

INVISIBLE PRISON

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the readers who have supported me along the way. Thank YOU!

Acknowledgment

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CHAPTER 1

Sometimes being a witch paid off. Today wasn't one of those times, not when facing a prison yard of nasty women who made mean their only reason for existence.

Worse? They weren't after me. Mean didn't equate with stupid, and it had taken most of the inmates here only a few days to know not to mess with Alex Noziak. That was me, Idaho-born, Native American on my father's side, convicted killer. And they didn't even know I was part-witch, part-shaman. Most folks could sense trouble if they paid attention.

Nah, these bullies targeted those who couldn't, wouldn't, or didn't fight back. Victims-in-waiting like the unfortunately named Been-There. Her parents should've known sticking a name like that on any kid was like painting a neon bulls-eye on her back.

Been-There had been at Pocatello Women's Correctional Center, PWCC for those who didn't like the mouthful, three months longer than my two months, four days, and twelve hours, which should have sharpened up her survival skills. Heck, twenty-four hours should've done that, but some people were born to be punching bags. Been-There was one of them. If I had to guess she was probably a tree-sprite or one of the lesser fae beings. There were so many it was hard to recognize any but the most obvious. Maybe she was even a pixie-gentle but clueless.

Not that anyone else but me knew she was non-human. For most of us with special gifts and non-human blood, keeping our heads down and our gene pool secret was the only way we survived. Unless you went on the talk show circuit, but humans didn't really believe what they were shown so they accepted those non-humans as fakes. It kept all of us rubbing shoulders instead of slaughtering one another.

I didn't really know Been-There. Her last four months had been spent in the medical facility with a high-risk pregnancy. Idaho wasn't one of the states that allowed a mother to keep her child while in prison, so two days after her daughter was born, Been-There lost her to a foster family. She'd been a mess ever since. Which is why her second day out of the infirmary she stood in an open yard that was more dirt than grass, surrounded by a circle of snarling women looking to take out their anger on the easiest target.

Crap and double crap.

Not my business I told myself for the hundredth time as I watched women in groups of two and three hustle and chin-nod one another into corralling Been-There, like dark thunder clouds roiling on the horizon. The mob-mentality inmates were led by Big Mad Martha. Now there was a woman named right.

BMM lived to torment and she was damned good at it. First day I arrived she tried to shake me down, but a quick, sharp banishing spell had her flaring her nostrils and backing off. You'd think I'd have learned my lesson playing with magic that could backfire, but sometimes you had to pull on whatever resource was at hand. Besides I hadn't killed her, which happened the last time I called on my dark-tinged magic.

All magic came at a price, and straddling the line between white, or good magic, and dark magic could be a very slippery slope. I knew; it was why I was here.

Murder. In a world where non-humans were acknowledged, it should have been justifiable manslaughter; a rogue Were had been about to kill my brother, who'd been in the process of shifting into his wolf form. But what human court was going to believe in Weres, shifters, and killer witches? And that was the tip of the iceberg.

Last fall I'd summoned a death demon and then sent it away before any humans arrived on scene. My magic was so rusty that I'd been damned lucky I hadn't killed my brother along with the Were. I wasn't lucky in that the death demon had decapitated the Were after it had disemboweled him. So when the cops showed up I was standing in a pool of blood looking like a psycho killer. I'd been convicted on the brutality of the killing, with no way to clear my name without exposing the hidden world of black magic, demons and non-humans. A lose-lose situation.

But that was then and this was now. Sweat dampened my back in spite of the chill of a late February day, and I wondered if saving Been-There were going to do either of us any favors. It wasn't like protecting Been-There was going to win me any points with the Council of Seven, the

governing group of non-humans and preternaturals. The same council that was letting me rot here. Their mandate was do what needed to be done to keep the status quo with humans, even if that meant locking an innocent witch away for life.

Sure Been-There was Native American like I was, or half of me, but that didn't mean she was my BFF or that I owed her anything. Maybe getting the snot beat out of her might save her life in the long term here.

Nah, even I couldn't buy that. But messing with a serious whack job like Big Mad Martha wasn't like casting an easy unlocking or a sunshine spell. Though that gave me an idea. Maybe I could call a storm? Something to break the tension, focus the agitated women on something other than drawing blood, specifically Been-There's blood.

Trouble was I didn't have a broom plant, a bowl, salt, rice, or a red candle. But I did have words. And myself.

I stepped toward where Been-There stood, head down, shoulders caved, staring at the scuffed dirt as if she'd find her lost daughter in its grains. Been-There had my straight ink-black hair, but where mine was waist-length and pulled back into a single braid, hers looked like someone had chewed the chin-length ends. The strands barely hid her moon-round face or the sadness staining her features, sadness so deep it tugged at a person's heart.

Except Big Mad Martha didn't have a heart. My gut told me BMM had strong dark demon-blood churning through her DNA, which explained the lack of soul I sensed every time I got next to her. Which wasn't often.

Until now.

"Hey, Martha," I hailed her, catching her and her nearest minions off guard. Only the crazies initiated any dialogue with BMM; she was more the less talk, more beating the crap out of you type of communicator.

A short Latina chick named Rodriguez spit at my feet and snarled, "Nothing to do with you, Noziak. Back away."

"That's where you're wrong." I offered a smile that had nothing to do with pleasantness. "Been-There's a friend of mine."

Even Been-There raised her head at that blatant falsehood. In prison no one had friends. One had allies or enemies and a boatload more of the latter than the former.

Rodriguez smirked, an expression that looked natural on her. "She your prairie rat?" she asked. "Your chole?"

"Nah, I don't need coconuts surrounding me like some," I tossed back, nodding my chin toward Big Mad Martha.

That punched Rodriguez's buttons. No one liked being accused of passing as another race, especially in a segregated stew-pot like the prison system. Being white, black, Chicano, or Native created an immediate identity, one that many times could be your only veil of protection. Shred that veil and you had nothing.

Rodriguez thrust her shoulders tight, notched her chin skywards, and muscled toward me, knowing her posse had her back. Unlike me who was posse-less.

But I wasn't the one who halted Rodriguez from taking a swing at me. Big Mad Martha wanted that right.

I didn't see the left-handed paw rocketing toward me, but damn if I didn't feel the thud of a beefy fist square on my cheek. I'd been kicked by a mule once, and it had taken a week to learn to walk without a limp. This smack made that seem like a love tap.

Rolling ass over teakettle I smashed up against the chain-link fence, spitting dirt and mud. I looked up into a half-circle of scowling women blocking the light above me, most of the circle taken up by Big Mad Martha with a goblin-gleam twist to her lips.

"Been waiting to do that, Noziak." Her smile tightened, telegraphing the shift of her stance. "This, too."

The thick boot caught my right thigh though it'd been aimed at my kidneys, but growing up with four brawling brothers taught me how to read a fight and protect the vital organs. Not that leather to bone didn't still burn like a banshee's brushfire.

BMM's crew was just warming up. Twisting into a fetal curl, hands protecting neck and head, knees defending my core, didn't really defend against the kicks and blows raining down on me. Thuds belted into me, one after another, harder, faster, each more brutal than the last one.

Good news, Been-There was out of harm's way.

Bad news? Much more and I wouldn't survive.

CHAPTER 2

Blood pooled in my mouth, streamed down my face, coated my tongue. Blow followed blow. Where were the damn guards when you needed them?

Some time between my first whimper and groans torn from deep inside of me I heard the sound I'd been listening for. A sweet, harsh blow of a whistle.

Finally.

But the attack didn't stop. Not immediately. And I doubted it'd stop at all if Big Mad Martha had her way. I could hear the guards scuffling with her, tearing her away from her fun.

I didn't uncurl. I couldn't. Like wadded paper I risked tearing apart if I tried.

The hands grabbing me might mean I'd live, but damn if they weren't as rough as BMM and company.

Hauled to my feet a scream tore from me. That gave me a second's respite before I heard a harsh growl. "Hell, Noziak, you trying to get yourself killed?"

The voice belonged to Mingo Martin, one of the least sadistic of the guards. A tall, burly Samoan woman who was one of the few who'd go head to head with Big Mad Martha, but only if there were no other way to slow the gang leader.

"What took you so long?" I whispered between lips puffing up like bad cosmetic surgery.

"I was having tea with the queen," came the reply, followed by a question spoken close to my ear. "Can you walk? Better for you if you can, know what I mean?"

And I did. Showing weakness of any kind only meant more brutality in this closed world. Since I was here for a life sentence, betraying fear or cowering beneath Big Mad Martha's attacks would only earn me more. From her and any other wanna-be control freak.

So I straightened, chomping down on the inside of my lip until I tasted fresh copper gagging me. "Lead the way." I said, knowing my brothers would be proud of me. Walking away from a beating with your head high was sometimes as good as it got.

In prison, it was the only win I'd be getting.

Mingo Martin grabbed my arm as if hustling me, but in fact she and I both knew it was the only thing making it possible to shuffle across the

school-ground sized exercise yard, a trio of guards with billy clubs and snarls the only thing keeping the milling women from moving in on me.

I leaned closer to Martin, murmuring, "Get Been- There out of here."

Martin paused, causing me to stumble and curse. Not loud as I didn't have that much air in my lungs.

"Patterson, you and Frizzoli remove all the new meat from the food chain. Got me?"

Good. New prisoners were often called fish or meat, so Been-There would be safe. For now.

Tomorrow? The day after? Prison meant surviving one day at a time and sometimes one hour at a time. Right now, all my concentration was focused on lifting the next foot.

I never thought I'd be happy to pass through the cell-block door, feeling the drop in temp inside the concrete two-story square.

"You going to live?" Martin mumbled next to me, willing to talk a little louder now that we were out of the worst of it.

"Do I have a choice?" I meant it to come out as a joke, but I hurt too damned bad for that.

"Need the infirmary?"

I gave a weak shake of my head. Taking the easy way out shouted loud and clear I was a lightweight. Besides, staying safe was easier in my isolated cell rather than the open bunks of the hospital wing, a wing staffed by inmates, many loyal to Big Mad Martha. Nothing she'd like better than finishing what she'd started in the yard.

"Have it your way." Martin barked an order to whoever dragged me along by my right side. "Take her to the warden's room. She's got VIP visitors."

That had me dragging my feet, more than they already were. "What?"

"That's right, Noziak, powerful people have pulled some strings to chat with you. Sorry mess that you're in right now. Warden won't like anyone getting the idea we can't protect our guests."

What the warden wanted or didn't want wasn't my problem. Figuring out who wanted to meet with me was.

Only person I'd allowed to visit me since I'd arrived was my sorry assed public defender. Not my dad, not my brothers. No way did I want them to see me here. I knew my holding them off was hurting them, but nowhere as much as it was killing me, a long, slow, tortured dying. But if they had any clue what it was like here they'd bust me out in a heartbeat, consequences be damned. One Noziak behind bars was enough for me.

I sucked in a painful breath, turning toward Martin, "Who?"

“Not local for sure,” came her response. “Don’t look like reporters or do-gooders either.”

That about summed up who visited prisoners. Family, a few friends who usually had their own agendas, newshounds who wanted a fresh angle or a human-interest story, or religious types who thought a few prayers would cut through the desperation coating the pea-green institutional walls.

I saved my breath. I’d see who wanted me soon enough as we headed down the nearest hallway, choked with the scent of cafeteria lunches being prepared. My only positive news, from what I smelled, looked to be that I’d miss out on the boiled cabbage. Lucky me.

Mingo Martin paused in front of the warden’s wooden door, so out of place in a world of concrete and metal. She nodded toward the other prison keeper propping me up, who released me and scampered away. Not a good sign.

“You watch yourself,” Martin said, thundering a knock against the door. “Better than you did in the yard, you hear me?”

Martin was one of the good ones. Someday I’d let her know it. Today all I could manage was an abrupt head nod as the door peeled open.

Ready or not. Mostly not.

I blinked as I adjusted to the change in light. Even in the middle of the day fluorescent lights flooded every inch of the prison. The better to see problems and look the other way. In this room, there was actually a window to the outside. The sight of it stopped me, even though I’d just come in from the yard. I hadn’t realized how much I missed the simple pleasure of looking out a window.

Guess I could have stood there for hours except a man cleared his throat. That jerked me back to the moment.

“Miss Noziak?” the warden asked. I recognized his guttural, central-prairie drawl. “What in the world?”

The last had him standing behind his wooden desk, frowning at me and sharpening his gaze. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I fell,” I said, as I shuffled forward. I would’ve gone for the more standard, I ran into a door, but that took too many words.

“Officer Martin, why is she in this condition?” he demanded, pulling himself up to his six-foot height as if that were going to drive home his anger.

“Altercation in the yard, sir,” came Martin’s response as she shifted to a stiff stance beside me. “Those involved have been segregated.”

“Did you start this?” The warden shot his steely-eyed gaze in my direction.

I didn’t have to answer as Martin jumped in. “No, sir, Prisoner Noziak was the recipient not the aggressor.”

“This true, Noziak?” the warden snarled as if not pleased his guilty party had been snatched away. “You wish to press charges?”

I could feel my brows arch, the only thing on my body not hurting. As if I weren’t going to be a big enough target; pressing charges against fellow inmates meant a death sentence.

“No, sir,” I managed between split lips. “Just a misunderstanding.”

I thought I’d managed a plausible recovery but from the warden’s expression I’d failed.

But he didn’t say anything, just shifted his attention to the other two in the room. Both of whom I’d missed, which told me how badly I’d been beaten. Only the naïve ignored the biggest predators in a small, enclosed space, and I had no doubt these two were top of the food chain.

One, a whipcord lean man, stood against the far wall, a strategic position that allowed him to guard his back and launch into an effective offense if needed. I doubted he needed to often as he gave off that mess-with-me-and-you-die vibe that action heroes and mercenaries have down pat.

But he wasn’t the biggest bad ass present. No, it was the diminutive Amerasian woman seated in one of the two faux-leather visitor’s chairs that had me bracing myself.

I wasn’t sure why. She seemed fully human, but I could be wrong. She held herself still, an elegant tilt to her coiffed black hair, groomed to the nth degree, compact and assured. She looked like a strong wind could topple her and might have been anywhere from mid-thirties to early fifties and holding well. So why did I want to call Big Mad Martha for back up?

“This is Alexis Noziak?” she asked, as if she held reservations. I had no doubt this woman had my social security number, knew my legal file in and out and could probably share my bra size if questioned.

“Alex,” I said, moving forward, an involuntary shift to protect Martin from association with me. Which was just dumb as Martin was the one with the club, mace, and full force of the law behind her.

The seated woman smiled. “Alex, then, a pleasure to meet you.”

Said the spider to the fly.

I glanced at the standing man who watched me with dark, dangerous eyes. No ally there. Then shot the warden a what-the-hell glance. He answered with a slight shrug of his shoulders I bet he didn’t know he gave.

He spoke to the two civilians though. “I’ll leave you three to your business.”

Captain abandoning the ship.

He moved from behind the desk toward the door, sweeping Martin before him in an action so quick I expected a breeze as the door clicked shut behind him.

“Won’t you please take a seat,” the woman murmured, sweeping one elegant hand toward the chair opposite her.

“No, thanks. I’ll stand.”

I might not be able to move quickly or fight off an attack, but I was still alert enough to tell that all of us knew this wasn’t a social call.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Mercenary Guy snarled. “You’re safe.”

Yeah, like I was going to believe him.

I shook my head, cringing at the movement. “I’ll stand all the same.”

I could have sworn his lips twitched upwards, but sweat, or blood, dripped into my eye and I was too focused on wiping it away to be sure.

“The warden informs us you’ve been an exemplary prisoner,” the woman said, easing into business.

I didn’t reply. Exemplary in prison meant you kept your nose clean, didn’t cause problems for the higher-ups and avoided, as much as possible, fist fights with the other prisoners. I’d blotted my copybook on that score today.

Instead of speaking I glared at the petite woman, willing her to get to the point so I could stagger off to my bunk.

“Forgive me,” she said, taking me by surprise as she stood. “I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Ling Mai.”

She extended a hand that had me flinching. I don’t know what I expected, weapon, threat, something, anything except a manicured hand that gave a decent handshake when I finally met her halfway.

“And this is my colleague, M.T. Stone.” She nodded toward the man who didn’t bother with a handshake or any other social pleasantries.

He reminded me of my oldest brother Van, ex-Special Forces, now working some other hush-hush job for some government agency. Right from the start you knew where you stood with Van: mess with him, he’d kill you, otherwise he’d ignore you until he needed to deal with you.

I gave a slight chin nod in acknowledgement—one of those you-don’t-mess-with-me-and-I-won’t-mess-with-you motions. I think Stone and I understood each other perfectly.

But I didn’t have a clue what this Ling Mai woman wanted.

“I understand you’re sentence here is for life,” she said, as if discussing the weather as she returned to her seat.

“Yeah,” I answered with more snarl than I intended. “What of it?”

The other woman angled her head and rocked my world. “Would you be interested in having your sentence commuted?”

CHAPTER 3

There are two things you don't joke about in prison. Getting your sentence commuted is one of them. I hadn't discovered the other one yet.

Instead of answering directly, I glanced at the empty chair next to Ling Mai and bought some time by saying, "Maybe I'll take that seat after all."

Since my sore muscles were already stiffening, shuffling the few feet to the chair and easing down into it took longer than I expected. But it still wasn't long enough to determine if the woman across from me was for real.

"What's the catch?" I asked, bracing myself.

"We need someone with your abilities," she responded. "And in exchange for a year of your services the state of Idaho is willing to forgive your sentence."

Bull puppy. Killing someone didn't get swept under the rug no matter what; and who needed me that badly to even suggest such a swap?

"What abilities?" I hedged, tackling the easiest question first.

"You being a witch and able to wield magic."

I was glad I was sitting. No one outside my immediate family and my witch mentor who'd trained me for a few months knew who or what I was. No one. And I was damned sure going to keep it that way.

Being a witch wasn't as hard to hide as say being a shifter or vamp. If discovered I could always pass myself off as a Wiccan, or a harmless back-to-earth kind of person, but the fact I possessed real magic, was not something I flaunted.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I was pleased my voice sounded level, except for that small crack on the last word.

"Quit the BS, Noziak," Stone jumped in, obviously a master at hearing the lie. "We don't have time to shoot the breeze here. Either you want to spend the rest of your crappy life stuck here." He glanced toward the space beyond the Warden's door. "Or you can jump at the best opportunity you'll ever be given."

"Only a fool jumps at some vague promise," I shot back, "And I'm not a fool."

The Ling Mai woman raised one hand to notch down the tension permeating the room. "Ms. Noziak is correct," she said. "She doesn't have enough data to make an informed choice."

Yeah, take that a-hole, I wanted to crow, but held my tongue, responding only to Ling Mai. "Tell me who you are, what you want and what you want from me," I said, my voice firm and no-nonsense.

“I am the Director of a very new, and very discreet agency being created to counter the growing agitation between human and non-humans existing in the world.”

“Non-humans?” I mumbled, curious as to whether this was a witch-hunt, pun intended or if she really knew what she was talking about.

“Weres, shifters, vampires, demons, faes and those we have not yet identified,” she said, her tone calm. “We’re not an eradication program, or seeking to kill and ask questions later. A few of us realize that humans and non-humans have existed relatively peacefully for centuries, and we want to make sure that status remains.”

“But?” I was waiting for the ten-ton other shoe to drop. The fact she knew about non-humans, while appearing to be human, was enough to take in. But the fact she knew about non-humans and wasn’t on an exterminate first and ask questions later agenda was the biggest issue to absorb.

As a species humans tended to be driven by fear. What we didn’t readily grasp or understand, we killed. It was a basic survival mechanism and one of the reasons humans remained at the top of the food chain. So the fact this woman was willing to keep the status quo, the much smaller and more threatened population of non-humans living secretly among the larger mass of humans, rattled me.

However, talk was cheap.

“But we are also pragmatists,” she continued, glancing over her shoulder at her granite-faced colleague before continuing. “Traditionally those humans who have known of the non-humans in our midst have dealt with those who pose a clear threat in one of three ways. Assuming all non-humans were dangerous and meeting that danger head on, warding any danger off before it strikes, or trying to avoid it through denial.”

I snorted, knowing how effective the last approach was.

Ling Mai nodded as if I’d spoken aloud. “My point is that as the world becomes more populated, the approach many humans have taken, to ignore the non-humans or non-human behavior around them, becomes less and less effective. The alternative is—”

“Another Spanish Inquisition?” I threw out. “Salem witch trials? Russian Pogroms, the riots against the Jewish population where the government turned a blind eye?”

“Where more innocents, both human and non-human, suffered and perished than those guilty of creating the situation in the first place,” she finished for me. “You’re also ignoring the Irish Leprechaun killings of

996, the Chinese warlock hunts of 1296, and the Islamic djinn slaughters of the early 1700s throughout North Africa.”

So she knew about those events, interesting. Most people only knew about the systematic killings of non-humans, or those deemed different, through fairytales and most of those stories had been whitewashed. Humans tend to come out on top in most of the tales I’d read as a child and not the trolls, goblins, or pixies. It wasn’t fair but it was reality.

Okay, I could see where there could be a need for a preemptive approach to potential clashes between human and non-humans. But that didn’t make me a believer that some government agency was the best option, or that I wanted to be any part of such an agency.

“Has nothing to do with me,” I said, spreading my hands wide, ignoring the tension knotting my neck and back muscles.

Mercenary Stone rocked forward on the balls of his feet, classic preemptive strike mode. I clutched the arms of my chair, hoping I could launch myself out of it before blood was drawn.

Ling Mai’s tone implied a reality-check absent from the room. “I think you’re wrong, Ms. Noziak. You are just the right type of individual we want for the new agency.”

“A convicted killer?” I asked with enough sarcasm to coat the room.

“A person who knows firsthand what can happen when a non-human attack is misunderstood. You had two options, hide the truth, which would have mitigated your sentence, or let a lie force you into prison for life.”

“You’re forgetting a couple of things,” I said, goading her. “The first is I’m here because of the violence of the crime.” She seemed familiar with the details so no need to elaborate. Bottom line was killing the rogue Were who wanted to kill my brother was not why I was in prison. I was here because I’d used black magic to call that death demon, thus he was literally torn limb from limb. Pretty gruesome, and not something that could be ignored.

It was the violence of my crime, and my reluctance to explain it, that railroaded me behind the walls of the Grey House. But if I’d explained what he had been, how I could use magic, I’d probably be facing a lot worse sentence than life in prison. Which brought me to my second point. “Here, there’s always the chance I can get parole for good behavior.”

“Not at all. You and I both know you’d be looking at a minimum of twenty to twenty-five years with good behavior before you could possibly see beyond these walls.”

Stone jumped in, “And with those fresh bruises you’re sporting I’m thinking it might be harder for you to turn the other cheek and fly low.”

I swallowed the lump of grief as their words washed over me. Twenty years meant I'd be close to forty-five, no telling if I could survive that long inside.

"So I'm a lifer who might jump at a chance to get out," I said, easing my shoulders but not my tone. "Still doesn't mean I'm qualified to fight non-humans, assuming I believed in them."

No non-human, like my brothers or myself, ever admitted to any one, especially a stranger, and especially a government stranger, that there was the remotest possibility of someone being anything except human through and through. It tended to avoid calling down a bucket load of grief on our heads.

"Have you heard of the *Custos per quod*?" Ling Mai asked, leaning back in her chair, her tone conversational.

"Sounds Latin," I said.

"Very good. It is," came her enigmatic reply.

When no one spoke I did. "So what does it mean and what does it have to do with me?"

"*Custos per quod* is an honorary designation for the Guardian of Time," she said.

"And this means what?" My bruises were screaming, my cuts needed cleaning and dried blood was sticking to a lot of me, mixed with dirt and grass. Patience was never my strong suit.

"Since the old days, humans have kept records of non-humans. A preventative measure."

I raised a brow, aware of my stomach nose-diving but held my tongue. This was news to me.

"The Guardian of Time's duty is to record the marriages of and offspring of non-humans, including those who have intermarried into human lines."

"So?" My shoulder shrug said loud and clear get-on-with-it. No way would such a list exist without it being common knowledge among non-humans. But there had been a rumor once or twice about something called a *Voco Vidico*, a summons to protect, or some such thing. My Latin was rusty, but the concept was still viable. An underground group of non-humans who were created to protect against humans who might know a little too much.

But wasn't that a different kind of fairytale? One meant to give some species of non-humans hope? Those non-humans who didn't like hiding their abilities for the greater good of all species.

Ling Mai's voice snapped me back to the present. "Your mother was a very powerful witch, your father part-shaman, part-shifter, all four of your brothers are shifters, and you, my dear, have shown very early signs of being an extremely powerful witch in your own right, even without your shamanic abilities."

Every instinct in me screamed run. Or hide. But I didn't have the option for either. This woman knew too much, far too much, and in this case knowledge was danger.

"Cut to the chase here," I growled, my fingers biting deep enough into the leather armrests to create half-moon indents. "What do you want?"

"You, to work for us," Mercenary Stone said flat out.

"And if I don't?"

"You stay here, and whoever beat the crap out of you will finish the job."

His tone said he'd make sure that happened. Bribing a guard to look the other way. Passing a weapon to Big Mad Martha or one of her minions. Making sure I was assigned a work relief detail that made me vulnerable. Oh, yeah, there'd be a dozen ways to easily make sure I never saw parole, never saw my father or brothers again.

My mouth dry, my gaze cut diamond hard toward Ling Mai. "And if I go with you?"

"If you survive one year working for me, then you're free to get on with your life."

Now why did that sound like a very big if?

Ling Mai stood and added, "There's one other thing to consider, Ms. Noziak."

"What?"

"If you remain here, you know that at some time your father or brothers will come to your assistance. To liberate you. It's in their natures."

I swallowed. Hard. She was right.

She angled her head before driving home the dagger. "And if they come, they will die. Do you wish that?"

CHAPTER 4

Ten hours after the mysterious Ling Mai and the pull-no-punches M.T. Stone had left, I was lying rock-still in my bunk, sleep eluding me. Damn them anyway.

How did they know what they knew about me and my family? Was that knowledge immediately dangerous? That was an easy one. Yes, if they used that knowledge against us. How could I warn my dad and brothers? Or would that create more problems?

Three of my brothers worked for government agencies who accepted their uniqueness without pushing as to why. A lot of government organizations who thrived on Alpha personalities and a hierarchical structure took advantage of Weres and shifters, without admitting that their members might be different. The ultimate don't-ask, don't-tell policy had been in effect for generations.

Ling Mai knew that most non-humans found it easier to hide in plain sight than to rattle the status quo and announce our abilities. For one thing, the sheer numbers of humans meant we were vulnerable, in spite of some of our talents; strength, stamina and for some, immortality. But not all of us were Weres, shifters or vamps, and all of us could be killed, one-way or another.

Like any species there were always a few who colored outside the lines and threatened to expose our existence. For the last thousand years or so we had policed ourselves, creating a Council of Seven whose sole function was to keep the knowledge of non-humans from humans. Not an easy task but a necessary one. So what if a mystery remained around Lizzie Borden killing or not killing her parents? Better to focus on that question than on the fact she was a troll with a little Berserker blood in her veins. Or what about Vlad the Impaler? Better to call him a vampire so people didn't look too closely at his cousin Gyula the Old, who ruled Partes Transsylvania, the lands beyond the woods, and was a true vampire.

So did the Council of Seven know about the Guardian of Time and the damned list of non-human progeny? That wasn't my real problem, my real problem was much closer.

What about the cryptic offer? Real or a hoax to flush out a non-human like myself? I wasn't Wiccan, which was a choice. I was born a witch, the ability being passed down the female blood-line, and practicing or not, I'd die a witch, as well as pass along my abilities to any female offspring. My dad's shamanistic abilities were also hereditary, which meant on the wild

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