card out,” Hedges said. “If you really want to disappear, you better leave your phones here.”

“Young man,” Amira’s grandfather said, “you’ve been very helpful. Would you be willing to come as far as the Hide with us? Your technical skills may continue to be of use.”

Hedges looked at me.

I winced. Of course he had to speak up just when I was hoping we could slip away without being noticed. “Only if I go with him,” I said.

“If you insist,” Amira’s grandfather said with a deep frown in my direction. He didn’t sound very happy about it.

And then we were hurrying out of the police station. Some of the men had Uncle Bloodsucker wrapped up in tape so he couldn’t use his arms. He was awake now and walking between two men, but he didn’t look so good. I *hoped* he felt terrible!

I kept close, just a little behind, where he could feel my eyes on him.

Amira grabbed the bag of sandwiches.

Nobody helped Chief Burt. He watched us leave with raised eyebrows. But I figured someone would report in for the evening shift soon and un-tape him. They’d find a lot of dead and injured agents, too, which would serve them right for trusting some agency nobody’s heard of that goes around kidnapping and killing people—or whatever we are...

A few townspeople stared as we went down the sidewalk, but it was pretty quiet and we didn’t attract much attention. Amira, Hedges and I didn’t go back into the Pine Cone to pay our bill, and there certainly was no tip to give the waitress. Oh well.

It was getting cold and dark by the time we got to the marina, and nobody was there, except more Val, who must’ve gotten calls or alerts, and were waiting to meet us.

We stopped in the parking lot above the docks and discussed who was going with who. Whom. Most of them had their own boats. Some of them had obviously called family members before they dumped their phones so more Val continued to pull up, tossing their keys and phones into the water as they arrived.

Amira's grandfather sent Uncle Val on the biggest motorboat, with a half dozen people to keep an eye on him. My mom and Amira's grandfather came with Hedges and Amira and me in the mahogany speedboat.

Motors roared to life all over the marina and boats sped away, lights off. But I noticed I could see pretty well in the twilight as long as I kept my fangs out. Guess that's another Val thing. Night vision. Must've been good for hunting.

Soon we heard shouting from the biggest motorboat.

"What's going on?" Hedges asked.

Someone was climbing onto the cabin roof. It was my uncle.

"Move!" I shouted, pushing my mom aside as I grabbed the .22 from under her seat. I hurried to load it and took aim just as he dove into the dark water. *Pop* went the rifle and *splash* went Uncle Murderer. I thought I'd been a bit late, but I couldn't be sure. Maybe I hit him. I was aiming for his legs as he dove to try to slow him down. Anyway, he didn't come up.

We circled around for ten minutes, but by then we could hear distant sirens and figured they'd be after us soon, so Amira threw the throttle all the way forward. My mom nearly fell overboard, but I grabbed her as we leapt into the darkness.

I had my suspicions about my uncle, and so apparently did Amira. She gave me a look along with the pushed thought: *What trick did he use?*

I didn't have an answer for her. I just hoped that if he got away, he'd *stay* away.

Then I had a thought of my own that I wanted to share with her. *Does he know where your Hide is?*

She bit her lip and frowned, but did not reply.

We both knew whose side he was on—and it wasn't ours. If he managed to make it back to shore, I was pretty sure his first call would be to that horrible agency.

Chapter 15

Escape Plans

When we got to the island, I jumped overboard just before Amira drove the boat into the boathouse. The water was cold and dark, but my clothes were stiff with dried blood and I had to get it off me somehow.

I rubbed myself all over, then swam to the rocks and scrambled ashore, dripping wet but not bloody anymore. It helped to be clean, but I knew I'd be having nightmares for a long time, and maybe I'd never really get the smell of blood off me ever again.

I came out of the water shivering—and not just because I was cold. *Don't think about it*, I told myself as I began to run through all the fighting and all the people I'd . . .

Just don't, I thought.

And then another voice in my head said, *You're right. Don't. It's better to focus on what to do next. Live in the future, not the past. None of it was your fault!* It was Amira, waiting for me on the shore.

"That was very poetic," I said, but for once, it didn't bother me that she was listening in on my thoughts.

"Come on," she said. "I'll get you some dry clothes. I keep things here because my grandfather comes out every weekend to take care of things and I usually come with him."

"I don't do girly," I said.

She chuckled.

I changed into a pair of her jeans—old and a little baggy, but she explained they were for chores—with a long-sleeved T and a black hoodie (I guess black hoodies were her thing. (She had a little bedroom down a long hall which I assumed had lots of rooms with bunk beds because it was lined with numbered doors.) Then we went through the now-crowded main lounge, and down the stairs to the tactical room.

Her grandfather was standing with several other adults behind Hedges, who was seated at the big screen, toggling through a dozen different windows and occasionally taking a bite from a half-eaten ham sandwich on a paper plate beside him. He was definitely in his element.

My mom definitely was *not* in *her* element. I spotted her sitting in a corner of the lounge looking like she really didn't belong. I felt sorry for her, but I couldn't worry about her now. At least she was safe. For the moment.

"The agency's budget has grown rapidly," Hedges was saying. "But it's not so clear what they do. Homeland Security describes their mission as, uh, 'leveraging elongocuspud terrorism,' it says, which I assume refers to you guys. They used to do nothing more than monitoring, but a few years ago, the funding for strike teams and research facilities kicked in, and their budget ballooned. They have a research center in Maine. Bio Enhanced Troops, it says, BET for short. Do you suppose they were going to take everyone to Maine?"

"Their vans have Maine plates," I said. "Uh, Hedges, whose cell phone is that?" It was wired into the computer Hedges was using.

"I found it on the floor in the police station," Hedges said. "It belongs to an agent. I'm working on it in this window." He clicked the mouse and opened up a window that had been minimized on the big screen. "I'm downloading texts, emails and telephone numbers, anything I can get off it in a hurry. Then we'll have to destroy it so they don't trace us. Look, here's his latest texts. Uh, that's weird." Hedges was frowning at the screen. "This is from someone at headquarters just a few minutes ago. *Someone* just called in and reported that we'd escaped. Who was left to—"

"I should've aimed for his head!" I snarled. It had to be Uncle Traitor. Nobody back at police headquarters was in any shape to call anyone.

"They know their teams are down, and they're sending a lot more," Hedges said. "Damn! By helicopter," he exclaimed as he toggled through the messages. "How long will that take? Uh, wow. Shit! Unbelievable! Falc, you might not want to read the next text."

"Why?" I leaned over.

My name was there. It said, “The informant’s niece, Falcon, has the super gene we’ve been looking for! I’m watching her take out three teams right now! I’ll take her alive if I can, or at least harvest lots of samples from her. Send more teams as soon as possible.”

Shit! I couldn’t *believe* it. Not only were they catching vampires, they seemed to be looking specifically for ones like *me*. Is that why Uncle Asshole was keeping tabs on me? Is that why he led them here? But if they wanted me alive, why was a team of assassins sent to my house?

I should’ve killed all of them, I thought, remembering the two I’d left for the ambulance. The ambulance would’ve taken them to the county hospital two towns over, where they were probably recovering and making phone calls a mile a minute right now. Between them and Uncle Asshole, I could assume lots of information was flooding into the agency’s headquarters about me. But why were they going to *kill* me if I was so damn special?

Then I remembered. The agents had pistols, true, but also air guns. They were probably going to kill anyone they didn’t who got in the way, but shoot *me* with their tranquilizer darts.

“I don’t want the government to make super soldiers from my blood,” I said, my voice coming out sounding strangely shaky.

“Not to mention your organs and genes,” Hedges added.

“Jesus! Do you mind?”

“I’m just reading the *next* text,” he explained. “It says, ‘If you can’t bring *it*,’—sorry, I guess that’s how they talk about you, Falc—‘alive, be sure to harvest and ice the following: blood, spleen, liver, lungs, bone marrow . . .’” He looked up. “Just about everything but your brain, Falc.”

I sat down hard in the nearest chair. It felt like somebody had knocked the wind out of me.

Amira’s grandfather, frowning, leaned over to read the screen for himself then stood and backed away. “I was afraid of this,” he hissed. “Amira! Come with me!” And then he was jogging—quite impressive, given his age—up the stairs.

Amira pushed a quick *Sorry!* into my head, fiddled with one of the smaller computers for a minute, then hurried after him.

Sorry for what? I thought back at her, but there was no answer.

“We’d better get ready to evacuate,” one of the remaining men said, and then they were hurrying up the stairs too.

Chapter 16

Abandoned

“Uh, where are they all going?” Hedges asked me.

I frowned. “Guess they’re afraid of me. Guess they should be. I’m an agent magnet. You should get away too, Hedges. You really should.”

Hedges stood up. “Someone’s overriding these controls,” he said, frowning and looking around. “But who?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m locked out. The screen’s frozen.”

“No one else is down here,” I said. “But there’s a couple monitors and keyboards in the lounge. Could they—What was that?”

Something had clicked loudly. I hurried over to the stairs. The door at the top was closed. The very heavy steel door.

“They’re leaving us behind,” Hedges said. “The human who knows too much and . . .”

“And me, the bait that brought federal agents here and ruined their lives.”

“Uh, yeah. Basically. You can see how taking us with them doesn’t make sense. Not if *they* want to be safe.”

“What about *our* safety?” I asked.

“That’s a problem,” he said. “We’ll have to work on that. But first we have to get out of here. Any ideas?”

I ran up the stairs and threw myself at the metal door. It wasn’t going to open. Not unless we had that saw from Hedge’s workshop.

“Any tools down there that can cut steel?” I called.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Where do you think they’ll go?” I asked.

“Canada, of course,” he said. “US agents probably won’t follow them there, and why else have your Hide on this lake? I mean, the border’s just a ten-minute boat trip and it’s forest on the far bank. Nobody to see you.”

“*Then* what? Live in the woods?”

He shook his head. “No, they’ve prepared for this. I saw some of the protocols. They already have bank accounts and new IDs set up in a town about ten miles over the border. They’ll blend right in. And do you know what *cachette* means?”

I shrugged. He was the brainiac, not me.

“French for ‘hideaway.’ It’s all over their computer records. They maintain another Hide in Canada,” he said. “Guess your girlfriend didn’t mention that.”

“Who, Amira? She’s not—Wait, are you jealous because she was helping me?”

He frowned. “I saw how you looked at her.”

“I saw how *you* looked at her,” I snapped.

“Doesn’t matter now,” he said. “She’s abandoned us.”

“Guess so,” I said. “Serves her right.”

“What serves her right?” Hedges asked.

“She forgot her sweatshirt.” It was draped over a chair. It looked just like the one I was wearing, but of course it wasn’t because I was already wearing mine. “Wait a second,” I added. She didn’t seem like the forgetful type. I picked the sweatshirt up and felt the pockets. “Uh, Hedges? Is this useful?”

It was a thumb drive. He plugged it into the big computer on the desk.

The screen lit up, displaying a rolling sequence of long numbers. Then these words appeared: “CONTROL OVERRIDE OVERRIDE.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I demanded.

“It means,” Hedges said, “we’re back in.”

“How?”

“She gave us the codes needed to cancel whatever they did upstairs. She must’ve known what they were planning.”

“She can listen in on people’s thoughts,” I said.

“Oh.” He was busy with the mouse and keyboard. “Oh!” He stopped typing. “Do you think . . .”

“That she knew you had a crush on her? Oh yeah. Definitely.”

I’d never seen him look so embarrassed.

“It was kind of obvious even without the mind reading,” I said, which didn’t seem to comfort him. “So, *can* you get us out of here?”

He hunched over the keyboard, muttering to himself. The overhead lights dimmed and came up again. Other screens blinked on. A fan began to blow hot air through ceiling vents. “I can’t find the door circuit,” he complained. “And isn’t that . . .”

We both listened. It sounded like helicopter blades. Growing louder.

“We’ll be fish in a barrel if they find us here,” I said.

“Hang on. Maybe it’s this.”

Click.

I sprinted for the stairs and took them four at a time, banging into the door with my shoulder. It swung open and I fell on the carpet.

“Come on,” I called, rubbing my shoulder. “And bring that sweatshirt and thumb drive.”

“Why the drive?” he asked as he came upstairs. He’d already put on the hoodie. Night near the Canadian border is always cold.

“So those agents can’t get into the system,” I said.

“Right,” he said.

I'd actually had an idea Hedges didn't think of first.

"Okay," he said. "Which way?"

"I'm sure they took all the motorboats," I said. "Back to your truck?"

He didn't wait to answer—the choppers sounded really close. He just took off at a run through the trees toward the canoe.

We saw the first chopper land on the roof. Men shouted to each other.

By then, we were already pushing off.

"I'll paddle," I said. "Stay still and don't tip us over."

A chopper went over, its spotlight just missing us. On the island, bright lights blinked through the pines and several gunshots rang out.

"Are they *shooting* at us?" Hedges exclaimed.

"Don't tip us over! No, probably at each other by accident. The place must be crawling with jumpy agents."

"At least it's too noisy to hear the truck engine," he said.

We'd reached the beach and jumped ashore. I started to pull up the canoe, but Hedges said, "No, let it go," and we pushed it out onto the lake. And then we were running through the pines. Hedges fell but I helped him up.

"Can you climb it?" I asked when we reached the cliff.

"I'll have to," he said.

I stayed beneath him because I wanted to be there if he slipped. It took a while, but we finally made it to the top, and there was the rusty old tow truck waiting.

We studied it from the pine trees.

An owl swooped by. That was it. Nothing else moved.

I let my fangs slide down and my eyes change, but I still couldn't sense anything. "Let's go," I said.

He got the truck going and we bumped down the dirt track in the darkness, not daring to turn the headlights on. After two turns that Hedges seemed to remember easily—it must be nice to be brilliant—we came out on the paved road. He switched the lights and the radio on. Tow trucks have police band radios so they can go to car accidents.

There was a lot more going on than usual. We heard the chief talking to both his officers. I guess they were all on duty. And there were lots more voices we didn't know.

“They've pulled in police from neighboring towns,” Hedges said. “There's a major manhunt going on and they're talking about some APB, but I don't know who they're after. Maybe some of those agents?”

We drove and listened for a few minutes until someone said, “Could you repeat that license plate?”

And the chief did. And it was ours.

“Oh shit,” Hedges said. “Dad's gonna kill me.”

“Not if the feds kill you first,” I said.

“What should we do?”

“Do you have any cash?” I asked.

“Not on me. You?”

“Just a few bucks,” I said.

“And we don't have much gas,” he added. The tank was below one quarter.

“You're heading home,” I pointed out. “That might not be such a good idea.”

He kept driving. We were nearly to the turnoff for his road.

“Uh, Hedges? The cops are probably watching your house.”

“I know.” He drove past and turned on a parallel street. “Remember Sally Jenkins?”

I did. She was in school with us until last year when her family moved away. Everyone used to go over to her house in summer because she had a pool. It was only a

quarter mile away if you took the bike path that came out of the woods a few houses down from Hedges's.

He drove the truck around the back of an empty for-sale house in her old neighborhood.

"That's my mom's photo on the sign," I said. "It's one of her listings."

"Not anymore," Hedges said. "She's probably in Canada by now."

I didn't say anything, but I was imagining how unhappy she must be.

It was dark and quiet as we ran through backyards, setting off a motion light only once. A dog started barking madly, but I reached out and sent a simple thought to it: *Be quiet or I'll have to sink my fangs into your throat.* It seemed to get the message and we were able to jog across that backyard without any more barking.

Soon we reached the place where the bike path crossed the road. We walked after that, not talking. I guess we were tired. Then Hedges stepped off the bike path and we wound through the trees until we came out on the edge of his yard. Of course there was a tall hedge, but he knew where a narrow arch was, and we slipped through.

All the lights were on at his house and an unfamiliar cop car and a shiny black van were parked out front, but we snuck along the back by the cement wall until we reached his shed.

"Wait." I slid my teeth out again. My senses were sharper that way. "It's empty," I said.

We slipped inside in the dark and he latched the door and fumbled around, knocking things over.

"Shhh," I hissed.

A flashlight clicked on and he hurried to cover it with his hand. "Dig out my treasure box," he said. We used to pretend we were pirates when we were little. "It's under that workbench."

I got down and reached around until I found the small metal box.

"Open it," he said.

“What happened to the toys?” I said when I saw what was in it: a wad of bills wrapped in string.

“My earnings from years of summer repair jobs,” he said. He fixed broken toasters, computers, and lawn mowers for the neighbors. “I was planning to use it for tuition assuming my dad let me go away to college to study engineering, which was a pretty big assumption even before I was wanted for murdering federal agents. Anything else we need?”

“Uh, how about Canadian passports in false names?”

“Sorry. No can do. But here’s dinner,” he said, tossing me a granola bar. “Okay, ready?”

I unlatched the new back door. “Aren’t you worried about wolves?” I asked.

“Worried? Hell no. I’ve got you.” He smiled, and we and stepped into Canada.

Chapter 17

Wolves

We'd hurried into the dark forest. The sirens were no longer audible, only the occasional hoot of an owl. It was chilly, but hey, we were wearing flannel shirts under Amira's hoodies. We lived on the Canadian border, after all. The main rule here seems to be that you never go anywhere without your flannel shirt.

We didn't know where we were going; we only knew we couldn't go back home.

We'd been walking steadily for a couple hours when I smelled the wolves. I think they were moving parallel to us through the forest, keeping their distance, but a breeze had come up, and it carried their scent to me.

I hoped they might be wary after their first encounter with me back behind Hedges's workshop. After all, I'd hit the lead wolf with a shovel. But maybe they wanted revenge for the way Uncle Traitor had killed two of them by slashing their necks. I figured he'd called them to us somehow, just to trigger me to transform. Killing them seemed like yet another treachery. But that was my uncle to a T. For treachery. Yup.

I didn't mention the wolves to Hedges at first. My best friend was moving slowly and his breath was ragged. He must've been exhausted after a day more full of action than anything he'd experienced since kindergarten. His was a life of thought, not action. Thought and tinkering. He worked his arms and his brains pretty hard with his wrenches and soldering irons. He didn't usually have to run away from federal agents with silencers on their guns.

I felt really sorry I'd gotten him into this.

However, neither of us had the slightest choice in the matter. My uncle had brought the agents to town to round up all the Valukar and especially to get *me*—or at least fresh samples of my organs. I forced myself to stop thinking about it.

"I can't go on," Hedges said. "Go ahead without me."

"Sure thing."

We walked a little further at a slower pace.

I could hear the pack now, closing in gradually. They must've sensed our exhaustion.

And then I smelled it. A tar-paper roof. It stood out distinctly from the forest smells around us.

"I think there's a logging cabin up ahead," I told Hedges. And then I grabbed his arm and began to pull him forward.

The wolves were much closer now.

I could hear their panting breaths closing in. "Can you run?" I asked.

"No."

"Just for a minute. You can rest when we get to the cabin." And then I tugged him harder, and he stumbled along beside me.

Like my nose had already told me, there was a log cabin ahead in a moonlit clearing. But it was still too far. The wolves closed in and Hedges tensed up and stopped, his eyes wide with fear.

As the pack circled us, I counted heads: thirteen. A baker's dozen. Could I take that many wolves without any of them getting through me to Hedges? I seriously doubted it, but there didn't seem to be much choice.

"Uh, want my knife?" he asked, pulling the blade out of its sheath on his belt.

"No. Put it away." I wasn't sure why, but I had a sudden intuition about these wolves. Maybe it was the way they were circling. Not showing teeth or lunging at us to get up their courage. Just circling slowly as if assessing us. Me.

And the leader—the really big wolf I'd hit with the shovel—he was there at the head of the pack still, but his posture was different. He was holding his head lower now, as if . . .

"He thinks I'm an alpha!" I hissed to Hedges. "Look at them! They're asking me to lead their pack!"

I took a few slow steps toward the lead wolf and stopped. He came closer and bowed his head to me.

My teeth were already out and I was sensing everything with the heightened clarity of the Valvenandi—the cullers of bad vampires, which is apparently what my mom’s ancestors did. I was still digesting that little fact. We were the fiercest hunters of all in the old days when the Valukar lived in harmony with ordinary humans and did their hunting for them, which raised an interesting question. Did my ancestors run with wolves? Or, correction, did wolves run with *them*? I guess they must’ve. What else could explain this strange behavior?

I knew the wolves were smelling my scent just as strongly as I was smelling theirs—each slightly different, marking them as individuals. My scent must’ve triggered their odd behavior.

When we began to walk toward the cabin again, the wolves came along with us, their leader on my left, while Hedges leaning on my right arm and the rest of the pack trailed after.

We passed an old stump with a rusty ax and some split wood beginning to rot, which confirmed what I’d hoped—the cabin was abandoned. Then we reached the steps and I helped Hedges sit down.

I turned around to face the pack. I was certain I was expected to do *something*. But what? Was there some behavior programmed into my genes that I didn’t know about yet? If so, what would awaken it?

There was a long, tense silence as the pack studied me and I studied them. *This could go sideways in a hurry*, I thought. “Uh, maybe you should get inside while you can,” I whispered to Hedges.

But before he could get back on his feet, the lead wolf sat down, pointed his nose toward the sky, slitted his eyes, and howled.

Soon the rest of the pack was howling too.

And I couldn’t believe it. I actually threw my head back and howled. But it wasn’t a silly imitation of a wolf’s howl like we used to do when we were kids. It was the real thing. Deep-throated and so fierce I made myself shiver. Who would’ve guessed?

“Shit!” Hedges exclaimed, scrambling to his feet and pushing through the cabin door.

The pack seemed content. Some lay down and began to groom themselves. Others just sat quietly, no longer with that tense look.

So far, so good. But *now* what?

I caught a faint scent as a breeze rustled the leaves on the nearby trees. What was it? Something big and deerlike. Maybe a moose. Yes, a bull moose. It was not that far off, and I could smell something marshy too. I guessed there was lowland nearby. A stream widening as it met the lake, probably. And a moose feeding there. I knew they were often active at night—we all knew that, back in our little town, because you had to be alert for them in the headlights up ahead. Running into a moose on a country road in the dark was a pretty serious thing.

The wolves got up slowly, one after another, their ears pricking and their noses sniffing to sample the rising breeze. They’d scented it too.

Darn! I thought. *This must be why they want me to lead their pack.*

I heard Hedges strike a match and at once smelled sulfur. The wolves’ ears went back and some of them growled.

“Don’t worry,” I told them soothingly. “It’s all right.”

“Who are you talking to?” Hedges demanded, reappearing in the door with a golden-yellow lantern in his hand.

More wolves growled.

“They don’t like fire,” I said. “But they won’t hurt you. I’ll have some of them stay here to guard the cabin.”

“Are you *completely* crazy now?” he demanded.

“Probably. Can you rustle up something to eat while I hunt?”

“Hunt?”

“Is there anything for them to eat?”

“Like what?” he demanded, eyeing the wolves. “A gigantic bag of dog food?”

“They’re hungry,” I explained. “They expect me to help them take a moose. It’s probably too big for the pack to take on its own.”

“Right. And you know this how?”

“Uh, I’ll explain later. Is there at least food for us?”

He nodded. “Someone must’ve used the cabin in the spring. There’s still cans of beans and soup, jars of jam and peanut butter, stuff like that.”

“Get the stove going and cook a pot of beans. Please. Oh, and clean and oil that rusty cast iron pan.” I could smell rusty iron, so *that* was an easy guess. “I don’t think you’ll want to eat moose steak raw,” I explained when Hedges gave me another of his have-you-lost-your-mind looks.

And then I turned and began to run silently toward the scent of the moose.

As I ran, I pushed a thought into the wolves’ minds. It was like the way Amira had taught me to talk inside her head, except I didn’t send words. I sent images. I showed half the pack staying there to guard the cabin and the rest of them following me.

Unbelievable! I told myself. *It worked.* I could actually communicate with wolves.

Chapter 18

Death in the Forest

The ground got spongy as we approached the moose. We stopped. We were downwind so it wouldn't smell us approaching, but we needed firm ground to take an animal that big. Wet moss and water full of tangled marsh plants wouldn't do.

I studied the wolves, then picked two that seemed to be a pair, always running side by side.

I sent images of them working their way quietly to windward, then howling and spooking the moose.

They loped silently off into the darkness.

I sat on a log to wait and the four remaining wolves sat down on the grass around me. We were so quiet that a fox nearly stumbled into us—then ran off so rapidly that it scared a pair of grouse that had been sleeping in the low branches of a spruce tree. They squawked and, with a mad rush of wingbeats, disappeared into the darkness.

It was quiet again after that.

Then we heard howls, followed by the *yip yip* of the distant wolves telling us they'd startled our prey.

It didn't take long to hear the moose coming our way. It was moving casually, not afraid of just two wolves, more annoyed than anything. But even though it wasn't running, it was so big that it made a lot of noise as it came through the forest.

The wolves with me got up and the hair on their backs rose, but they did not make a move. They just looked at me. I was their leader now and I was supposed to tell them what to do. But did *I* know what to do?

I guess I did. As soon as it lumbered into view, I found myself running straight at the massive beast.

It hadn't expected that of myself. Human hunters are careful not to get too close to a moose. Moose can take out a human with one kick.

The moose lowered its massive antlers at me just as I leapt, but I cleared its head and antlers (normal humans can't do that) and landed on its back, spinning around and throwing myself forward to slash its neck with my long canines. And then I leapt away before it could shake me to the ground and kick me.

As I landed clear of it, the wolves closed in. As the blood loss from its neck weakened it, they added their own sharp fangs to expand the cut I'd made.

It fell on its side with a tremendous thump.

I came back over and examined it. It was definitely dead.

I wiped its blood off my face with the back of my sleeve. "I'm sorry," I told it. And then I raised my head and howled to let the rest of the pack know about the kill. As I did that, I found I could sense them all the way back at the cabin, and I wondered if I could push a thought to them.

I focused on their leader, who had stayed behind to supervise the other half of the pack. And I focused on Hedges too. I hadn't told him about sharing thoughts with Amira, but I hoped he knew me well enough to figure out it was me. Or else at least he might think it was his own thought. Either way would work.

What I showed both of them was an image of the lead wolf carrying Hedges's knife to me. I could've just sliced chunks of meat off with my canines, but I didn't want to be a wild animal—well, any *more* of a wild animal than I already was.

Then I sat down on the log again to wait.

Meanwhile, the wolves with me were already beginning their feast. They growled and fought over the best piece, which was silly, I thought, because the moose was way too big for them to eat in one night's feasting, but that was their way.

When the lead wolf came trotting into the clearing with the others trailing out behind him, my group of wolves stopped feeding and turned to show him their respect. His had the right to eat now, while they waited.

But before he approached the kill, he came over to me and...crosswise in his mouth, there was Hedges's sheath knife! It was still in its leather sheath, which I hadn't

visualized, but that's Hedges. Always thinking. I suppose he didn't want the wolf to get cut.

I took the knife and, slipping it free of the sheath, went over and cut a very large steak from the shoulder. Then I turned and jogged toward the cabin.

I won't say I didn't want to feast with the wolves, sharing the steaming raw meat right there on the forest floor, but I was determined to wait and eat a proper meal with Hedges. Whatever else I had become, I was a human first. At least I sure hoped I still was.

Chapter 19

Housekeeping

Hedges is amazing. When I got back to the cabin, lantern light glowed from the old cracked windows and good smells wafted from the chimney, along with the welcome scent of a hot fire. I stepped inside and stopped to stare. He'd found an old flower-print apron and put it on, and he was stirring a pot at the wood-burning stove. Someone had left split firewood stacked near it, I noted, so he hadn't had to go out in the dark and gather wood. That was good. When things are going wrong, I think it's helpful to notice things that happen to go right.

He had a lantern hanging up by the stove and another sitting on the table. He'd even made up the two cots in rear of the room.

I came in and plopped the chunk of raw meat on the counter near the sink.

"What the hell is that?" he demanded. "And how did you get blood on you again?"

"Did you find that iron pan?"

He frowned, but gestured toward the stove. The pan was already hot and waiting. I picked the meat up and moved it there. It sizzled and sent off amazing smells.

I realized my eyes and teeth were still transformed. Turning so as not to look at the meat, I concentrated and, with an effort, shifted them back. "Uh, I should clean up. Does the water work?" There was a faucet at the sink.

"It's fed by a cistern in the attic. There's a hand pump in the closet to fill the cistern from a well down in the cellar hole. I had to replace a pin in the pump."

"I'll take that as a yes," I said. "Mind if I . . ." I stripped off my hoodie, flannel shirt, and T-shirt and tossed them in the kitchen sink.

"Hey! I just scrubbed that sink clean!" he complained.

"Sorry, but I don't see another sink."

“Just clean it really well when you’re done,” he said, turning to stir his pot again. “Your clothes smell like blood.”

At that, my fangs slid down again and I had to close my eyes and take several slow breaths to get myself under control and put them away.

I found a plug for the sink drain and started to pump water over my shirts. There was a bottle of dish soap on the counter. I squirted some into the sink, then pumped more water on top. It was cold, of course, but I worked the clothing around until the water was all pink.

I drained the sink and refilled it, then repeated the cleaning. Three times. Finally they looked and smelled truly clean and I rang them out and turned to Hedges, who was setting our food out at the little table. “Where can I hang these?” I asked.

“Over the stove. Only place they’ll dry. Do you *have* to eat like that?”

“Like what?” I demanded.

“Uh, naked from the waist up?”

I’m not a girly girl, I guess you already know that, and my build is very muscular, more like a man’s. Except, once I became a teenager, my breasts developed, and I don’t usually show them to Hedges. Or anyone.

“Well,” I said. “I didn’t exactly have time to pack a change of clothes. Did you?”

He shrugged. “Whatever. Maybe I’ll have breakfast without my pants on.”

And then we both laughed. I guess we needed to. It had been a very long day. And night. If we didn’t hurry up and eat, I figured we might not even get to sleep before dawn.

I carefully used the knife and fork on my steak. All right, it’s true, I ate a *lot* of it, but I didn’t eat it fast, and I kept my fangs hidden and didn’t dribble bloody juice on myself. Practicing being human felt good.

Hedges took a few bites of the moose steak, then switched over to his bowl. He’d made a stew with canned beans and vegetables, and it was really quite good.

After I finished my steak, I ate two more bowls of the stew. And then I took my T-shirt down—it was already much dry—and pulled it over my head. “Where’s the bathroom?” I asked, looking around.

Hedges chuckled.

“What?”

“For someone who seems to be turning into a wild animal, you have a lot of privileged assumptions about central plumbing.”

“Meaning?” I demanded. I was too tired to follow Hedges’s clever dialog. I didn’t always understand it even when I was at my best.

“Outhouse.” Reverting to simple sentences for my benefit, he pointed out the kitchen window. “That way.”

Oh. Oh well. “Any, uh, outhouse paper?” I asked.

He pointed to the woodpile.

Huh? And then I noticed a stack of yellowed old newspapers there. I guess they’d have to do.

Chapter 20

Unwelcome Visitors

We slept kind of late, and we didn't think to take turns standing watch. We'd gone so far into Canada that we really didn't expect any trouble.

I was confident those agents hadn't followed us. What I hadn't considered was the other Valukar—the families from town who'd escaped ahead of us to join their Canadian friends. I assumed they'd gone to their Hide, wherever that was.

I guess it wasn't all that far from our cabin . . .

A growl awoke me. It wasn't an audible growl. There weren't any wolves in or near the cabin, I was pretty sure. It was something I heard inside my head: A warning sent to me by the leader of the wolf pack.

I sat up and my teeth slid down.

I could smell them then. I wish I'd slept with my special senses engaged instead of in my dumb old human form, because now I could smell a bunch of people. Correction: Val. They had that muskier animal smell I'd learned to associate with the Valukar. And they were near. All around. Probably sneaking up on the cabin.

Why would they do that?

And then it occurred to me that they probably blamed me for so many of them being hunted out of their homes. If it weren't for me, an 'unregistered' Val with the super-hunter genes of the Valvenandi family that the government seemed to want, no one would have bothered to come to our sleepy town to hunt us.

I got up silently and shook Hedges. "Shh," I warned. "Visitors. Put your flannel shirt on."

And then I went to a window and, putting my eye to the crack in the checkered cloth curtains, studied the clearing and the woods beyond it. I couldn't see anyone, but I could definitely smell them.

Concentrating, I teased out the different scents. Amira's grandfather was there, probably leading the raid. Why would he do that, though? It puzzled me. And six more men, but only one I recognized from the fight at the police station. The others were new to me. Either family members who'd joined us at the marina when we fled, or, more likely, new Val from Canada. What if there were a lot more Val in Canada who wanted us dead?

And I also smelled oiled metal and bullet casings on the morning breeze. Hunting rifles! Damn.

Yesterday, I'd fought more than a dozen armed agents, but that was in close quarters when I could strike them before they could get clear of each other and line up a good shot at me. They were heistant to kill me because their agency wanted me alive, and they were only humans. Despite those factors, they put up a heck of a fight. Could I fight a dozen armed Valukar whose reflexes were almost as good as mine? And how would I close the distance to them without being an easy target in the clearing around the cabin?

We were outnumbered and completely outgunned, seeing as we didn't have a— wait, what? Hedges had pried open a tall cabinet and was taking out a shotgun and putting cartridges in it. Okay, that was a start.

"Cover the door," I said. "And blast anyone who comes in."

I started to slide a window open, but a bullet buried itself in the log wall just to one side of the opening. Shit! I ducked to the side and looked at Hedges, who frowned and bit his lip. This was a bad situation. Probably the worst yet. And we were completely alone.

Wait! Not completely. I'd forgotten about the wolves.

I tried to feel them out there in the forest, wondering whether I could make contact with them again.

The lead wolf was there, attentive, wondering what I wanted them to do! He pushed an image of what he was seeing into my mind's eye. He was watching the Val who were watching the cabin. It seemed like the wolves had encircled *them*.

I pushed a strong warning about guns at the wolves. I didn't want them taking any unnecessary chances. And then I sent them an image of wolves sneaking up on our attackers and leaping on them from behind.

After that I just stood there, eyes closed, trying to sense what was going on.

“What are you doing?” Hedges demanded.

“It's all about the timing,” I hissed, not opening my eyes. “Okay,” I added when I sensed the wolves were within striking distanced getting ready to attack. “Stay here and be ready in case any of them get past me. I'm going out.”

“You'll be shot!” Hedges exclaimed, but I knew I wouldn't. Not when the Val were being jumped by wolves.

I was out the window, across the clearing and onto the first hunter in a few fast leaps. He was holding his rifle by the barrel and swinging it at the wolves, who were lunging at him alternately, not giving him time to turn the thing around and get a shot off. I knew there were five more Val plus Amira's grandfather, so this was no time to be charitable. I leapt and sliced my fangs across his neck, then sprinted toward the next one.

A similar fight was happening about twenty yards over, behind some blueberry bushes. I raced past, slowing only long enough to slice that Val's jugular too.

At the next big clump of bushes, I saw that a Val had was lining up a shot at a wolf. I took a flying leap and tackled him, pushing his rifle barrel up just as it went off.

The concussion was deafening but the shot missed, and then we were tumbling on the moss, trading punches and trying to sink our fangs into the other. He was big and a lot faster than a human, and he might've gotten the better of me—but one of the wolves bit his leg and that gave me an opening. I punched him so hard that he fell over, unconscious.

I sent an image to the wolves of their dragging his rifle away into the underbrush, just in case he came to. But I didn't think he would, the way the wolves were snarling and biting.

Then I was off again, aiming for more shouts and growls up ahead.

This time, the Val man was in a much better situation. I guess he'd been hiding behind a tree and he'd climbed up before the wolves could get him. Now he was aiming his rifle down at me.

Damn! I dove into the long grass and scrambled behind another tree just as the bullet dug a furrow of fresh dirt beside me.

But he was stopping to reload. It was a single-shot hunting rifle that had to be reloaded between shots! The old timers in our town use them for hunting deer. I guess this guy was a Canadian old timer. Which presented an opportunity. Could I . . .

I've never moved that fast or jumped that high. I just managed to land a flying kick on him as he was reloading and getting ready to shoot. The rifle spun off to the side while he fell hard on his back ten feet down and *I* landed on the limb where he'd been standing.

I didn't bother jumping down to finish him off. The wolves were already on him. I just jumped to the next tree, which had a similar limb, and then to another, from where I could jump down on a Val man who was struggling with two more wolves.

As I jumped, I heard the crack of a rifle up ahead. *Better hurry!* I thought. *Someone's firing on the cabin.*

When a bullet whizzed past me, I edited my own thought: *Correction, firing at me.*

As I came down, the wolves backed away to give me room to work. I landed beside the Val and pushed him between me and the source of that shot. Another *crack!* and I felt the bullet strike the man instead of me. I let go of him and dove to the side, then ran in a wide loop, using trees for cover. As I ran, I warned the wolves to back away. Someone up ahead was shooting freely and I didn't want my pack to be hurt.

I stopped behind an oak tree's wide trunk, panting. I'd noticed a flash from a rifle barrel up ahead. Peeking carefully around the tree where a low, leafy branch gave me cover, I soon spotted Amira's grandfather with two younger Val men on either side of him. All three had rifles firmly in their hands, and they were successfully keeping the wolves at bay. They were firing without reloading, too, which meant repeater rifles. Not much of an opportunity there.

I sent another urgent warning and the wolves backed up, but the men didn't relax their tense postures. They were waiting for me.

How could I possibly get close to them? They had my approach covered from all directions. I'd have to improvise.

I spotted a stone the size of a grapefruit and picked it up. Okay, I know you think of me as a hockey player, but in spring there's no hockey so I do track and field. And I'm best at shot put. There's a trophy in the case outside the locker rooms with my name on it from a record throw I did at state last year.

I heaved that rock in a high arc. They weren't looking up. I didn't think they'd notice it.

It fell slightly short, but it *did* hit one of them on his foot. He shouted and dropped his gun.

The others couldn't figure out what had happened at first. They were alternately trying to help keep him standing and staring all around like they were totally freaked out.

I sprinted straight at them.

Too bad Amira's grandfather saw me coming.

"Stop," he said. And since his rifle was aiming right at my heart, I did. I was about a dozen feet away, fists balled, eyes boring into his, but I didn't see what my next move could be.

And then the Val beside him, the one who wasn't injured, let go of the man whose foot I'd crushed and let him fall down.

There were two rifle barrels aimed at me now. *Shit.*

BLAM!!! A shotgun spat from the side. Both men dropped their rifles and staggered sideways before kneeling on the ground, holding themselves and moaning.

"It's only bird shot," Hedges said as he banged two more cartridges in and came toward them. "But it hurts like hell, doesn't it?"

He'd come out of the cabin to make sure I was okay! Gotta love the guy. Damn brave for a nerd.

“I saved your stupid life just yesterday,” I said to Amira’s grandfather. Then I kicked the guy I hadn’t hit with the rock. He went down unconscious beside the rock guy, who was groaning and holding his broken foot.

“What the hell’s wrong with you!” I shouted, leaning over Amira’s grandfather.

“It’s the Canadian Valukar tribe,” he said, sounding very nervous. “They’re sending the other families into town, but they made Amira and me stay at their Hide to help, uh, well, to help hunt you. Turns out they’re unhappy with us.”

“*Unhappy?*” I repeated, stunned. “When I’m unhappy I eat too many crackers with peanut butter. I don’t organize kill squads!”

“They said we couldn’t stay unless we ‘dealt with you’. They don’t want us to bring trouble onto their side of the border.”

“And you just said, ‘Okay, we’ll go murder them? Don’t have anything else to do this morning so why not?’”

He didn’t have an answer for that.

“What did my mom have to say about this brilliant plan of yours?” I demanded.

“The conversation was kept on a need-to-know basis, but I think they’re keeping her locked up along with my daughter.”

“Because?” I demanded, getting up in his face.

“I should think that would be obvious,” he said. “As leverage in case the hunting party fails.”

“Jesus!” I breathed. “You’re unbelievable. One more question before I ‘deal with’ you. How the heck did you track us here?”

He glanced to the side, at the man whose foot I’d broken. “Lester is an expert tacker. Works as a guide for wealthy out-of-town hunters.”

“Anyone *else* an expert tracker?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

This is not my proudest memory but I was feeling like they really had my back against the wall, so I landed a kick on Lester's other leg. I went for the knee because that's easy to sprain. I didn't want him tracking me again.

So far, so good, but then I paused to think. Would I have to do more than just injure him? After all, if Lester knew where our cabin was, he wouldn't need to track us. He could just tell someone else. But I didn't want to have to kill him in cold blood.

Apparently, wolves aren't troubled by ethics. I had to look away as two of them went in to finish off the injured men on either side of Amira's grandfather.

"Jesus," Hedges breathed.

I took a deep breath and steadied my gaze on Amira's grandfather as the wolves stood growling at him. "You are now the only living soul, if you even have a soul, who knows where our cabin is," I said. "What would *you* do if you were me?"

He did not want to answer that.

"I'm not going to do what you'd do, because we're not killers. Not if we can avoid it anyway." I wasn't feeling very good about this not-being-a-killer thing, but I was trying to draw a line as best I could in the circumstances. "Besides, you're Amira's family, so I really don't want to kill you, although I *do* feel sorry for her."

He looked down. I think he was ashamed. But that wasn't going to change anything for the better.

"Then what *are* we going to do with him?" Hedges asked, puzzled.

"I'm thinking."

"Uh, I have a thought," he said.

I frowned. "Good, but keep it to yourself. Just think it really hard. Oh!" I smiled when I picked up on it.

Chapter 21

Return to Sender

We made Amira's grandfather get to his feet—he wasn't seriously injured, just a little bloody—and we marched him back to the cabin and sat him on the steps. I watched over him with a couple of wolves at my side while Hedges went and got something that he wrapped in newspaper so the old man wouldn't know what it was.

Then I said, "On your feet! We're going for a hike." And, with Hedges carrying the shotgun under his arm and with all of the wolf pack at our heels, we headed out.

I went first, my fangs out again, eyeing the ground. Their trail was easy to follow. They'd made no effort to be stealthy; they'd just walked straight through the forest, breaking twigs and ferns and leaving footprints everywhere. I guess they'd assumed we'd be dead soon, and dead people don't follow trails.

"I don't get it," Hedges said. "I thought their tracker followed our trail, but this trail just leads due west. We came from the lake to the south."

"The tracker must've located our cabin, gone back to get the raiding party, then brought them straight to us," I said. "Smells like rain coming," I added.

"Good," he said.

I knew he'd be worrying about such a bold set of tracks from their Hide straight to our new cabin, but a good rainstorm would wash them away. We just had to do our business and get back before the rain ended.

"How far is it?" I demanded.

Amira's grandfather frowned. "It's big," he said. "And very well fortified. You can't kill all of them. They'll kill you first."

"I don't want to *kill* them," I snapped. "It just so happens that they want to kill *me*."

"You're not planning to attack?" He sounded surprised.

“I’m bringing you back. How far is it?”

“Oh!” He sounded relieved. “About an hour from here.”

I turned and asked Hedges, “How’re you holding up?”

“I’m good,” he said. “Beans and a bunk are all I need.” He grinned.

I couldn't believe he actually seemed to be enjoying himself. Maybe there was a more adventurous side to him than either of us knew.

The wolves slowed their pace and the leader growled a warning as we got near.

“Hedges, you stay here and keep that thing loaded and ready in case I come back with anyone chasing after me,” I said.

I sent an instruction to the wolves too. I told them to wait with Hedges. Except the lead wolf, who I asked to come with me.

Then I tugged Amira’s grandfather by the arm and headed toward where I could smell another Valukar with a gun. Obviously a guards on station out in the woods near the Hide.

The wolf stopped abruptly, a low growl sounding in my inner ear. *He’s projecting his thoughts, just like Amira does, I realized. And good at it. Must be a traditional wolf thing, which explains how Valukar and wolves cooperated when they hunted together in the old days.*

I pulled Amira’s grandfather to a stop and warned him to be quiet by putting a finger to my lips. Then I slipped ahead, using spruce trees for cover, until I came upon the first guard.

I didn’t kill her. No need. She wasn’t expecting trouble. Her rifle was leaning against a tree trunk and she was tapping away on her cell phone. I snuck up and gave her a firm punch on the back of the head and she went down, unconscious.

Then I got Amira’s grandfather and the package. It was a whiskey bottle from the cabin. I sat him down next to the guard as I toe the newspaper away and and popped the top off. It smelled horrible. “Drink it,” I commanded.

“What?” He looked startled, to say the least.

“As much as you can,” I instructed, getting up close to him with my new fangs, which were a lot longer and sharper than his old yellowed ones.

Coughing and gagging, he managed to get about half the bottle down. Then his eyes rolled and he slumped back against the unconscious guard, mumbling something incoherent.

“Okay,” I said as much to myself as him. “I don’t think you’re going to remember anything useful.” I smiled. Then I signaled with a quick thought to the lead wolf, and the two of us sprinted back to where Hedges was waiting.

We came upon Hedges so fast that he dropped his shotgun; if I hadn’t kicked the muzzle to the side, it would’ve hit the lead wolf. Instead it blew the leaves off a maple branch. They floated down in bits all around us as Hedges gaped in stunned surprise and the lead wolf crouched low, ears back, eyeing the shotgun with deep suspicion.

“Jesus, Hedges!” I complained. “Keep it together, would you?”

“Uh, we better go,” he said.

After a little while I stopped us and said, “We’re just making the signs even clearer. Let’s go the wrong way until the rain comes.”

And that was how our trip to deliver Amira’s grandfather alive (if barely—he was going to have a hell of a hangover) ended up taking most of the day. We worked our way in a big loop north of the cabin, where we found a cold stream leading to a lake, where I dove in and caught us some fish. Hedges had brought a lighter and insisted on making a fire so he could cook the fish on sticks. Then, when the rain finally started, we made our way back to the cabin.

It rained hard all evening. I was pretty sure there wouldn’t be any clear signs left for the Canadian Valukar to follow.

The rest of the pack had dragged off the dead attackers to a cave they’d been using as a den. They sent me images of the place, which sure didn’t look like it would be any use for sleeping now. That’s probably why we found the wolves sheltering on the porch. But the cabin wasn’t a big one, and the porch was small. Now it was so crowded that they were resting their heads on each other’s backs. The lead wolf, the one who’d been with

us, was unable to join them until a couple lower-ranked wolves slunk down the steps and out into the rain.

It seemed like an obvious gesture of hospitality, but Hedges gave me one of his priceless looks when I held the door open and let the pack come in to sleep on the floor.

“Just tell them not to eat me,” he snapped as he hurried to climb into his cot.

It smelled strongly of wet wolf fur that night, but at least Hedges and I didn't have to take turns standing watch. The lead wolf organized that. One of the advantages of sleeping with a pack of wolves is that no one's going to sneak up on you.

But I did have to pay a price for their service. They got me up long before dawn to help them hunt deer. A pack of wolves is a lot of hungry mouths to feed.

We took a large buck and I came back to the cabin around dawn with a steak to fry for breakfast, which I left in the pan for Hedges to deal with when he got up. I was so tired that after I washed up, I went back to sleep and only got up when Hedges shook my shoulder and said, “Breakfast's ready.”

We had the cabin to ourselves again. The rain had stopped and the wolves were out in the forest, feeding on my latest kill. Hedges had a pot of oatmeal bubbling on the stove, and he was opening up a bag of dried fruits he'd found to sprinkle over the oatmeal.

I smiled and took the meat outside, where I left it on a stump for the wolves to find. And then we had oatmeal for breakfast. Sometimes it's good to be vegetarian. Especially if you're getting sick of the taste of blood.

Chapter 22

Camping

The rest of that day was surprisingly ordinary. We did things people do when they're on a camping trip. We split firewood. We went exploring around the cabin and found a stone foundation for another hunting cabin nearby. It was long gone and the foundation was filled with leaves, but down in the bottom of it there was another well with boards over the top. When we lifted them off, we found it was full to the brim with cold, clean water.

"Good to know," Hedges said as he cupped water in his hand to drink, "in case our well goes dry."

The wolves had removed the carcasses of yesterday's attackers, but gear and guns were scattered in the underbrush so we gathered everything useful and brought it back. Then Hedges took charge of what to do with the stuff. Cell phones were disabled so they couldn't be traced, even though there was barely a bar of signal out there in the forest. He made quick work of that job with some tools he found in a kitchen drawer. Then he took the batteries out of all the flashlights and stowed them away in the back of a drawer.

"Don't you think you might *want* a flashlight?" I asked.

"Not essential, but if I decide to make a radio or a simple computing device, I'll need batteries to power it."

"You can't just *make* a radio or a computer!" I objected.

"Why not? Every device you've ever used was made by *someone*, you know."

"Yeah, but not out of pine cones," I said.

He raised an eyebrow and gestured at the table where our attackers' gear was piled. Cell phones, a GPS, a satellite phone, a pair of night vision binoculars, and even several little walkie-talkies were in the pile, along with more boring things like a lighter and a pack of cigarettes.

"At least throw the cigarettes out," I said. "They smell bad."

“But the packaging of the box has foil in it,” he said, stopping me from grabbing them. “Might be useful.”

“To you,” I said. “Not to me.”

“We’ll see.” Clearly his mental gears were turning, but I couldn’t imagine what he would make out of all that junk.

We went for a swim in the nearest pond. Obviously, the cabin didn't have a shower with hot water on demand. But it *was* fairly warm weather for Canada in the fall, and we swam at midday when there was sun to dry us off on the smooth rocks beside the pond.

Then Hedges revealed his latest culinary accomplishment. He’d found a bin with flour in it, and also some tins of condensed milk. I didn’t realize it, but he’d opened one and set it out to collect microbes for a sourdough starter when we first got to the cabin. Then, before breakfast, he’d prepared a loaf and put it in the oven to slow cook. When we got back to the cabin, there it was, a fresh loaf of hot bread. He sliced it and made us sandwiches from the leftover moose steak. Not bad for two campers who left home with nothing but the bloody clothes on their backs.

We had a quiet afternoon. No one tried to kill us. The wolves wandered off into the forest to look for small game—squirrels and whatever else they could catch individually. Hedges tinkered with the bits and pieces from our attackers’ stuff after stowing their guns and knives out of sight under his bunk, while I climbed to the top of the tallest pine tree I could find.

I wanted to see whether there were farms, a town, or even a road in sight, but the forest rolled off in all directions except where it stopped at the big lake to the south. The only thing I could make out was a railroad line cutting through the forest way off to the east. And somewhere to the west, too low to be seen over a hill, was the Canadian Hide. I could see smoke rising up from a chimney there. I marked the direction firmly in my mind, then climbed down.

I wondered whether the wolves would want me to help them take down another large animal soon. As their new leader, it would be up to me to find them another deer. Ugh. I mean, I had to admit that using my new hunting skills was fun in a weird way. The hunt itself was exciting. All action, like a hockey game. But I didn’t like the killing.

I didn’t enjoy fighting assassins, either, but I didn’t want to think about that.

We had bean soup for dinner. There was starting to be a beanish theme to Hedges's cooking, but I managed not to say anything critical. And then we cleaned up and went to bed as per the new usual, knee-deep in wolves.

I didn't mention it to Hedges, but I was worried about Amira. I had tried to reach out and speak to her silently when I was dropping off her grandfather, but I couldn't sense her there. Either she was deep inside their Hide or she was somewhere else entirely—but if so, where? Had they viewed her as a loose end because of her friendship with us?

I guess I was worrying about her in my sleep because when I woke up the next morning, I sat up and said, "I have to tell them what her scent is."

"Huh?" Hedges blinked his eyes open and stared at me from the next cot.

"Amira. I was dreaming about her."

"About a beautiful vampire-girl who's five years older than us? How about you just keep that dream to yourself."

"No! I was, well, okay, she *was* looking pretty good, but that's just how she is. The dream was about my sending the wolf pack to find her."

"The wolves? Oh." He sounded disappointed as he looked around the cabin and realized they were still there: big, furry bodies asleep everywhere. "Uh, how am I going to cook if I can't get to the stove?" he demanded.

"I'm going to ask the wolf pack to track her down. They can stake out the Canadian Hide and see if she's there. But I have to send them her scent."

"You can do that?" Hedges asked, surprised.

I shrugged. "Makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, if you can send a sound or an image, why not something to the other senses?" And then I thought really hard about giving Hedges a punch on the shoulder.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. "I *felt* that!"

"Did it hurt?" I asked, hopeful.

"No, it's not like your thoughts are deadly weapons, Falc, but I *did* get a quick image of you hitting me and a little feeling like a tap."

“So there you go,” I said. “Sensorama.”

“What does that even mean?” Hedges tends to wake up irritable in the best of situations, and this was the worst.

“It means that what Amira taught me about sending words and images works for the other senses as well. It just depends on what you imagine as you send a message.”

“As *you* send a message,” Hedges corrected. “She didn’t teach *me* how, did she? But if you send them to look for her,” he added, “at least it’ll get them out from under foot. And you don’t have to send some imagined scent to their ‘inner noses,’ if there even is such a thing. Just give them the sweatshirts to smell.” And he tossed me the black hoodie he’d been wearing ever since we escaped. Right! It had been Amira’s. Same with mine.

Her scent was still on the two hoodies. I could smell it strongly as his sweatshirt flopped onto the foot of my bed. It made my stomach flutter nervously. Which was stupid, I know. With all that was going on, how could I still have a crush on her?

I got up and called the wolves outside. They waited in the clearing while I presented their leader with the two sweatshirts and pushed images of Amira toward him.

Then he called his pack and they all came up and sniffed.

Soon they were slipping into the forest so silently it was hard to believe they’d ever been here. A week ago, I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to move like that, but now I could too.

I gotta hand it to Hedges. He’s nothing if not adaptable. Back home, he tinkers all day in his messy shed, but here he was proving to be one hell of a housekeeper. Not only had he rebuilt the water pump and cleaned and oiled the stove, he’d also gone through all the canned goods and the other foods—there were so many of them that I was a little worried someone was planning to come back this season—and organized our meals.

“Two weeks, easy,” he’d said. “Or more if you keep hunting, but try not to bring back such big chunks of meat that they get blood all over my nice clean kitchen.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“For what?” He stopped working and turned around.

“For saving my ass repeatedly, and taking care of everything. Well, except the things that need long, sharp fangs. And for coming with me. I really appreciate it.”

He shrugged. “If the agents didn’t kill me, the police were gonna send me to prison for life. This is definitely more fun than either of those options.”

“Not a high bar,” I pointed out. “Anyway, thanks. Sorry I messed your life up so completely.”

“Yeah, you really did, but you know what?” He turned around again, looking funny in the old flower-print apron he’d found. “I was getting tired of my life anyway. It's not like you can go anywhere in a town like that one. I mean, my dad wouldn’t even *talk* about my going to college to study engineering. He said I needed to take over the towing business and why didn’t I do auto repairs on the side if I liked engineering so damn much.”

“Oh.” I thought about what it would be like to have a father who actually cared enough to offer to teach you his livelihood, even if it *was* boring, but I didn’t say what I was thinking.

“Still,” Hedges said, eyeing me, “I do appreciate him being around and all.”

“Yeah. Of course,” I said, wondering if Hedges was beginning to pick up Amira’s mind-reading trick after all. “So, what’s for breakfast?” I asked.

“Not red meat,” he said, pushing a plate of beans and rice my way. He’d found some diced tomatoes in a can and seasoned them to make a topping with chives he’d found growing outside. It was pretty good. I ate two plates and would’ve had a third if we hadn’t already scraped the pans down to the bottom.

The lead wolf came running into camp in midmorning. He was thirsty and winded, so I filled a pan with water from the sink faucet and set it down on the porch. Then I sat on the steps to wait.

He joined me a few minutes later and sent an image of how they’d set up three wolves at each compass point surrounding the Hide. The wolves are very aware of where the sun rises and sets and navigate according to the same patterns as we do.

Then he showed me how four men came out of the main door, which was steel and looked impenetrable. The building was made of heavy logs and there were bars on all the windows. It was built like a fort.

The men were herding Amira between them. They were carrying short sticks that the wolves didn't like. At first, I couldn't tell what they were from the lack of detail of the images the lead wolf shared with me. Not guns. Oh! Electric shocker sticks, the kind some farmers use as cattle prods. Those things really hurt! It made me very mad to think of them prodding Amira, but I bit my lip and tried to stay still and open for the rest of the story to come.

The group the wolves were tracking stopped and argued. The wolves didn't understand what they were saying, but I could tell Amira was shouting and the Val were too. Then the Val men began to shock her with their cattle prods and she fell down. I stood up at that, fists tightening and my fangs dropping down.

But the wolf wasn't done. He showed me that they got her unsteadily to her feet and forced her to walk into the forest with them, heading east toward us.

Why? The question was the wolf's, and I thought I knew the answer.

Amira's grandfather must've told them how good she is at long-distance thought-reading. Which also means she's really good at sensing someone's presence. Like mine. They were going to force her to find us. They must've been planning another raid. How badly did these jerks want to kill us? I guess a whole lot.

Just before the wolf finished his report, I thought I saw Amira pause and stare off into the forest. Then they prodded her ahead again.

What was that? I thought to the wolf. *Did she see you?*

He growled. *Of course we weren't seen! We're too clever for that.*

But, he added, she sensed me. She felt me out there. I know because I felt her too.

Did the Val men? I asked.

The stupid tall animals that smelled dumb? No.

Good. Where's your pack now? I asked.

He sent an image of the wolves sneaking after the scouting party, staying hidden at a safe distance.

“Hedges!” I called. “I’m going hunting. And *you* are going to hide.”

He came out on the porch with a semiautomatic rifle he’d disassembled into several pieces. “What?”

“Why are you taking that apart? We might need it.”

“Working on something,” he mumbled, studying one of the pieces he was holding.

“Never mind. I just need you to go into the forest with a few of these wolves and hunker down until I deal with this new raiding party.”

He paused, frowning. “I thought the tracks were erased by the rain. Do you really think they’ll find us in hundreds of acres of trees?”

“If they force Amira to guide them, yes. She doesn’t need to be very near to—damn! I just felt her. They’re getting near.”

Hedges turned and went back into the cabin. When he came out, he had a backpack and the shotgun. “I’m going with you,” he said.

“No, Hedges, you don’t understand. We’re going to hunt them.”

“So? My dad used to take me hunting. Did yours?”

“No, but . . . all right,” I added with a sigh. “Just stay behind me and stay safe. Please?”

He put something small and black into his backpack and came down the steps. “Sure, whatever you say.” He winked.

“It’s not funny! These are Val. They’re harder to fight than people.”

“And do you know *where* they are?” he asked.

“No, but we’ll crisscross the area and find their scent.”

“Or . . .” He pulled the black thing back out. It looked like he’d rebuilt one of the cell phones. But the touch screen showed a grid and there was a pulsing circle of light on it.

“What is *that*?” I demanded.

“In any populated area, the environment is full of electronics. Lots of signals.” He adjusted something and frowned at the screen. “But here, acres and acres of no signals at all. So it’s easy to build a detector.”

“A detector of what?”

“It’s showing that there’s some kind of com device emitting a signal *right there*.” He tapped the screen. “And according to my mapping grid, that puts it a little more than a mile directly that way.” He pointed.

“They’re already that close?” I frowned.

The lead wolf growled as I sent an image of the raiders approaching.

“Now, because they seem to have come in an almost straight line from their Hide, I think we can assume they’ll follow a straight line the rest of the way here,” he continued. “Shall we?”

“Shall we what?” I demanded.

He reached for a shovel leaning against the porch and handed it to me. “I’ll carry this saw,” he said. And then he headed off into the forest. I admit I was puzzled, but I’ve learned to trust Hedges. At least a little. So I followed.

When he stopped, I could see at once that it was a very strategic spot. A ridge of land with thick trees broke the landscape, except in one spot where there was a natural little valley cutting through. It made sense that they’d come this way. *We* had. Everyone did. Why climb up and over a ridge and press through all that tangled foliage when there was such a convenient natural path?

“Dig,” Hedges said. “No, not like that. Change yourself and do it fast. We only have ten minutes or so.”

I dug a trench across the path about three feet deep and Hedges cut greenery to cover it. But it smelled like fresh earth and any Valukar would notice that and wonder. So I went to my pile of fresh dirt and neatened it up, then we stuck some sticks upright in it. I hoped it looked like we'd just planted a garden to feed ourselves. If they encountered that first, they wouldn't think hard about the smell of recently dug earth.

"Look," I said, leaning on my shovel and wiping the sweat off my forehead. "This is all well and good, but they're not going to get caught in a shallow trench. They'll just jump out."

He smiled and pulled several coils of rope out of his backpack. Then he made a series of loops with slipknots, and together we muscled down the tops of some sapling trees and wedged them under sticks I pushed into the ground. Hedges tied the ends of the ropes to the lashed-down trees, and then we added leaves and moss to conceal the ropes.

I thought it was unlikely to work, and that I'd just have to fight them the old-fashioned way, but I didn't want to be negative about Hedges's idea.

The lead wolf had watched us with his ears up, curious. Now he growled to warn me that they were near, so we hid on the downwind side of the path, where they wouldn't smell us. And we waited.

Are you there? The thought came through loud and clear. Amira was close.

Yes, I sent back. Take them toward the path that cuts through the ridge and let them go in front of you. That's all I risked sending, and I sent it softly, like a whisper in her ear, because I was afraid one of her captors might be able to hear thoughts too. But no one hears as well as Amira.

Then I sent another low whisper, this one to the pack. *Begin to close in from the rear, I told them. And avoid the guns and sticks they're carrying!* I added. I didn't want any wolves getting hurt.

Chapter 23

Amira

We peeked through the foliage and watched them come up. They paused to scope out the ‘garden’ before they headed up the path.

Amira was dragging behind. She seemed to have a bad limp, and was unsteady on her feet. Damn them! I suppose being zapped repeatedly will do that to you. My teeth came out and I gritted them so hard I cut my lip.

And then the two men in front had fallen and tripped in the hidden ditch and—*What the hell was he doing?*

Hedges was leaping to his feet and firing his damn shotgun. Huh? Oh! He was aiming at the sticks that were holding the bent saplings down.

Both men were caught by their ankles and swung upside down into nearby trees, dropping their rifles and shouting curses as they went. That left just the two standing beside Amira.

It was our moment. The lead wolf howled to his pack while I leapt forward and was there so fast I couldn’t believe the nearest Val had time to pull out that big knife and swing it at me.

No matter. Hedges had made me protective wrist cuffs out of some scraps of old leather he’d stitched around my forearms while we were eating breakfast. It meant that I could block just about anything short of a bullet and I did, knocking the blade aside with one arm as I slammed my other arm into the Val’s neck. Hard.

Here we go again, I thought unhappily as he went down, looking unconscious if not dead. *This is not what I thought my career would be!*

The next man pulled Amira between us and held a pistol to her. I had to stop, not sure what my next move was. But two wolves began to nip at his legs and he turned to fend them off. His mistake...

Amira straightened up, smiled and pushed a thought into my head: *I'm glad to see you.* And then she did a backflip, landing on one Val's shoulders and twisting the pistol out of his hand before he could line up a shot at a wolf.

I jumped in and took down the other guard as he was distracted by the wolves. Then I turned to see how Amira was doing. Pretty well, actually. She was squeezing her legs around her Val's neck and then she twisted his head. He went down hard. When she got up, he didn't.

I guess you're not as bad off as you made them think? I asked.

Good guess.

That left two Val hanging in our tree trap. They'd dropped their prods and rifles. Unfortunately, they had pistols in holsters on their belts and although they were hanging upside down, they looked dangerous when they pulled their pistols out and aimed at Amira and me.

The wolves backed off at the sight of their guns. Smart animals. Amira and I began to back away too.

Blam! Blam!

It was Hedges off to the side with his shotgun again. He had a way of staying on the periphery and avoiding attention until he was really needed. This time, it looked like he'd loaded something a lot heavier. Probably buckshot. Anyway, I couldn't look at those men after that, but Hedges went over, only a little shaky, and retrieved the guns and electric rods that they'd dropped.

"God!" I exclaimed. "Why do they keep making us have to kill them?"

"It does seem stupid," Hedges said. "I mean, they're afraid agents might come after them, so they do this, and instead of some future uncertainty, here they are now..." He gestured at the dead bodies swinging from the ropes and shook his head.

Amira knelt down and felt for a pulse on the man she'd taken out. "He's gone too," she said. "But the other one's beginning to move. What do you want to do about him?"

“Double damn!” I cursed. “It’s bad enough when you’re in action and reacting to *their* attacks, but . . .” I studied the man on the ground. He looked like he’d live, and then all of our efforts to hide our cabin would be wasted.

Hedges reloaded his shotgun and came over, frowning, but I held his arm. “No. We aren’t murderers, even if *they* are.”

He looked puzzled.

“If we don’t kill him, you’ll have to run,” Amira pointed out.

“Even if we kill him, we’ll have to leave eventually anyway,” I said slowly. “Apparently your Canadian cousins are going to keep coming after us.”

She nodded. “They’re more militant than our community, it turns out.”

“Let’s cut those ones down and use the ropes to tie this one up,” I said. “It’ll give us an hour or two to pack.”

“Whatever you say,” Hedges said, “but the more logical thing to do is to kill—”

“We’re going to do the more *ethical* thing,” I interrupted.

He shrugged. “Okay. I’m sure we’ll sleep better. Unless they find us while we’re sleeping,” he added.

“Trust me,” I said. “It’s better to have to stand watch than to have more blood on your conscience.”

We tied our captive firmly to the nearest tree trunk and I told the wolves to leave him be, which they reluctantly did. Not troubled by conscience, I guess.

Then we rolled the dead ones into the trench and I mounded the dirt and all the branches over them. I made a mental note to find a different path over the ridge next time we went this way.

When we were done and I was able to set the shovel down, Amira smiled said, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

And I said, “Yeah. I’m glad *you’re* okay. We were worried about you. Are they treating the rest of our neighbors better than you?”

“Yes. Your mom’s uninjured. She’s not happy, but I guess no one is. None of them dared to object to how they treated me like a criminal, but your mom didn’t know about the plans to kill you. Only my grandfather, and they told him he had to help them or they’d kill *me*.”

I frowned.

“It’s all water under the bridge now,” she said. When I still didn’t look happy, she smiled and added, “Come here, you.” Then she wrapped an arm around my waist, pulled me to her, gave me a quick kiss on the lips, and hugged me hard.

I was embarrassed at first, but then I hugged her back.

When we separated, there were tears on my cheeks. “This whole thing sucks,” I said. “I never wanted to kill anyone!”

“Me neither,” Hedges said. It looked like he was waiting for *his* kiss and hug.

Amira smiled and gave him an affectionate punch on his shoulder. “You’re amazing, Hedges,” she said. “And thanks, both of you, for rescuing me.”

“You probably could’ve taken those guys on your own,” I said.

“I was going to try,” she replied. “But it would’ve been fifty-fifty. Still, I figured if I took out at least a couple of them, it would improve the odds for you. I really didn’t expect such an organized reception. Thanks!”

We both glanced at Hedges, and he look embarrassed but pleased.

“Okay, let’s go take a look at your supplies. We need to pack and leave as soon as possible.” And then Amira took the lead, heading off toward the cabin. She casually jumped the ditch full of dead attackers like she thought it was just a minor inconvenience.

She was in charge again, just like that. Even the lead wolf seemed to think so. Without a glance at me, he trotted along at her heels.

Hedges and I exchanged another of our looks, then we shrugged and followed her.

Chapter 24

Packing

We were sitting at the table, which we'd heaped high with food from the cupboards, along with various tools and equipment Hedges had gathered.

Amira scanned the table with a frown, then turned to Hedges. "Cans are hard to carry," she said.

"Carry where?" he asked.

She shrugged. "We'll get to that. Let's focus first on how to make ourselves as mobile as possible." She picked up a heavy hammer and set it aside.

"Hey! I might need that," Hedges objected.

"Use a rock," she said. "You can't carry an entire toolbox on your back."

He frowned.

"Take specialized, small tools only," she said, picking up a small pair of needle-nosed pliers. "For electronics, right? Which I don't understand, but you do, so bring what you'll need to make more of your clever gadgets." She glanced at the repurposed cell phone Hedges was using to monitor the forest for signals.

He sighed.

"What?" she demanded.

"I have a whole shed full of tools and parts back home, but even with all that, it's hard to make a new 'gadget' whenever someone asks for something."

"Good thing you're brilliant," she said. "Now, as for food, the dried fruits and berries are the lightest." She pulled a number of ziplock bags toward her. "What else can we bring?"

Hedges shrugged.

“Dried beans?” I offered. I’d spotted a couple bags in the pile. Even though I was getting sick of beans, it seemed like a portable item.

“Falcon and I can live almost entirely off fresh meat,” Amira said. “It suits our physiology, but you’re going to need a more balanced diet.” She was talking to Hedges and ignoring me.

“I don’t really like eating meat,” I said. “It reminds me of death.”

She continued to ignore me. “So,” she said to Hedges, “what about just a few cans, like these?” She tapped a can of vegetable stew. “And a pot. And don’t forget some matches.”

“I’ve got a lighter.”

“And a can opener,” I said.

“What about all the weapons?” Hedge asked.

“What weapons?” Amira replied.

Hedges got up and began to drag them out from under his cot. It was a big pile by now.

“Oh. Huh.” Amira frowned. “I think we’ll have to leave most of them behind. To be mobile, we need just one backpack each. And we have to bring bedding. Are there enough blankets here?”

I sighed.

“Don’t you like camping?” Amira asked me.

“I’m fine with camping. But where? You know it’s going to be winter soon and this is Canada.”

“It’ll snow within the month,” Hedges said. “Where can we go?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have let that Val go today,” Hedges continued when neither Amira nor I could answer his question. “We need more time.”

“Is there a map of the area?” Amira asked.

Hedges shook his head.

“I wish we knew the territory better,” she said. “It’s hard to be fugitives in an unfamiliar landscape.”

“Didn’t you get a look at some maps in the control room of the Canadian Hide?” Hedges asked.

“The Canadian Valukar locked me in a room as soon as we arrived. They suspected me of helping you get away from the agents.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I exclaimed.

“But true,” Hedges added, pulling the thumb drive out of his pocket. He smiled. “Thanks!”

I smiled, too, but for a different reason.

And I kept smiling until Amira frowned and said, “I don’t see anything all *that* amusing about our situation.”

I kept smiling even wider.

“Spill it,” Hedges said. He knew me well enough to see I had an idea.

“Oh!” Amira said. She’d read my thought, of course.

“Look, Hedges,” I said. “Amira just gave us a hint when she said how hard it is to be a fugitive in an unfamiliar landscape. The answer’s clear. We have to go back to a familiar place. That’s where we’ll have the best chance of surviving the winter.”

“I appreciate the idea,” Amira said, “but the agency told the local police to arrest us on sight or shoot us if they can’t catch us.”

Hedges nodded unhappily. “There are federal warrants out on all three of us,” he pointed out, “and Burt won’t help. He’s probably afraid of those feds after how they taped him up.”

“Would you rather have to avoid Burt, or freeze to death in the Canadian wilderness?” I asked. “Tell me about the Hide,” I added, turning to Amira.

“The Canadians have a huge complex with multiple floors going underground. A group of about thirty of them live there full-time and act as a private army for hundreds more Val, who are integrated into nearby towns.”

“*Are* there nearby towns?” Hedges asked.

Amira nodded. “More or less. Just not out this way.”

“That’s interesting, I guess,” I said, “but I wasn’t asking about the Canadian Hide.”

“Which, then? Are you thinking about *another* country?” Hedges was puzzled.

I laughed. Now he looked annoyed.

“Just tell us your brilliant idea,” he snapped. “And it better actually be a good one.”

“Amira’s Hide,” I said. “On the island. It’ll be deserted now, right?”

“It’s a crime scene,” she said. “Or was. Do you think they’ve gone back to Washington or Maine or wherever they came from?”

“I don’t think they’ll care about Remoteville, USA, now that the Valukar have fled. The ones they didn’t kill, that is.” I frowned at the memory. “And Burt is hardly a threat to us. We know his routines. Plus we have a vehicle, even if it’s got an APB out on it.”

“My tow truck?” Hedges asked. “They might’ve impounded it by now.”

“Then you can get another old car going. You’re good at that kind of stuff. And when the lake freezes we can ski into town at night to get supplies.”

“By breaking and entering?” Hedges said, sounding unhappy.

I shrugged. “We are fugitives, after all. So, when we get back to the Hide, we’ll sneak into town and take the police band radio out of your truck so we’ll always know where Burt and his deputies are. Does the Hide have a pantry full of emergency food?” I figured it had to, but I wanted to lob that one at Amira to help convince her.

She nodded. “Of course. We were prepared to retreat there, a dozen Val families, for as long as a year if necessary. And when you close the shades and lock the front door, the Hide is very inconspicuous. It just looks like some wealthy out-of-towner’s island retreat that isn’t in use at the moment.”

There were a number of small islands with wealthy people’s summer homes on them on that lake.

“And it’s isolated,” she continued. “It’s at the opposite end of the lake from town, and the lake’s kind of rocky around it. People don’t come there in their motorboats—except us Val because we know where the rocks are.”

“Very private, already stocked, and presumably abandoned.” I said, and I smiled.

And they did too. In fact, Hedges laughed.

And so it was decided. We’d pack only what we needed for a short trip, leaving all the cans behind and mostly bringing the collected electronics. As for the wolves, well, it’s handy to have your own private pack. We knew they sometimes went that far south. After all, they’d come into Hedges’ back field already, when Uncle Traitorous Bloodsucking A-hole sent them a false message that I wanted to meet them. Now we were getting along much better, and they liked it when I helped with their hunts, so why not ask them to come along?

We decided to hike around the far end of the lake. Since we’d crossed the lake by boat to get to Canada, Hedges and I didn’t know the way, but Amira said we could easily make it in a day’s walk. All we’d need to do was keep the lake on our right.

The leader of the wolves was fine with the plan. The idea of centering their winter range farther to the south appealed to him and he knew the deserted little cabin where we’d parked the truck when we first went out to the Hide with Amira. He pushed back an image of our leaving the door open so his pack to use the cabin as a den during the winter snows.

And even though I warned him there weren’t many moose, he pushed back an image of a herd of deer. I think it was a question. And I explained to him that yes, we certainly do have a lot of deer there, whereupon he pushed back a clear image of *me* taking deer down for the pack. Which at least meant I’d be running enough to stay in shape, even though it would be my first winter away from hockey.

There was the small problem of it being an island and us not having a boat, but Amira said there were kayaks in the boathouse and we'd just have to swim out there the first time, then we could use the boats at night to come and go as we pleased. And once the lake froze up, I'd be able to skate to and from shore—assuming I could sneak back home and steel my own hockey skates. But why not, now that I was faster than any human and able to see in the dark. As for skins to use once the snow came, Amira said there were dozens of pairs in a basement supply room and not to worry about that.

We decided to put the weapons in trash bags and hide them in the foundation of the ruined cabin so the Canadian Vals wouldn't find them.

So we changed our plans and tidied up the cabin, then packed light. I spotted Hedges stuffing that flowered apron into his pack, though, so he wasn't taking the idea of 'packing light' as seriously as Amira and I were. But I just smiled to myself. He must've been expecting he'd have to do most of the cooking, which was just fine with me.

It took us only a half hour to pack and head off into the forest. I wondered how long it would take that Val attacker to get out of his rope binding and make his way home. Probably a lot longer than that.

It was a grey, overcast morning and as we walked, Amira in the lead and the wolves strung out in a line behind us, it began to rain hard again. Raindrops got in our eyes and cold water trickled into our shirt collars, but Hedges was still smiling.

I knew what he was thinking. No tracks for anyone to follow. They'd have no idea which way we went and the last thing they'd guess is that we'd go back over the border. I chuckled at the thought of them searching the endless spruce forests for us all winter while we were holed up, warm and cozy, in our Hide. There was just one little problem that still bothered me, however. One thing we'd left behind.

Chapter 25

Second Thoughts

“I *think* this is where the border runs,” Hedges announced, glancing at his modified cell phone with its grid map. “But of course there’s no fencing out here in the middle of the forest. So, are you ready to step back into the good old U.S. of A?” he added with a grin.

But I’d continued to think as we walked, and the conclusion I’d reached was that I wasn’t ready to leave Canada. Not yet. I paused and looked back at the tall evergreen forest, damp with rain. There was a major problem with our plan and I could tell by how Amira was looking at me that she sensed what I was worrying about too.

I just couldn’t leave my mother behind in Canada. She was virtually a captive there, and who knew what they might do to her as long as they thought she could give them leverage over me? What if they threatened to kill her unless I came back?

“Go without me,” I said. “I have to check on my mom and get her out if I can.”

“Uh, that’s not going to be easy,” Hedges said.

“Or safe,” I replied, “which is why you guys are going to wait for me down there. If I don’t make it back—”

“Shut up!” Hedges snapped. “You’re being an idiot. Of course I’m not going to leave without you.”

“You’re going!” I snapped. “I...don’t want to lose you too.”

“Falcon!” Hedges exclaimed, taking a step closer and balling his fists. “You can’t bring me all this way with you, then just run off into the woods with those damn wolves and, and, probably not come back!”

The wolves, who had been following at a discrete distance, faded even further into the trees. They don’t mind howling so loudly that it makes your skin crawl, but apparently they don’t like it when we raise *our* voices. But I wasn’t worried about them. They’d go off and find a deer to share for dinner, then meet up down south when they were ready to sleep. Hedges, however, was really getting on my nerves.

“You’re just going to get yourself killed!” Hedges continued, his voice still raised, “and you know it!”

He was probably right, but that didn’t make me any less angry. My fangs slid down and I growled at him.

“Uh, guys?” Amira stepped between us. “Let’s take a break. Now. Come and sit on the rocks over here and don’t talk. Don’t!” she warned, holding up a warning finger when I opened my mouth to object.

We let her lead us over to some rounded boulders protected by huge overhanging pine trees that gave shelter from the rain. “Sit,” she commanded, pushing us down.

“It’s damp,” I complained.

“You’re already damp,” Hedges pointed out, sounding exasperated—but not so mad anymore, which was an improvement.

“I have no idea where my parents are now,” Amira said. “Hopefully still in California and safe, but I’m worried about them of course. And Hedges, are you wondering how your dad is doing?”

He shrugged. “He probably thinks I’ve gone crazy and become a terrorist or something,” he said. “He always thinks the worst of me. I’m sorry if I really did let him down this time.”

“You didn’t let anyone down!” I exclaimed, annoyed. “You did what was right! If I ever have a chance to talk to your—“

Quiet, Amira warned, inside my mind this time.

“It’s natural to be concerned about family,” she continued out loud. “And Falcon’s mother is a bigger concern than the others because it turns out the Canadian Valukar are problematic.”

“*Problematic?*” I repeated, outraged. “They’re crazy! Insane!! Relentlessly murderous!!! I’d call that a lot more than ‘problem—”

Enough, Amira said, and it was such a firm command sent into my brain that my teeth snapped shut and I bit my tongue. “Look, I know you’re worried about her,” she

continued, “and you should be, but let’s just stop arguing and *think* for a minute. A non-excited minute. Okay?”

“I guess,” I said.

“If you insist,” Hedges said.

We sat there silently, listening to the rain dripping down from the thick green canopy above us.

“Well?” I demanded when I couldn’t wait any longer. I was finding it hard to think about anything more than how I wanted to force those jerks to let my mom go—with my fangs if need be.

“Precisely!” Amira said, smiling and exchanging a look with Hedges.

“Wait, what?” I exclaimed. Had they exchanged thoughts without me?

“Only option,” Hedges agreed, nodding and smiling—at Amira, not me.

“Hey!” I said, annoyed that I still didn’t know what they were talking about.

“When you get agitated,” Amira said, turning to me, “your skills get compromised. You have to be in control to be effective. Like when you beat up an entire hockey team and got thrown—”

“Just great,” I broke in. “Now you’re lecturing me! Why don’t you just tell me what you’re thinking and stop—”

“Stop what?” she interrupted. “Trying to solve your problem?”

“Yeah! Uh, I mean no. Sorry. Wait, what *do* you have in mind?” I asked, turning to Hedges.

Hedges stood up. “Look,” he said, “we’re not getting into that Canadian Hide. It’s a fortress. So the way to get your mother is to get them to bring her to us.”

“Why would they do that?” I demanded.

“Because they want you a lot more than they want her,” Amira said with a glance at Hedges. “So we’ll offer an exchange.”

“Why would they trust us?” I asked. “Why would they believe you’d actually hand me over? You’ve got to give them a plausible motive.”

“That’s easy,” Hedges said. “To get them off our trail. We don’t like being the target of constant assassination attempts. And since *they* think you’re a huge problem, they’ll be quick to believe *we* feel the same way too. We’ll say we want to trade you for her—but that *you* think she’s escaping. We’ll tell them we’re tricking you.”

“You’re going to tell them they can have me?” I asked. “To, uh, kill, I presume?”

“Or tranquilize and offer to the agents who want to study you in exchange for leaving the Canadian Valukar alone. Because you can be sure they’ll send strike teams up here if they find out we’ve gone over the border,” Amira explained. “And the Canadians will have heard all about you from my dad, I’m afraid.” She frowned. “So that means they’re highly motivated to get hold of you. I think we’ll tell them they can keep you *and* your mom for all we care. That Hedge and I just want to be left alone.”

“Then why not just kill me and deliver my dead body?” I asked. “Wouldn’t they rather you do it that way?”

“We’ll tell them we can’t,” Amira offered. “You’re a formidable foe.”

Hedges nodded. “That’s right. We’ll contact Amira’s grandfather, then tell you he’s planning to slip her out and bring her to us.”

“But,” Amira continued, “they’ll actually have an ambush planned, so everyone will be rid of the biggest magnet for trouble on the entire North American continent,” she explained with a smile. “That’s you!” *Now* she smiled. Great!

“You’re pretty convincing,” I complained. “I’m glad you’re on my side. *Are* you on my side?”

“It has to be convincing,” Hedges said. “So, how do we get a message to him?” he asked, turning to Amira.

“That’s going to be hard unless we happen to know anyone who’s a whiz with electronics,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“Call him? Why not,” Hedges replied. “Where there’s a circuit board, there’s a way.” He fumbled through his backpack and pulled out one of the phones they’d dropped

when they attacked us. Frowning, he worked over it for several minutes until he got the back off. “Security has to be bypassed,” he complained. “Everyone uses passwords these days.”

“Because of people like you!” I snapped. “Can you break into it?” I added.

“Easy now I have the back open. Harder if you have to hack into it remotely, but I’ve done that too.”

“Don’t tell me about it,” I said. “I like to believe the illusion that people’s cell phones are actually private.”

“Suit yourself,” Hedges said as he poked into the inner workings, then turned it on and scrolled through the menus. “I’m in, but we don’t have a signal here,” he complained. “If I could get higher I’d probably be able to pick up at least a weak signal from the nearest tower.” He glanced up at the tall trees looming over us.

“Easy. Just climb this tree,” Amira said, pointing at the one we were sitting beneath. It was massive.

Hedges’s eyes got wide. “They call me Hedges, not Giant Sequoias,” he snapped. “I can’t climb that!”

“Then I’ll do it,” Amira said. “I’ll call my father and tell him I’m ready to stop being hunted by the Canadian pack.”

“Will he believe you?” I asked.

“People tend to believe you’ll behave the way *they* would,” Amira said with a frown. “And clearly *he* was willing to sell *us* out to save his own hide. Phone,” she added, holding out her hand.

Hedges gave it to her.

Amira leapt up the tree from brand to branch so quickly that she was almost a blur.

After she’d disappeared into the green foliage high above, we waited in silence down below.

A jay called.

A porcupine ambled out of the underbrush, then stopped to eye us. Once it decided we didn't belong there, it raised its quills and became a bristling pincushion of hostility.

"We won't bother you," I told it, using mind-talk like I used with the wolves.

The porcupine's quills went down and it wandered off, ignoring us studiously.

I smelled something. It made my nostrils flair and sent a pickle up and down my spine. "Uh, Hedges?" I whispered. "Is that shotgun loaded?"

"Never carry a loaded gun on a hike," he said, speaking in his normal voice.

"When I whisper, you should whisper back!" I hissed. "It means I detect danger!"

"I'll load it," he whispered, sounding tense as he fumbled to open his pack.

"Too late," I exclaimed as a large mountain lion came into the clearing, its eyes on us and its tail twitching.

"Damn," Hedges exclaimed, backing away to put me between the lion and him.

"I don't want to fight it," I said, "but unfortunately it seems to think we'd make a nice lunch."

"I'm okay with your fighting it," he whispered as it moved slowly toward us.

Whoosh followed by *thump*. Amira had dropped down from the pine tree and landed between us and the lion in a half crouch, one hand on the needle-covered ground and the other still clutching the phone. She was almost face to face with it.

The lion, startled, put its ears back and growled.

Amira growled back.

As it turned out, Amira's growl was the scariest. The lion turned and slipped into the forest.

"We had it under control," Hedges said, finally managing to get his hands on a couple shotgun cartridges. "No worries. Uh, how did the call go?"

Amira turned toward us. Her fangs were out and her eyes glowed wildly.

"Amira?" I said. "Are you okay?"

She took a deep breath, held it...and returned slowly to her human form.

Hedges, his gun now operational, had it pointing at her chest.

“Do you mind?” she said, stepping toward him and pointing the barrel away.

“Oh. Sorry!” He opened it and took the cartridges out again. “Uh, the call?”

She handed the cell phone back to him. “Not a great connection, but good enough. It’s all set up. Tonight, 4:00 am, at the cabin. Well, I guess that’s technically tomorrow, but you know what I mean.”

“We have to go back there?” I exclaimed.

“You’re the one who announced you had to go back to get your mom,” Amira pointed out. “Where exactly did you plan to go back to?”

“It’s just that the cabin has a lot of unpleasant memories of angry vampire-dudes trying to shoot and kill us,” I pointed out. “Which they’ll do again.”

“We know the location,” Amira explained, “and its near enough that we can get back in time to get ready.”

“Ready for what, exactly?” I asked.

“I told my grandfather I’d tell *you* that he’s to sneak your mom out and bring her to us.” Amira frowned. I could hear the unspoken thought—that she was angry and disappointed that her grandfather had caved into the demands of the Canadian Val so easily instead of sticking up for us. But I realized I shouldn’t be listening to her private thoughts. I cleared my throat. “Good. And what are they *actually* going to do?” I asked.

He wasn’t going to bring your mother at all, but I said you’d never be fooled unless you could smell her coming. So he’ll tell the Canadian Valukar to begin her to the cabin. I imagine they’ll wait for us to open the door and let her in, then attack with everything we’ve got.”

I frowned and bit my lip. “This plan is missing the part where *we* trick *them*,” I complained. “It seems to end with our being outnumbered, surrounded and shot. Too bad your... Never mind,” I added quickly, realizing that it wasn’t going to make Amira feel

any better to mention that her grandfather agreed to sell us out again. “Uh, any ideas?” I asked hopefully.

There was a pause. Amira was looking at the ground and I could sense sadness and anger in her, but no new ideas. And all *I* could think of was how they were going to send a lot more men this time, and a lot more firepower too.

“I have an idea,” Hedges said. He was smiling.

Chapter 26

More Plans

“Okay, out with it,” I said, eyeing Hedges. “What’s your plan?”

“Well, for starters, we’re not going to just wait inside the cabin while they lay siege to it. We’d be trapped.”

“Wait, how can we meet them in the cabin for the exchange, but not *be* in the cabin?” I asked. “I don’t get it.”

Amira chuckled. “I’m seeing something really big floating above the cabin in the darkness,” she said. “What exactly are you thinking, Hedges?”

“Well...” He smiled. “Since you guys don’t mind climbing, we’ll be up. They won’t think to look up. Nobody does. And it’s hard to look up because the trees are so thick. Do you remember that huge tree that partially covers the back side of the roof? If we sneak out a hole in the roof and—”

"Wait, I don't remember any hole in the roof," I interrupted.

Hedges smiled again. “You’ll make one.”

“What’s the big thing you’re visualizing up above that tree?” Amira asked.

“You’ll see,” Hedges said.

“Wait, you’re not thinking about some crazy invention?” I demanded. “Like that chair that was supposed to climb the wall?”

“It worked until it ran into barbed wire,” he said. “Anyway, I wasn’t thinking about building something new. No time.”

“Then what?” I demanded.

“Stealing something, or to be more precise, multiple somethings,” he explained. “Guess what time it is?”

“Uh, maybe two in the afternoon?” I offered, puzzled as to why he cared.

“Yes, which is good because we still have plenty of time before our meeting, but I actually meant what time of *year*.” He grinned again. “County fair in Mapleton. Remember? It’s close to us here, just an hour or two away. And they always have—”

“Hot air ballon rides!” Amira interrupted, smiling. “This is going to be fun!”

“Assuming we slip in and take a balloon,” I said, beginning to feel even more worried than before, “how in the world are we going to get it across the Canadian border and position it above the cabin? Unless the wind is just right, we’ll end up somewhere completely different than we want to.”

“You’re not thinking,” he said. “Well, you did get the gist of my idea quite quickly, I’ll give you credit for that. But what else do they have at that fair?”

“Uh, hay rides? Barns full of prize-winning pigs and cows? I give up.” I frowned.

“Biplanes! They have old guys flying stunt planes over the hayfield!” I’d rarely seen Hedges so excited.

“Wait, are you going to—you don’t even know how—” I was getting more alarmed by the minute.

“It sounds crazy,” Amira agreed.

“We’ll have to divide and conquer,” he said, thinking out loud. “Amira, you and Falcon steal the biggest balloon, while I find a biplane and tow it over with whatever pickup truck I can find and jumpstart. Get your balloon up in the air with the mooring lines still dangling from it. Run the flame hot enough to get it good and high so they can’t pull you back down if someone notices. Meanwhile, I’ll fly by, grab one of the ropes, and drag you behind me. Or...” He frowned.

“Can you even fly one of them?” I asked, studying him.

He shrugged. “I’ve done hundreds of hours on flight simulators. The real challenge is going to be low-speed lift. See, an old-fashioned biplane needs to go at least fifty or sixty miles an hour to stay aloft, but a hot air balloon is hardly streamlined. It’ll probably go no more than ten miles an hour tops, so the plane will want to dive into the ground, which would be inconvenient. Hmm.” He was soon lost in thought, muttering to himself.

Amira shrugged.

I shrugged back. There wasn't much else to do but sit and wait. It was like watching a computer crank away at a gigantic problem that you weren't sure it was big enough to handle.

"I've got it!" he finally exclaimed. "I won't fly the biplane after all. Too bad, because I've always wanted to see if I could."

"You *said* you could," I snapped, eyeing him.

"Yeah, but my simulators were for modern airplanes. Anyway, I'll just roll it over to the balloon, then we'll lash the plane under the balloon's basket... Is it too heavy for a hot air balloon? Wait, have either of you actually gone up in a balloon at the fair? How many people do they hold?"

We both shrugged.

"Let's hope they have a big sixteen-eater. And I think they fly old Navy biplanes at that fair," he continued. "I remember getting to sit in one when I was little. Yellow, with red stripes on the wings, right?"

"Whatever you say," I said. Amira ignored him.

"Which would be the Stearman Model 75," Hedges went on. "It's the most common biplane, and it weighs... What *does* it weigh? Be quiet, I have to think."

Amira and I exchanged a look and she sent me the thought, *Is he always this annoying?*

I sent back, *You have no idea.*

"Not as heavy as some," Hedges muttered. "Lightly built wood-frame wings covered with fabric. Be careful when walking on them!" he said more loudly, glaring at Amira. Then he went back to muttering. "Fuselage also covered in fabric to keep it light. Most of the weight is in the engine and the gas tank. Hmm..."

I'm beginning to get a clearer idea as to how annoying he can be, Amira sent, arching an elegant eyebrow in my direction. And I sure hope he doesn't expect me to actually walk on a plane while it's flying!

“Shut up!” Hedges snapped. “I can hear you!”

Amira smiled. I did too. I knew she’d made sure to include him on that last thought when she sent it out, just to bug him.

Finally, after another round of muttering, Hedges jumped up. “Got it,” he announced. “Come on.”

Chapter 27

The County Fair

If you've ever been to a county fair, you know that they have rides and games, but also barns full of prize animals and gigantic pumpkins and things like that. People are everywhere, eating cotton candy and tossing horseshoes for prizes and waiting in line to go on hot air balloon rides.

But not after hours. We got there as it was closing and hid in the back of a barn until the sun set. At night the fairgrounds are dark and dusty—or muddy if it's been raining. And there are hardly any guards, because I mean really, who wants to steal gigantic pumpkins? And if the livestock doesn't recognize you, they aren't exactly going to let you walk off with them. Try telling that to a five hundred pound pig.

So we slipped out of the barn and explored until we found the field where the hot air balloons were.

It was somewhat disappointing. There were three baskets, one of them large enough for more than a dozen people, but the balloons were mostly deflated and they looked sad and floppy, I guess so they wouldn't take off at by accident if the wind came up. Hedges climbed into the basket of the largest balloon and began to fiddle.

"Rope," he said.

"What?" I stared at Amira.

"Find a lot of rope."

By the time we got back, heavy coils of rope hung over our aching shoulders, Hedge had the flame leaping up and heating the balloon, which was already nearly inflated. He climbed out of the basket, misjudging the height (the balloon had risen as it inflated) and falling on the grass. "Damn," he cursed as he got up.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Hot dogs," he said, eyeing a sign on a shed nearby.

"You're hungry?" I asked, surprised.

“No, but they must have a grill they heat with flame from a propane tank. Get me an extra tank. We’re going to be lifting a lot of weight. And find a gas tank too, like you use for lawn mowers, in case the biplane needs more fuel. AOh, and Amira? Climb up and keep an eye on that burner. Turn it down once the balloon is full.”

“Where are *you* going?” I demanded.

“To get my biplane,” he said as he headed off into the darkness.

Soon we heard a truck motor coming. *Security guard?* I asked Amira.

It’s Hedges. The security guard wouldn’t drive around with no headlights.

He pulled up in a pickup with a biplane in tow behind it. “Ease out the mooring lines so I can drive underneath,” he instructed.

Soon the hot air balloon was higher up and ready to receive its strange payload. We worked the plane under it by hand. Its wingspan was pretty wide (Hedges announced that its span was 32 feet, but I couldn’t say for sure). Still, it rolled easily with just a gentle push and we didn’t have much trouble getting it in position. Once it was centered under the basket, Hedges had Amira and I pull the balloon down to touch the top wing, and then he lashed them together. “There,” he said. “I think we’re ready. All aboard!

It was just in time. Headlights were coming. But before they reached us, Hedges cranked up the flame to an orange roar and the balloon strained hard against its morning lines. Amira and I hurried to cast them off and up fast, we went with the bright yellow biplane lashed underneath us. It must’ve been a strange sight to the security guard down below. I hoped he wouldn’t lose his job over it.

“Okay, one of you has to climb down there and fire up the biplane,” Hedges announced.

“Really?” I couldn’t believe it. “Why not use remote control or something clever like that?”

“Oh sure!” He exclaimed. “In one hour, in the dark, without any supplies or tools?”

“Right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

But Amira was already climbing out of the basket.

“Wait,” I said. I tied a length of rope around her waist and I tied the other end to one of the mooring line cleats. “It’s a long way down,” I pointed out.

“I didn’t know you cared,” she quipped, and gave me a quick kiss that set my heart beating way too fast. Then she was over the edge and, balancing carefully, tiptoed over the shiny painted top wing of the plane.

The wing crossed over the cockpit the plane, so she had to climb under it to get to where the controls were. “Careful!” I called, but she made it look easy.

There was a mechanical chugging followed by a cough and a roar. The engine had come to life and the propeller began to pull us madly forward.

“Throttle it down!” Hedges shouted.

At its slowest speed, the big propeller tugged us along in a somewhat orderly fashion. Hedges, who thinks of almost everything, had rigged the ropes from the top of the balloon to pulleys. He checked a compass and frowned. “We’re off course,” he said, and tightened one of the side ropes.

The balloon was pulled a little to one side, which created drag and changed our course. When he was satisfied with our heading, he let the extra tension off. “The biplane’s flaps aren’t any use at such a slow speed, so I’m adjusting the balloon instead. It’s so big that any small change in its position will alter our course, and then the propeller will drag us consistently in the new direction. I hope.” He studied the compass again.

“What about hills?” I asked. A dark ridge was coming into view up ahead.

“Shit!” He exclaimed as he rushed to turn the flame up.

The balloon groaned as it expanded and we began to gain altitude, but the ridge was coming up too rapidly.

“Hey!” Amira shouted as she clamored back into the basket. “Do you see that?”

Hedges seemed to be frozen, a look of panic on his face, so I figured it was a time for action. I spotted a sand bag and tossed it over, then another. (They use them for ballast

but we hardly needed extra weight, I figured, what with the dead weight of the biplane.) We rose a few more yards, but I could see that we still weren't high enough to clear the top of the ridge. I grabbed a gas tank like the one my dad used to use to refill the lawn mower, and tossed that overboard too (Amira had found it in a shed and brought it on board). It had been heavy, obviously full to the top. Now we rose more quickly and the pointy tops of spruce trees only scraped lightly against the underside of the biplane's body.

Then we were over the ridge and in open air again.

I let out a long sigh and Amira chuckled.

But Hedges just glared at me. "You tossed the extra gas!" He snapped. "We probably going to need that!"

"Not if we're dead," I pointed out.

Chapter 28

Time

“It’s 2:00 am,” Hedges announced, glancing at the watch he’d taken from an unconscious agent. “We arranged to meet the at 4:00, so it’ll still be dark. Amira, can you go back down there and increase the throttle a little?”

“Sure thing, brainiac,” she said with a grin, then she was scrambling over the wing again.

No kiss this time? I teased her with a sent thought.

Shut up, she sent back.

We could hear the engine change its tune as she gave it more gas, and then she was climbing along the wing again. The wind rose as we picked up speed and I tightened my grip on her safety line just to be sure, but she leapt nimbly into the basket. “What?” she said, eyeing my grip on the rope.

“Nothing,” I lied, letting go of it.

“Stop flirting!” Hedges snapped.

“You wish,” I said, giving him a punch on the shoulder. Unfortunately I hit him a little harder than I meant to.

“Ow!” He cried. “Cut it out!”

Amira rolled her eyes.

We didn’t talk after that. We just tugged on the ropes when Hedges told us to. After another hour he said, “Cut the motor.” He glanced at his new watch. ‘Early. Good. Okay, I’m going to lose some altitude so we can tie to that big tree behind the cabin.’ He turned the flame down until it was almost invisible and tugged some small ropes to vent air out of the balloon.

After a few minutes, he picked up two big coils of rope and said, “Your turn,” as he held them out to us.

“Wait, what do you expect us to do?” I demanded, eyeing the rope suspiciously.

“You’re the ace climber,” he said. “Rappel down and lash us to the top of that tree.”

“You don’t rappel without a harness!” I complained, but Amira was already letting her rope down over the other side of the basket. “Hell, here goes nothing,” I muttered as I tossed mine over (Hedges had already tied one end to the balloon’s frame). Then I was shinnying down a swaying rope in the darkness. Crazy, I know. But crazy was usually one of the main elements of Hedges’ ideas. *Crazy plus genius*, I thought, although I had to admit that sometimes his ideas leaned more toward crazy than genius. I couldn’t tell for sure which way this plan was leaning, but I was beginning to get a bad feeling about it.

Amira and I had to swing back and forth on the ends of our ropes in order to reach the tree. I guess we’d drifted away from it while waiting for the balloon to descend. “When we finally got our ropes tied, I sent her a simple thought: *What now?*”

But it was Hedges who answered. He was leaning over the basket, looking down. “Climb down the tree and get the cabin set up, then wait,” he called.

And so we did.

We lit a lantern and hung it over the little kitchen table. Then we hurried over to the old foundation and extracted enough firepower to be ready for almost anything. I set up a high powered rifle on a tripod and covered it with a tablecloth. Amira stashed three hunting rifles and a pile of ammunition on one of the bunks with a blanket over them. Then we closed the shutters on the windows and latched them shut. But we opened the front door and made sure it looked welcoming from outside looking in, with the table set with plates and tin mugs and even (Amira’s touch) a chipped glass jar filled with late blooming wildflowers we gathered.

Of course we didn’t expect they’d believe it was all *that* welcoming, but we hoped they’d see we were set up there again, so they’d send someone to bring my mom inside and do the exchange for me, as we’d agreed.

Once she was inside, I figured I’d deal with whoever came with her—how many fighters could possibly squeeze through the doorway a time? I was confident I could take a few of them easily, and then a few more if they rushed through too. All I had to do was

buy us a few minutes while Amira got my mom up the ladder to the attic, and into a makeshift harness we'd made, so Hedges could lift her up to the waiting balloon. Then Amira and I would follow. Surely they wouldn't anticipate we'd escape straight up.

Amira had used a rusty saw to cut a hole in the roof beneath the spruce tree's thick branches, and we rigged three more ropes by threading them down beside the thick trunk and into the hole. Of course Hedges wouldn't be able to pull all of us up, but Amira and I figured that, when transformed, we'd be strong enough to climb up our ropes on our own, so he'd only have to pull my mom.

As long as I locked and barred the door after I dispensed with whoever came inside, they'd assume we were still in there. Their obvious strategy would be to treat it as a siege by surrounding the cabin and taking their time while we got more hungry, thirsty and desperate on the inside. Except we wouldn't *be* inside if our secret escape route worked.

I had to admit it wasn't so crazy sounding after all. What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 29

Plans within Plans

Our idea, of course, was to trick them. It turns out they had the same idea.

By 4:00 am, it was really dark. The clouds had covered the moon and stars and we couldn't see anything out the door, but we sure could hear the first volley of gunshots. They sent us diving under the kitchen table.

When the firing let up, we brushed broken glass and wood chips off us and crawled to the back of the cabin where the bunks were. *Why didn't they even try to do the exchange?* I asked Amira with a thought.

They don't trust us, obviously, she said with a frown. *They must've decided to just kill us right away.*

Where's my mom? I asked.

She shrugged.

Gunfire erupted again, this time closer, and the shutters began to splinter away. A shot struck the lantern. It shattered, spreading flaming lamp oil over the wooden table. Soon fire was leaping up and threatening to set the ceiling on fire. *Time to go,* Amira thought, heading up the ladder to the attic.

"But what about my mom!" I demanded.

"Come on!" she called from the top of the ladder. When gunfire struck the stove and began to shatter the cast iron pots and pans on it, I scrambled up after her. "Shit!" I shouted. But there was nothing to do except scramble up the tree and grab the ropes.

Instead of taking time to shinny up, Amira, who always seemed to have a sharp knife on her, slashed the ropes we'd used to anchor the balloon to the tree and the balloon started to drift away, tugging us on our long ropes behind it.

We could see trees looming ahead, lit by the flicker of flames as they rose from the cabin, so we began to climb our ropes as fast as we could.

Meanwhile, Hedges must've been giving the balloon more heat, because the ropes were pulling us up even faster than we could climb. It was dizzying, but somehow we avoided being seen and made it up over the trees. Panting, we threw ourselves into the basket.

"No mom," Hedges observed.

"No shit," I growled as I wiped blood from a scratch on my cheek made by a flying bit of glass. "Now what?"

"If they didn't bring her here, they left her there," Hedges said, adjusting his steering ropes. "I'm not surprised. In fact, I kind of figured this might happen."

"You think she's still in their Hide?" I exclaimed. "Then all this was for nothing!"

He smiled. "Not true. Most or all of their fighters are watching the cabin burn right now, which means that their Hide isn't properly guarded. In fact, it may not be guarded at all."

Another annoying thing about Hedges is that he usually fails to tell me his whole plan. I guess he figures I'd never agree if I knew everything he had in mind. I probably wouldn't!

Chapter 30
What Goes Up

The sky to the east was beginning to lighten. It would be dawn soon. I wondered what they'd think when they saw the gigantic balloon with an airplane strapped underneath it. We were just sixty feet or so above a back corner of the Canadian Hide, tied to the top of a tall spruce tree that was bending oddly as the breeze began to rise. I hoped it wouldn't break.

Hedges frowned. "I hope they don't shoot at us," he said. "The airplane's covered with painted canvas, and the balloon basket's made of wicker, so our ride isn't very bulletproof."

"Nor are we," I pointed out.

Amira ignored us. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to be listening to something.

"News?" I asked her.

Her eyes popped open. "Yeah. My dad, if we can trust him this time, says he's sorry it didn't work out but he's going to sneak her outside."

"My mom? Now?" I was surprised.

"We definitely can't trust him," Hedges said.

"How many Val are guarding this place right now?" I asked.

Amira shrugged. "He says all the fighters went to the ambush, but I doubt that's true." She thought for a moment, then added, "Unless we thinned their ranks so much that they can't cover both places at the same time."

"Do families live here?" Hedges asked. "Or staff?"

"Staff?" I repeated, puzzled.

"Cooks, maids, secretaries, whatever?"

Amira frowned. I didn't see any kids or families," she said. "And I heard that they sent the families from our group to sometown where there's lots more Val. This place looked like a military barracks. Everyone I saw looked like a fighter, they were all wearing tactical vests and boots and had guns in holsters on their waists, but I was locked into a room pretty quickly so I'm not entirely sure. Wait, there was a kid who brought me meals and pushed them through a slot in the door. A young boy."

"I'm going to try to talk to my mom," I said. "Hang on." I figured she knew a lot more about being a Val than she'd let on and that if she sensed me reaching out to her, she'd be able to answer. At least I hoped so.

After a while, Amira tapped me on the arm and whispered, "We've got company."

I gave up on trying to reach my mom. Probably a lifetime of denial made her immune to my efforts. Amira was pointing over the side of the basket, so I leaned over to look. Shit! A half dozen people were down there, looking up. We'd been spotted.

But none of them looked like Val fighters. It was a half dozen young kids along with one older girl, probably twelve or thirteen. She had kinky hair and a medium brown complexion, kind of like me. Who the heck were they?

I refocused on the teenaged girl and sent her a thought. *What's going on?*

Are you here to rescue us? She thought back right away. *early she had skills. Seemed like the kids' leader.*

Amira and I exchanged a puzzled look.

Who are you? Amira asked in a thought.

We're the child labor, she sent. They make us do all the chores. Remember Archie? He brought you your food.

But you're Val, I said. Where are your families?

In town. Families with three or more kids have to send their youngest. They say it's in exchange for protection but protection against what? she asked. Archie says that Amira was nice to him, and the fighters here aren't nice to us. Not at all.

Do you go to school? Amira asked.

No. Just work. But the nice lady helped us break out and said she'd arrange a rescue. Are you our rescue?

Nice lady? I repeated *Is she a captive too?*

Yes, the girl said.

Jesus! I exclaimed.

“Your mom?” Amira asked.

“Gotta be.” I grabbed a coil of rope and tossed it over.

“You’re not going in there, are you?” Hedges asked, sounding alarmed.

“Here,” I said, grabbing his favorite shotgun and pushing it into his arms. “Cover me and shoot first if anyone points a gun at you! This rig won’t stay up in the air for long if it gets any bullet holes in it.”

Amira tossed another coil of rope over the side. “I’ll get the kids. You look for your mom.”

“Wait!” Hedges called. “The balloon might not lift all of them plus the biplane!”

“You’ll think of something,” I said as I went over the side of the basket.

It’s a good thing the kids were Val because with a little prompting we got them onto the ropes and climbing up. They were lean from being worked so hard, which is kind of an advantage if you want to climb a tall rope as it turns out, and of course once Amira helped them transform, they were strong enough to take down a deer, so climbing a rope was not a big deal.

Amira, with a big hunting knife out and at the ready, stood guard at the bottom and helped each pair of kids onto the ropes in turn.

I sniffed out their wood pile—it smelled like recently cut wood mixed with oiled steel. The latter smell was from an ax, of course. A recently sharpened and oiled one. Perfect! I ran back to the (now considerably smaller) group of kids, ax in hand—one of them cried out in fear but Amira hushed her with a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

The oldest girl was still on the ground, helping Amira get the younger ones up. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Hawk,” she said.

“That’s funny,” I said.

“People make fun of my name,” she admitted, looking sad.

“No, sorry! See, my name is Falcon.”

“Oh.” She looked at me with wide eyes, then smiled. “Pleased to meet you!” she said.

“Do you play hockey?” I asked on a whim.

“What? No. I was a figure skater until they sent me here.”

“Oh. Okay, listen, do you know where the ‘nice lady’ is being kept?”

“Yeah. Down the main corridor, turn right at the end, go most of the way down and it’s the second to last room on your left.”

Amira turned from helping a little boy up the rope and said, “How about from the outside? Which window?”

“Um, I’m not sure.”

I studied the building. We were around back, at one corner. The main door was on the opposite side. “If the hall goes straight back, then you’d turn right, which would be left to us, and come toward this corner, right?”

“I guess so,” she said.

“This’ll be fun!” I announced as I jogged over to the building and strode past the first set of windows. They were tinted dark so I couldn’t see in, but from her description, I guessed the room I wanted was the second set. I stopped and raised my ax.

Chapter 31
Hi, Mom

“Close your eyes,” Amira called over to me as I raised the ax. I was about to chop it into a plate glass window, so it was good advice. Then I thought of an even better idea and lowered the ax, switching my grip, so that I could swing it down low, at knee height. I already had one glass cut on my face, I thought that was enough.

But before I could break the glass, it shattered, and not down where I was aiming but just a few inches from my head. Someone had shot at me from inside.

“Run!” Amira shouted at me as she pushed the last two kids, Hawk and another girl younger than her, up the ropes.

But, as you might have guessed having heard about my adventures so far, I don’t usually run from things, I run toward them. That’s what I did now. I threw the ax as hard as I could at the window, imagining where that gunshot must’ve come from, and without waiting to see what would happen next I jumped after it.

The glass had only gotten a smallish bullet hole from the shot fired at me (must’ve been a pistol, I figured, not a hunting rifle, so that was at least one thing in my favor). But the ax, of course, shattered it catastrophically and I found myself jumping through lots of bits of falling glass. It was safety glass, so it didn’t break into slivers, it broke into hundreds of little sharp-edged shiny squares that filled the air. The Val guard inside had duck as the ax somersaulted toward him, and with all the flying glass pieces he didn’t seem to realize I was coming right after the ax. I hit him hard, full body, and he fell over backward. I had gambled that he was a righty since most people are and grabbed his right arm with my left as I barreled into him so as to keep him from simply shooting me. It was a good guess. Soon I had a grip on his pistol and I twisted it hard, which must’ve broken at least one of his fingers because he cursed and let go of it in a hurry.

Then we we scrambling up and he was—darn! He had pulled out a hunting knife from a sheath on his belt with his left hand and was about to sink it in me when—

Bang! Another shot rang out and he fell to the floor.

It was my mom. My mom! What the Hell?

“Hi, Sweetie,” she said as she stood there with a smoking pistol in her hand. “Sorry to interrupt but I thought maybe you could use a little help.”

“Mom!” I gave her a big hug. “Are you okay?”

Come on! Amira hissed in my inner ear.

“Tell me later,” I said, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward the window. “We have to go.”

She let me hurry her to the waiting ropes and. Amira was already most of the way up one of them and she gestured for us to follow. I grabbed the other and, as Amira reached the balloon basket and pulled herself over the edge, I said to my mom, “Can you climb?”

She stared at me. “What?”

“Uh, the rope. Can you climb it?”

“I, uh, I don’t think so,” she said. “Climbing was more your father’s thing. Although we did meet at a climbing gym. Did I ever tell you about—***Falcon!!!***”

“I could understand her being upset. After all, I’d just let me fangs all the way down again and bitten her on the shoulder. Not deep, but it still must’ve hurt like heck. I eyed her reaction, hoping that... Yes! She reacted the way any Val would when attacked. Her eyes changed and her canines elongated.

“There!” I said. “*Now* you can climb.”

“You little—“ What she would’ve called me, I hate to think, but she didn’t have time. We heard shouts, loud shouts from people with deep voices. Obviously there were more guards somewhere in the building, and they’d heard the gunshots.

I couldn’t believe how fast my mom went up that rope. I was a little slower because in her haste she dropped the pistol and I bent down to grab it and slip it under my belt and jeans in back, before leaping to the rope and shinnying up. I caught up with her in time to help her get up and over the lip of the basket. She fell in, looking exhausted, and I could see that she’d transitioned back to her ‘normal’ self again. But I didn’t have time to think about her. I set to work shooting at the men who had come to the broken

window. One of them had a pistol too, and was lining up his first shot, but they ducked back in when I began firing.

Keep count, Amira warned in my head but I had already run out of ammunition by then, so I threw the gun at them and broke another window pane.

By then, Amira had cut the mooring lines with her knife and Hedges had turned the flame up all the way. We began to drift away from the building, but we weren't rising. "Can you turn the biplane on?" he asked me? Amira had his shotgun out and was keeping the guards from coming out to shoot at us, so it looked like it was up to me.

"On it," I said as I vaulted over the edge of the basket and landed on the top wing. "Damm!" I added as one of my feet punched a hole in the covering.

"Careful!" Hedges shouted just before blasting another shot off.

All I could think of was the kids and my mom, huddled in the bottom of the balloon basket, and how I had to get them away from the Hide before anyone could shoot up into the basket. I slid along the wing to where I could swing over, then I dove off and grabbed the edge of the front cockpit as I fell. I wrenched my shoulder as I caught myself, but soon I'd swung myself up and into the seat. How the Hell do you start it? I sent to Amira, so hard that Hedges must've heard me too because he leaned over and shouted directions.

Soon I had the engine roaring and I threw the throttle all the way forward, hoping the balloon would not burst. It was a mad moment as the big balloon groaned and the children screamed and the plan tugged madly at its ropes, but soon we'd gotten out of sight of the Hide and were floating just above treetop level, with the pointy tips of spruce trees whipping by under us.

I climbed up more carefully and joined the others in the basket. "What's our course, Captain?" I asked Hedges cheerfully. It seemed like we'd actually pulled it off. We'd rescued not only my mother, but a half dozen kidnapped children. Hurray!

Hedges didn't answer. He was fiddling with the burner, trying to get it hotter. "Anything wrong?" I asked.

Amira was soothing the children, but she stood up and came over to see what was going on. "Uh, Hedges?" she said. "You do see that hill up ahead?"

“I can’t... It won’t... Shit!” He looked more upset than usual. In fact, I’d never seen him quite that upset before. There were tears in his eyes.

“Too much weight?” I asked him.

“Right!” He looked like he was ready to deal with it after all. He grabbed a propane tank and tossed it over the side. “Empty,” he said. “I switched the new tank while you were down there.” Then he picked up the shotgun and threw it over. I tossed my pistol after it.

But it didn’t seem to help. We had the three of us, plus my mother, Hawk, and five younger children. We weren’t going to gain any altitude. In fact, we seemed to be sinking, I realized, as the tip of a spruce tree scraped the tip of one of the biplane’s wings.

“I’ll cut the plane free,” Amira said. “It’s the only way.”

“But we’re not heading toward home,” Hedges said. “We’re heading further into Canada.”

“There’s a break in the trees up ahead,” I said, “and the wind’s shifting toward it. I think we’ll miss the hill and end up over a clearing. We can set down in a field and walk home. Or not,” I added, my optimism evaporating as I saw what was there. It was a lake, not a field. And it was big. “Can you guys swim?” I asked the children.

“Not the younger ones,” Hawk said.

Chapter 32
Must Go Down

Ideas? Amira asked.

I shook my head. Hedges still looked close to tears. My mom got up and looked over the side. “Why are you carrying a plane?” she asked.

“We need the propellor,” I explained. “So we don’t just drift with the wind.”

“Better to drift than crash,” she said. “Cut it loose.”

I looked at Hedges. “What do you think?”

“If we have to,” he said, “but...” He pointed. As we skimmed over the treetops on our approach to the lake, we could see a dirt road off to the far right side of the lake, maybe a half mile away—and a pickup truck was rolling to a dusty stop there.

In back of the truck: Men with guns.

“I think they’re following us,” Amira said with a frown.

“We have to gain altitude,” Hedges said. Even if they don’t shoot us out of the sky, we’re going to crash into the trees when we get to the far side of the lake.”

“Unless you cut the plane loose!” My mom snapped. “Like I told you!”

Hedges winced. Although he’d known my mother for years, she didn’t usually unleash her anger around him. Usually she reminded both of us how wonderful she thought he was compared to me.

“Let him think,” I told her.

“What’s to think about? It’s obvious what we have to do! There’s only one choice!”

“There’s always more than one choice,” I said, my voice as calm as I could make it. “Hedges? What are our other options?”

“Well... Do you feel like a swim?”

And that was how it came about that Amira and I stripped down to our T shirts and jeans, with only her hunting knife on her belt for a weapon. Hedges' idea was simple: We, as the strongest fighters and runners, would dive overboard near the far shore to lighten the load and he'd toss the heavy coils of rope over too—the last things in the cockpit aside from the kids and him. But just before jumping, Amira would climb down and start the plane's motor to give Hedges the ability to navigate the balloon again.

We decided we'd sneak toward the men in the pickup and wait to see that the balloon cleared the trees. If it didn't, we'd have to ambush them and try to take them all out. I hoped they weren't all Val guards and hunters, or the odds would be unfavorable to say the least.

The balloon was only twenty feet above the water. When Amira and I climbed down onto the biplane, the water looked even closer. I noticed some turtles barking on a floating log and thought, *That's what we are now. Slow as a turtle.*

Amira kicked the engine to life and the big propeller blew wind back at us. With a wave up at Hedges and the kids, who were leaning over to watch, we dived.

We hit the water side by side with a swoosh, but as I was slicing back toward the surface, I heard two more plops followed by swooshes. Were they shooting at us already? I'm didn't think they were close enough. Damn.

When I surfaced, Amira's head was breaking the water closer to shore, and stupid I know but I couldn't help thinking how beautiful she looked with her shiny black hair all slicked back by the water and her rich golden brown skin covered in water droplets and—

Falcon! It was a shout inside my head from her. Damn! I was getting distracted. I began to swim toward shore, but was startled by a smaller head breaking the surface just in front of me. “Hawk! What are you doing!” I sputtered.

“I'm going to help,” she said matter of factly. “I can't let them get my friends.” And with her eyes all golden and fierce and her fangs out, she looked like she was ready for anything.

“Okay,” I said. “Let's go.”

What I really didn't expect, what totally startled me, was the next person to pop up. My mother! Which might have been a nice surprise, except she wasn't transformed and she seemed to be about to drown. She was gasping and gulping water instead of air, and her arms were flailing wildly.

"Stop that!" I hissed. "They'll see us!" Then I grabbed her the way they'd taught us in lifeguard training (one of my summer jobs in past years) and began pulling her toward the beach. Once she got her feet under her I let go of her and she splashed out of the water and stood bent over on the sand, gasping to get her breath back. After a minute to recover, she started wringing out her soaking wet dress.

"Mom!" I growled.

"I, I can't shift," she said, looking panicked.

Amira? I asked, but not out loud.

Amira came quietly over to my mom. Placing a hand on her back, she closed her eyes. I don't know what thoughts or messages she shared with her, but all of a sudden my mom's eyes went wild and her teeth slide down and she let out a deep, throaty growl. I stumbled back, alarmed.

Amira turned to me. "Keep her quiet," she hissed. "And Hawk? Stay behind Falcon."

"Then all four of us were running along the beach, close to the trees for cover, until Amira held up her hand for us to stop, then led us to a boulder on a little sandy point sticking out into the lake. We stood behind it, hoping we hadn't been seen yet.

I turned to make sure the balloon was out of sight.

It wasn't.

One yellow wing and a wheel of the biplane showed over a tall spruce tree, and above them loomed the huge balloon, which was not exactly camouflaged in the bright morning sunlight because someone had thought it would be festive to make it out of alternating stripes of red, gold and purple fabric. Jesus! It was the most noticeable thing in all of Canada. And it seemed to be stuck.

“Someone’s got to free it,” I said. It looked like a mooring rope had been dangling from the basket and gotten tangled in the tree.

“They’re coming,” Amira warned. She was looking around the rock toward the armed men. “In fact they’re running this way. They must want to catch up with the balloon.

“All right, let’s think about this,” I said, trying to channel some of Hedges problem solving prowess. But I didn’t come up with anything. It was a pressurefull situation.

My mom put a hand on Hawk’s shoulder. “Can you climb?” she asked.

Hawk didn’t wait. She sprinted toward the base of the tree and when she reached it, began to scramble up it. From the pace of her progress, it seemed pretty obvious that she’d climbed trees before. Probably all her life. We did too down on our side of the border. I mean, what else are kids going to do when the grow up in the middle of nowhere with almost nothing else but trees all around?

Amira pointed toward another bolder, mostly overgrown with tall blueberry bushes. It was maybe a dozen feet away at the edge of the forest, and the two bolders formed a narrow passage where the beach went past—and so would the men, I assumed. “Perfect place for an ambush,” she said. “I’ll go over there and you two stay here. Don’t come out until they’re here! We have to get in close or they’ll just shoot us.”

“I nodded. but my mom frowned. Some of the fierceness had left her eyes and her fangs were part way back into her gums.

“Mom! Are you ready?”

“I’ve never fought anyone before,” she admitted. “My high school sport was band.”

“That’s not even a sport, is it?” I snapped, but Amira asked, “What did you do in band?”

“Baton twirler”, she said. “And I was quite good at— oh!” Amira had pushed a stout driftwood branch into her hands. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do to help.”

No shots rang out when Amira slipped into the foliage behind the other boulder. I hoped that meant they were still too far away to see where we were hiding.

And then we waited.

Hawk sent us some good news: *They're free!* Then she added, *I'm coming back to fight with you.*

Amira and I both sent her a hard *No!* At the same time. I hoped she would listen.

Then a sour scent alerted me that the Val fighters were near. I couldn't see Amira but I assumed she had smelled them too.

My mom was leaning on the driftwood stick like it was a cane and staring in the wrong direction. Probably trying to see the balloon but I it was already out of sight. I ignored her and focused all my senses on the advancing men. I could hear them panting and the sound of their boots in the sand. Running hard. Going in blind. I was thankful they didn't seem to be big on strategy.

As the first two came past, I leapt out and wrapped my arms around one for long enough to slash his neck. Spitting out the horrible taste of his blood, I rolled low in the sand and kicked the other guy's legs out from under him. Then I grabbed the pistol the first man had dropped and, still low down, fired at the next three, who were fumbling for their guns. They went down in the sand.

A *thunk* behind me made me glance over my shoulder. My mom was standing over the Val I'd kicked. Turns out h'd gotten up with a semiautomatic pistol in his hand, but his eyes went glassy and he fell hard on his side, the gun falling to the sand without discharging. Guess my mom could swing a mean baton after all.

Amira was tangling with four more men and I heard several shots ring out. I jumped high and landed on the shoulders of the nearest, taking him down quickly, while Amira continued to work fast in the middle of the remaining group of three. They were trying to line up a shot her but by staying in close to them, she was making that extremely difficult.

One of the men backed away and went down into a crouch, then raised his gun, aiming point blank at Amira.

I pushed off hard and dove toward him, but with the soft sand under my feet I didn't get as much speed as I needed to...

Boom! A high powered rifle went off from somewhere behind him. I assumed it was aimed at me. Damn! Well, at least we bought enough time for Hedges to get the kids away.

Wait. Huh?

The man had fallen face down on the sand. Had someone hit him by accident? I scrambled back to my feet and stared up the beach at the last man standing. He was holding a long hunting rifle, but not aiming at us. Wait, what the heck..?

“Grandpa!” Amira exclaimed, sounding even more surprised than I was.

“Look out!” I shouted, and he spun around and got another shot off before the Val guard coming toward him could. Probably the driver of the truck, who must’ve hurried after the others when the fighting began.

And then they were all down and it was again.

“Are you all right?” Amira’s grandfather asked.

Amira shrugged. “Alive, but no thanks to your Canadian friends.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize—“

“Let’s not waste time talking,” my mom cut in. “We have to go. It’s a long hike to ___”

“Mom!” I cut in. “Never mind where!”

“Okay,” she said, “but is he coming with us? Do you want to escape?” she added, addressing him.

He shook his head. “I’ve got a lot of people from our community who are going to need my help. Turns out Canada isn’t quite the friendly refuge I thought it would be.”

“No shit,” Amira snapped.

“I’m really sorry it didn’t work out better,” he said.

She shrugged. “Thanks for picking the right side, though,” she added. “Even if it was kind of extremely late.”

He nodded. “You’re family,” he said.” he said. “And don’t worry, I’ll make up some story when I get back without the them. I’ll say they headed off into the northern forests to track you, and told me to take the truck back and wait for word.”

“Then you better drag the bodies out of sight,” my mother said with a frown. “It doesn’t look ready for a showing!”

Once a realtor always a realtor, I thought, but she was right.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

And then Amira turned and jogged off into the woods in the direction the balloon had gone, and Hawk and I followed. After a little while I could hear my mother coming after us. She must have stayed transformed because she was keeping up with us even though Amira was going at wolf-pack pace.

Speaking of wolves, after an hour or so I smelled the pack. They’d come back over the border to look for me and when we came upon them in a clearing, they yipped and danced happily around me, while Amira waited with an indulgent smile, and Hawk reached out her hand and let them lick her to get her scent.

My mom never really warmed up to the wolves, but she did seem to appreciate their escort, and she looked less nervous when a dozen of them were running with us, forming defensive lines on either side. Friendship with wolves does come with some unique privileges.

But that’s us. We were finally in the clear, and headed back home, such as it was. The real question, though, was what had become of Hedges, the kids, and the gigantic balloon?

Chapter 33
And So It Ends

Hedges isn't very good at hearing or sending thoughts, but then again, he's not from a weird subspecies of ancient hunters so it's kind of impressive he can do it at all. I kept trying to reach out to him as we ran south, but had no luck. I even asked the wolves to try to find the balloon, but it must not have been near us. How good time could they have been making? But the wind had risen out of the north, so maybe they made really good time, I dunno.

Amira stopped us for a break and a drink of water when we reached the northern edge of her lake. We were careful to avoid the few summer cabins there, staying in thick woods until we reached a rocky stretch of shore where the swimming and boating wasn't good so nobody had built cabins or roads.

It was while we were resting there that we spotted the balloon. Hawk saw it first. It wasn't across the lake to our left (the more deserted part that was dotted with rocky islands, including the one where Amira's Hide was located). No, it was way off to the right, in the hazy distance, over the docks and buildings of town. What the?

"He's way off course!" Amira complained. "Looks like he's going to crash land at the marina!"

"You don't know Hedges," I said, trying to sound confident, but honestly I wasn't feeling very good about things at that moment.

Then the balloon began to rise. It climbed high over town with that ridiculous biplane still under it. I wondered how he could get that much lift with a full basket of passengers and a biplane. Maybe he'd fiddled with the burner to make it hotter, which added another anxiety to the large list of them because I wouldn't put it past him to blow the whole thing up. I wasn't there with a fire extinguisher, was I?

That, it turns out, was just the first surprise.

The second was even more startling. The biplane began to fall!

It nosed down and began to spin and spiral like it was going to crash right into town, in fact it seemed to be heading for a tall steeple belonging to one of the churches on Main Street. It was the tallest and narrow and white, very distinctive. The Unitarian

church next door to the Moose and Squirrel, a popular bar. But never mind about that, the point was, Hedges was crashing!

It was too far to see people but I imagined that the stores and offices must be emptying out as they flooded into the streets to see what the noise was. Even from our distance the of the motor was impressively loud.

Down, down, down...and up! The nose came up as the plane fell fast enough to finally reach flight speed, and then Hedges was pulling out of his uncontrolled dive and whipping over Main Street. Because of course it had to be him. No plane would do that on its own without a pilot.

He banked and passed low over downtown again, then headed off to the south, tipping his wings from side to side as if to say goodbye.

“It’s gotta be Hedges, the crazy bastard,” I said. “He was itching to fly the damn plane.”

“But what about the balloon?” Hawk asked.

It was so high now that it looked a lot smaller. I hoped he had a plan to get the kids down from there.

Finally we lost sight of both the balloon and the plane.

“Show’s over,” Amira said. “Come on.” And then we were jogging through the forest again with the wolves loping along near us. I sent the leader of the pack and her mate ahead of us to scout because we didn’t want to run into any humans who might talk later and give our location away. But it was quiet afternoon and no one was out in the woods. After all, we were miles from the nearest road and it wasn’t hunting season, not for humans anyway. Of course the wolves were always on the lookout for deer and when we came across fresh tracks the leader sent two wolves off to find out where the herd was, so we could take one this evening for dinner.

We kept our silence all the way around the lake until we got to the little cover where Amira had hidden her canoe the first time we went to the Hide. We were all worrying about Hedges and the kids, and eager to push on to the Hide to see if they made it there too.

When we got to the little cove, my mom hurried down the beach to get a drink, but Amira hissed, “Get back to cover!” She’d spotted something strange. Two canoes were pulled up neatly on the sand with life jackets and paddles in them, but no sign of their occupants.

Picnickers way out here? I asked her.

Maybe, she sent back, but the canoes look familiar.

Familiar? I repeated. *What do you mean?*

They’re from the Hide. We’re the only folks on the lake who paint our canoes and kayaks black. And I recognize the life jackets. We use the same type of vests in our summer training program.

So these canoes are actually from your boathouse?

She nodded.

“Well then, let’s go,” I said out loud. I had faith in Hedges, even if they didn’t.

We moved stealthily, eyeing the woods with suspicion as we slid the boats into the water and got in. My mom insisted we put the life jackets on first, which made Amira roll her eyes, but soon we were paddling toward the island.

Amira was piloting the lead boat, with my mom not really doing much with her paddle up front, while I was piloting the second canoe from the rear seat with Hawk proving to be good with her paddle up front. Amira didn’t land at the first spot with a beach, she circled the island instead, and I could tell she was scoping it out carefully.

We made it all the way around to the long dock and the big boathouse, but she went past them and pulled up to an older looking, smaller boathouse.

The door to the water was open. Within the dimly lit interior, I could see lots more canoes and kayaks, most of the on racks on the side walls, and the largest ones hanging from the ceiling on ropes with pulleys.

We nosed in and climbed cautiously onto the docks on either side, and Amira and I tied the bow lines to cleats so our canoes wouldn’t float away. Then she signaled for us to wait while she went to a cabinet and punched a code into a modern keypad mounted on

an old wood door. When it clicked open, she took a short sword down from a rack and closed it again. “Just in case,” she said.

“What about me?” I asked.

“You already *are* a deadly weapon,” she said. “Come on.”

“Mom, why don’t you go last?” I suggested. “To protect us from anyone trying to sneak up in us from the rear.”

“Oh! Okay, if you think it would be helpful,” my mom said. (Truth is she wasn’t very good in a fight and I didn’t want her in the way of things got busy, but I couldn’t tell her that.)

Hawk picked up a short fishing gaff with a vicious looking barbed hook at one end, then came right after me. I was impressed by her. The kid was learning rapidly. Come to think of it, we all were. Can’t say any of us had ever been in such extreme situations before, not even Amira with her summer training sessions.

Amira led us up an overgrown narrow path to a side door of the Hide, and tapped a code into the security pad beside it. When it clicked, she gripped the handle tightly and turned to eye me. *We go in together, fast and low, and take out anyone who tries to stop us! Ready?*

Born ready, I sent back. And, to my surprise, Hawk added, *Me too*. Then Amira threw the door open and we burst into the big common room with its dark red rug and comfy armchairs, Amira with her sword, me with my fangs and a growl, and Hawk with that scary hook raised high. There was a scream or two as six very startled children jumped up, one of them, I think the youngest girl, continuing to emit a piercing scream.

Hawk was overjoyed to see them safe and sound. Dropping her fishing gaff, she rushed into the middle of the room and soon had them all in her arms in an excited and confusing group hug.

When things calmed down and we got my mom inside and sitting in a chair with a can of seltzer water (they stocked her favorite, cranberry lime), I called for quiet. “All right,” I said. “Tell us how you got here and what happened.”

They all started talking at once.

“Hang on,” Hawk said. “Oliver, you go first.” He was the older of the two boys and he soon explained that Hedges had piloted their balloon to the island and landed it on the dock. Then he sent them off to find canoes, including a big one which they used to tow two canoes to the beach where we found them. After that, he let them into the front door of the Hide because of course he remembered the security code, being good with things like that.

Finally, Hedges told them to make themselves comfortable and wait for the others to come. “We ate candy bars!” a younger girl named Amalie said, sounding very pleased with how things had turned out.

“We’ll have to make you a proper meal for dinner,” Amira said. “Did Hedges say where he was going next?”

They shook their heads. Seems like he just took off again in the balloon, and didn’t tell anyone what his plan was. I hoped he was all right.

That was about the time when we heard a motor coming our way.

“Airplane?” Amira guessed.

“Wait with the children,” I told my mom. “And be ready for anything!”

Then Amira and I hurried outside and down to the boathouse dock, where we could see most of the lake and its surroundings. We couldn’t see the plane, though. The sound of its motor had faded to a distant hum. We were about to go back in, assuming it was just some random plane passing over, when the sound of the motor began to increase, as if it had turned back for another pass. “Hope it’s not from that damn agency,” I said.

Suddenly it flashed over us, quite low, with a deafening roar. It was a bright yellow biplane with red stripes on its wings. Hedges!

He circled out over the lake, then came straight toward us, almost touching the water. “How’s he going to land?” I asked.

Then the plane *was* touching the water, and two big fans of white spray shot out on either side.

Amira grabbed my arm and tugged me to the side as the plane came rushing toward the dock, propeller first—but it stopped a few feet away and the engine turned off. A perfect water landing.

We went to the edge of the dock and looked down. Strapped to the plane's two wheels were two kayaks. Figures! He'd converted it into a seaplane.

Hedges climbed out and tossed me one end of a rope. "Pull me into the boathouse," he said. We gotta keep this beauty out of sight until I can get it repainted.

And that was how we came back to Amira's island with a bunch of little kids and a new toy for Hedges to play with.

My mom stayed a few days, but there was nothing keeping her from going back home since nobody suspected her of being Val and she hadn't been on the government list. I guess they assumed my dad had passed it on to me, and he was long gone. Anyway, Mom's her job wasn't going to get done without her, as she said. So she agreed to be our in-town spy, and to help Amira buy groceries for our larger-than-we'd-expected group. Amira had access to the Hide's bank accounts and there was a fair amount saved up, but every contribution helps, right?

As for her parents, they decided not to come back from California. The local Val out there helped them get new identities and they rented a double wide trailer with a view of the ocean and only talked to Amira on burner cellphones. I could tell Amira was a little sad and hurt that they hadn't rushed back to help her, but we had each other's backs, so we were good.

Hedges insisted that the kids study math and engineering with him for two hours each weekday, and he made me teach them English for an hour too. Honestly, I enjoyed doing it, but I pretended I was annoyed just to have some fun with him.

Ice came to the lake and the wolves could run out to visit us whenever they wanted. I helped them with their hints a couple times a week, both to make sure there was enough food for all, and to keep in shape. Sometimes Amira hunted with me too, and it was exhilarating to race through the frozen forest beside her. I wished we could do that more often.

Hedges and I stole his truck back from the police yard where it had been locked in by Bert. If Bert figured out it was us (and who the Hell else would want it?), he chose to look the other way. He wasn't a fan of the agency, even though they came through town

every now and then to bother him and poke around. But they never came back out to the Hide, fortunately. I guess that just seemed too obvious a place to hide. Unless you thought about it. I mean, it is called the Hide, right? But they probably didn't think that hard about it, so that was good.

We were an odd but happy crew, a kind of boarding school of sorts, except we ran it ourselves and there were no adults. Well, sometimes my mom came out to deliver a batch of home made chocolate chip cookies and update us on news from town—and to urge us to eat more vegetables but she never seemed to bring vegetables did she? Other than that, we were on our own.

We spent a lot of time that winter in the Hide's big gym, teaching the kids karate and weapons use. They got really good at sparring with sticks and Hedges even modified a flight simulator program to teach them how to fly the biplane, but we never let them actually go up in it, even though he took it out for night flights sometimes. And sometimes I'd go up with him to admire the stars and the moon and get some very fast-moving fresh air.

That's my story, or most of it. The parts I think are interesting enough to tell. Oh, but I suppose you want to know what happened with Amira and me. I guess I should tell you about that too.

Chapter 34
Us

So the thing is, I was pretty sure I had more than a teenage crush on Amira. I was in love with her, and it definitely seemed like she liked me too. So the prospect of spending the winter with her in the coolest of facilities, and with no one to tell me what not to do, seemed like a great opportunity to explore this whole relationship thing.

At least it seemed that way to me. But apparently, not to her.

“I’m sorry, Falcon,” she said. Out loud. We were sitting side by side on the snowy dock, watching the sun set and enjoying some time together after a busy day training the kids. “But,” she continued, “I can’t be your girlfriend, you know.”

“What!” I was flabbergasted. Not only because of what she’d just said, but of what I knew she’d been *thinking*. See, we were both really good at reading the other’s thoughts, more so as the weeks passed, and I knew she’d been thinking about kissing me. And I’d just taken hold of her hand, and she hadn’t pulled away. She must’ve known I was thinking about kissing her too.

Then she pulled her hand away. “You’re still fifteen,” she said with a frown.

“Sixteen in a month!” I pointed out.

“True, but I’m twenty-one and you’re under-age.”

“Wait, don’t tell me you’re suddenly all law abiding, Amira! How many people have we killed?”

“None who weren’t trying to kill us first.”

“Are you serious?!?”

“About us not being murderers? Absolutely.”

“No, about us, uh, about us not, you know...”

Not kissing? she sent. She knew that’s what I was thinking about, of course.

“And not sharing a bedroom,” she said, this time out loud, which made it seem all the more final. “I can’t do that too you. You aren’t old enough to be in a serious relationship, Falc.”

“I thought...” I couldn’t go on. *Damn!* I thought, hopefully only to myself, *F-ing stupid and completely not like me, but my tears are actually threatening to well up.*

“I feel the same way you do,” she said softly, taking my hand again. “We just have to be patient. Okay?”

“When government agents might try to kill us again tomorrow?”

“Even with that possibility,” she said, giving my hand a squeeze. “And you know the good part of being young?”

I wasn’t seeing it, but she smiled and pressed on. “It means we have lots of time!”

“Time to wait,” I said bitterly. “All the waiting time in the f-ing world!”

“Yup. But you’ll be sixteen soon. Maybe that’s a good time to begin doing a little light dating.”

“With you?” I asked.

“Sure, if you still want to then. Why not?”

And then we both smiled. I guess it’s good to have things to look forward to.

Then we got up and dusted the snow off. It was time to go in and help Hedges with dinner. We’d left him busy in the huge commercial kitchen with his funny old flowered apron on. Hawk was there to help him, but we knew he’d appreciate it if we’d get the other kids seated and the serving bowls set out.

I realized as we worked together to get the cheerful but not very orderly group seated, that waiting wasn’t all *that* bad, actually. I guess it beats being chased constantly by murderous vampire hunters. Truth is, we had it pretty darn good that winter.

As for what happened next, that’s a story for another time. I hope you know how to wait too?

The End

Afterward
A Lot More Trouble?

You know the old saying, ‘gone but not forgotten’? Yeah, well, too bad it was the opposite way with my Great, Great, Great whatever Uncle Wolfgang. There’d been no sign of him all winter so we’d kind of forgotten about him. However, it turns out he was forgotten but not gone.

I’m not going to tell you all about it now, but it was Bert, the police chief, who first warned us he was back in town with another group of agents in dark suits and black vans. And, according to the folded note Bert slipped Hedges when they passed each other outside the diner late one night, they’d checked into a luxury hotel a few towns over where the rich folks like to go. The agents had asked to use Bert’s police station as their base again, but Bert had told them absolutely no—and he had a court order from the local judge saying they had been so destructive and lawless last time that they were never to set foot in it again. Undaunted, they simply took over the police station and town hall in another town about twenty miles away. Bert he figured they’d be coming around soon enough to renew their search for us, and he didn’t want to see anyone else get hurt.

It meant we had to go on the run again. It also meant that, if we got away, there might very well be a Blood, Book #2.

About **the author**: Ella (Elizabeth) Bathory’s name has a long pedigree with hints of the supernatural, tracing all the way back to a royal countess of the same name, about whom, according to the author, unfair and biased rumors have swirled for centuries. However, regardless of the truth of it, having someone suspected of being the most notorious and ruthless of all nonfictional vampires as an eponymic ancestor has always inclined Ella toward writing about the topic. Here they tell us a story that, while entirely fictional, may actually be closer to the historical truth than any stories in the Dracula tradition, and might even help set the record straight when it comes to ancient rumors about vampirism. Some people are uniquely talented and seem to others to have almost supernatural smiles or powers. Ms. Bathory loves to explore this phenomenon in her young adult and middle grade novels.

Media alert: She does not give interviews. Address all correspondence with the author to her publisher.

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