

"The question," he murmurs, "is this. Knowing what you know, standing where you stand, do you pull the trigger? You can try to make it more complex if it makes it easier, but that really is the question. Do you pull the trigger? It's that simple, little girl."

I swallow hard, trying to block out the noises. The *smells*. The gun wavers for a moment before I get it under control again. Hopefully he won't notice.

"What are you made of, little girl?" he asks, aping a smile. It *isn't* a smile, it doesn't even *look* like a smile, but the intention, the fakery is there. "Moment of truth."

It took me a moment to realize where I was. Lying in bed, at home. Looking around, I could see, but it wasn't quite *seeing*. I knew where everything was, I knew what colors were there and how bright it was, everything you would expect to see.

But when I actually opened my eyes, there was nothing. Just blackness, overwhelming and absolute.

The same as it was every time I'd woken up recently. I'd had to move out as a result. Couldn't stay in the dorms, couldn't move back in with my parents. Not when every morning found me blanketed in a thick, unnatural shadow, along with half of the room.

I couldn't even leave a window open at night. Not when anyone walking by might glance in and see something that they really weren't supposed to see.

I got up, dismissing the shadows that lingered around me. Much of my awareness of the room went with them, my knowledge of the lighting and the colors. Some of it remained, a vague impression of light and darkness, but it was so much dimmer when it wasn't dark.

In the bathroom, I left the lights off. It was dark enough inside that my powers could give me a decent idea of what I was looking at, and there was enough light coming in from the bedroom that I could see well enough with my eyes. It was the perfect illumination level for me, *dim* rather than dark.

Looking in the mirror, I thought I could see a cloud of darkness behind me, like ink spreading through water. I glanced back to check whether I'd actually done it, without meaning to.

Nothing there. When I looked back to the mirror, there was nothing there, either.

I wasn't losing control of my power, then. Just psychosis. Just normal, garden-variety post-traumatic stress disorder. It was almost a relief.

"You can't do it," he says, taking another slow step forward. His voice is expressive, in contrast to the blank, unnaturally still face, the expressions that are imitations of human expressions, by

something that hadn't ever seen them before. His *voice* is tender, caring, gentle. "Even knowing all that you do, you can't do it. Can't bring yourself to pull that trigger."

I don't look away from him. Don't *let* myself look away, for fear of what I'll see. The people in here, the *things* he did to them.

"Yes, I can," I say, trying to suppress the waver in my voice. "If you don't stop moving, I *will*."

He pastes another fake smile across his face and takes another step. "No, you won't," he says. "You don't have it in you, little girl."

"Can you help me with something?" Mike asked, handing me a sandwich wrapped in foil. He'd taken to bringing food to these little meetings. He didn't have much money to spare, but he had more than I did. I still hadn't paid last month's rent, and it was only going to take so long before the landlord got tired of that and rent ceased to be an issue.

"Depends," I said, tearing open the foil and ripping into the sandwich. The bread was dense, the meatballs dry. But it was calories, and that was what I cared about right now. "It's not a vampire, is it? I don't think I can handle another vampire so soon."

I looked around the park and, sure enough, I could see a family. Man and woman, both young, two children, both female. It was almost painfully reminiscent of the scene in the vampire's lair. We'd gotten that family out, mostly because Mac was there to help, but they weren't the same as they had been before. There were things *missing*, physically and mentally.

"Not a vampire," Mike said, looking the same place I was. He had been there. We almost always worked together. He had the sensory capacity to work in my darkness, and his powers covered threats that mine didn't. He dealt with the more abstract, mental and spiritual threats, while I took care of the immediate physical danger. "A demon."

I raised my eyebrows at that. "A demon?" I asked. "Fire and brimstone? Shouldn't you be calling an exorcist for that?"

He looked at me, and then looked away. "It's not that kind of demon," he said. "Come on. I'll show you."

"You can't bring yourself to pull that trigger," he says. "It's not in you. You can't make yourself make the hard choice, can you, little girl?" He takes another step, more sideways than forward. Not getting closer to me. "Can't do what you know needs done."

I open my mouth to deny it, but nothing comes out. I make the mistake of looking down, and almost gag as I force myself to look back at him.

He is smiling again, a warped, broken smile. It's a smile, a human expression, but there is something fundamentally, profoundly *wrong* about it. "You can't unsee it," he comments idly. "Once you see it, it'll be with you forever. Even if you try to forget."

"I know," I say quietly.

Three dead. My reaction to that was strange, even to me. The emotional part, the *normal* part thought that it was horrible. The cold, logical, rational part said that it wasn't bad. Not nearly as bad as it could be.

Not as bad as it *had been*, other times.

"How'd it kill them?" I asked, dreading the answer. I'd heard from some of the others that they felt a morbid curiosity about that sort of thing, but I didn't. I asked because I might *need* to know, not because there was any part of me that *wanted* to.

He looked at me and then looked away. "You don't want to know," he said. "Demons are...there are different kinds. They embody *concepts*, and how bad they are depends on what kind of concept they are. Some of them aren't really bad at all, they just seem that way if you look at them out of context. But this one is bad. It's as bad as it gets."

"Okay," I said. If he said I didn't want to know, I believed him. "So what's the problem if they killed it already?"

"That's just it," he said. "They didn't. Six hours later, one of the policeman on site killed his mother-in-law and then shot himself. Different method, but enough in common to make you think twice about it. He bled out on the way to the hospital, and then the next day one of the EMTs was on a domestic abuse call and killed the abuser. Again, just enough similarity in the methodology to make some connections."

"So the demon's changing hosts," I said, thinking it through. "It uses one until it's useless or dying, then moves to another one. It takes time to twist them far enough to be useful, and when it does there's still something left of them. Enough to choose targets in a way that makes sense to them."

"Right," he said. "And I think I know the next one. A bystander at the scene, who's holed up across town. Hostage situation, in the worst way."

"You sure this is a good idea?" I asked. "I mean, if it gets into one of us...we could do a lot more damage than some random EMT."

"I can keep it from jumping hosts again," he said. "I just need you to take it down while I do. Kill the host when it can't change, and it should be sent back to the spirit world."

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

He isn't smiling anymore. He doesn't need to be. "I could fix that," he says. "Let me in, and I could make you into what you need to be. Make you harder, make it so you can make the choices you need to. I'd even let you go after. No harm done. I promise." He smiles again, and it's a parody, a *caricature* of a real smile. "You know we keep our promises."

I look away again, intentionally looking at the victims for the second time. There are three of them, two men and a child. One of the men is dead, hanging from the ceiling from ropes tied around his ankles, bled out from two dozen small cuts on his face and hands.

He's the lucky one.

The child is burned, burned badly. The monster heated metal wires on the stove and pressed them against her skin, branding her. Over and over again, until it was impossible to see what shapes the burns had initially been, they overlapped so much. She'd been cut as well, but the knife had been heated, so that the wounds were cauterized. She isn't bleeding.

But she is alive. She is *awake*. She'd have been screaming, if she still had a tongue.

The other man is behind me. I kept walking past him, specifically so that I wouldn't have any chance of seeing him again. My power—my *magic*, as much as I hate to use that word—still tells me what it looks like, but it lacks the visceral immediacy of seeing it with my own eyes.

But now I look back and see him again. He is lying on the ground, on his stomach, with his arms and legs tied down in an X shape. He pulled against the bindings, going past the point of rope burn until he started tearing the skin from his body, and just kept going after that.

The reason for his struggles is obvious. There are two holes in his back. The monster sliced him open with a hot knife, opening long gashes on either side of his spine. Then he had reached in and broken off the man's ribs from the spine, pulling them aside, and pulled the man's lungs out, resting them on his back.

I'd heard of it before. The blood eagle, they'd called it. The cruelest means of execution the Vikings could come up with.

Except it was supposed to kill you before they'd actually gotten the lungs out of your body. I didn't think this man had been that lucky.

The room stinks of blood, of feces. Underlying that is the sharper scent of vinegar and alcohol. He'd mixed them together with salt and poured it over the wounds.

*Make it so that you can make the choices you need to*, he'd said.

"You already did," I said, looking back to him.

He smiles again. "There's a piece of me in you now," he says conversationally. "Even if you try to forget. You can't unsee this."

I pull the trigger, ending his life. It might have been just a bystander before, but you can't come back from something like that. The demon broke him, twisted him, and there was nothing on earth that could bring him back. Mike had said that, and after seeing the things he'd *done* here, I believed it.

I shot the girl as well, and then went to throw up.