

The Wimberley Chronicles

Part Seven

A Violet Crown Adventure

Kelly Fox

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Series Note:

This series was originally published under the name Violet Crown. The story has been re-edited and expanded into a dual-POV, eight-part series that was made available through my newsletter. To sign up for the newsletter and get updates on when this will be made available on Amazon, head over to my website: www.authorkellyfox.com.

For those familiar with my Wrecked and Wrecked: Guardians series, this is the back story of the mysterious Wimberley crew. These events take place in the year or so before the beginning of the Wrecked timeline.

Chapter 51

January 9th, 3 years ago

Cancer Therapy & Research Center—San Antonio, TX

Christine Statleton knew that she was almost gone. Her weight hovered around ninety pounds and the papery, empty skin of her belly, a reminder of the life she once had, puddled on her upper thighs under the hospital gown. The cancer had started in her stomach, but it had taken over her liver, her bones, her lungs, her brain. She was more cancer than anything else. And that silly, crazy-intelligent, beautiful plumpy who was her wife would be there with her until she became cancer. She was so close. God, this was going to kill her.

Christine had her mother-in-law get a dog for her wife from the local rescue. “Get her one with a good story,” she said, knowing that Hedwig would like that.

When Izzy gently placed the small, female dachshund on Christine’s lap, she wasn’t sure if her mother-in-law hadn’t gone a little overboard with the request.

“She was used for breeding and then dumped,” Izzy explained.

“No shit,” responded Christine, looking at the wiggly, ugly-cute dachshund in her lap.

She was an odd-looking red on red dapple, so while she wouldn’t fetch much on the pet market, she had the DNA for beautiful puppies. After years of breeding, her teats were disturbingly large and her legs were so short that the damned things very nearly grazed the ground. Despite all of that, she had a spunky, sweet disposition and the soul of a comedian. When Christine scritchd her ribs, the little weirdo’s eyes glazed over and she happily bared her teeth, supremely blissed out. Yeah, maybe she would do after all.

On the day Christine gave the dog to Hedy, the skies were as blue and the grass as green as the mild Texas winter would allow. Hedy was pushing Christine in her wheelchair to a lovely garden area with benches, humming the song from their wedding. Their song. Christine noticed that Hedy’s eyes were dark with lack of sleep and puffy from crying. She momentarily doubted her decision, but Hedy’s mom and dad were already walking in with the dog. She immediately began to pull in Hedy’s direction, pawing at her leg, prancing, snorting, tits swinging

everywhere. After a few seconds, Christine was rewarded with her favorite sound in the whole world—Hedy’s deep belly laugh.

“Did you get me an ‘I’m sorry that I’m dying’ dog?” Hedy asked, still wheezing with laughter, her freckles catching the sun.

Christine smiled. She was at peace with her decision to return to Source, having experienced three lifetimes already. Still, she felt privileged to have loved and protected an ancient, even if this particular ancient didn’t yet know how special she was.

Shrugging, her eyes drifted to the violet aura that always danced above her wife’s head. “Yeah...sorta.”

Hedy turned to her mom, “¿Y usted? ¿Lo compraste?”

“Yes, I got her from the local rescue. Apparently, a lot of lesbians like the wieners,” she said, smiling at her own joke.

Say what you will about the elder Dr. Villarreal, she had a great sense of humor.

“¿Y qué dijo esto?” Hedy asked, thumbing at Christine. “¿Comprar el perro más raro por ahí?”

And what did she say? Buy the weirdest dog out there?

“Pues, si. Estarías aburrido con un perro normal,” she said matter-of-factly. A normal dog would be boring.

“Oh my god. Let me look at this thing,” said Hedy as she picked up the insistent cutie. She licked Hedy’s face with wild abandon, only stopping to enjoy the belly rubs that Hedy laid on her.

“Hedy, baby,” Christine said, getting a little tired. “Scritch her ribs.”

Seeing the little one bare her teeth with stoner abandon, Hedy let loose peals of laughter and tears streamed down her face. Even Hedy’s father, the Senator, had to smile. Hedwig named her Minnie, after her favorite aunt.

Five days later, Christine let go of this life. That gorgeous day, her wife’s laughter, and Minnie’s look of high happiness carried her from this world to the next.

Chapter 52

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Glitter in the Air"—Pink

I woke up with a migraine, gulping for air, a terrible dream ripping me from sleep. There was no story, just the sound of the Disciple breathing, then the weight of being pinned down, the prickly dirt that had found its way into my underwear, the wetness of his tongue against my chest, and the sense of panic and fear that built and built until I felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest. *I am safe. I am safe.* I popped a Xanax and hoped for the best.

God, those stupid dreams. Thankfully, I'd worked out a routine to get me back on the right path: look around the room, verify that I was safe, make myself a cup of tea, do breathing exercises in front of the big picture window, clean my gun. My heart pounded as I looked around the room for shifters and gunfire and black eyes. Seeing none, I grabbed the P230 that Arye gave me and went to make some Earl Gray.

It had been raining on and off for a week, and the change in barometric pressure meant that I'd had three migraines, with another in the chamber. As I attempted to inhale healing and exhale anxiety, I felt a rumbling sadness that matched the slate skies outside. After several minutes of breathing and no peace, I gave up. Perhaps I would go to the Meditation Room later. I checked my phone for the news and noted the date with a lump in my throat.

My hand immediately went to my necklace and tears began to fall. It was the third anniversary of Christine's death. I already had on her old lobster boxers, so I changed into my ratty periwinkle ribbon T-shirt. Just as I decided to stay in bed, curled up with the memory of my dead wife, a sharp rap at the door broke my reverie. I punched a pillow and threw off the covers.

Walking to the door, I looked through the peephole and swore with words so filthy and loud that I received a response from the other side.

"Happy to see me?"

I'd managed to avoid that asshole all week. Before grabbing the taser that Rae had given me from the side table, I thought better of it. I bet a not-quite-vampire probably wouldn't go down with a couple of electrode darts. Gun it is. Son of a *bitch*.

I swung open the door. Edison Fitzwallace stood there like I didn't know what.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, pistol in hand, safety off, acutely aware that I looked like day-old roadkill.

"Hi, Hedy. Nice boxers."

"Fuck you. I like my boxers. What do you want?"

Hesitating, he looked at the gun. Yeah, maybe he should've learned that showing up unannounced on a Saturday morning wasn't the brightest idea. *Jackass*.

"Spit it out, St. Louis."

Edison's eyes turned black.

"Are you trying to scare me again?" I asked, backing up, sliding my finger alongside the trigger guard.

Edison raised his hands, "No, no, no. Sorry. Sorry. I'm not trying to scare you. *I'm not going to hurt you.*"

I shot him a look full of venom and spite. *Too late, jackass.*

The sexy little crinkles around his eyes softened and they swirled back to blue.

"Indaja is having me do a thing. I'm just not actively controlling the transition now."

"Yeah, I heard. Look, I had a really bad night, and those eyes aren't, you know, helpful."

Goddammit. Practically on the verge of tears, I slid the safety back into place, just in case.

"Are you still having nightmares? From what happened?" he asked, worried, his eyes iridescent.

“No.” I shook my head and wagged my finger at him. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to act concerned about my feelings. Just tell me what you need to say and go.”

Edison noticed my shirt. “Wait...did your wife die of stomach cancer?”

Okay, Captain Non-Sequitur. “What *fucking* concern is that of yours?” I said through clenched teeth.

“The periwinkle ribbon on your shirt. I sponsored the Periwinkle Ball in San Francisco last year. Greenhouse hosted.”

“Well, I’m surprised they didn’t throw a parade in your honor.”

It would be impossible to overstate the amount of sarcasm in that response.

Edison ran his hands through his hair. “Yeah, I’m going to tell Indaja this was a bad idea.”

“Ya think?”

Edison sighed and looked apologetic. I wasn’t giving an inch.

“Why are you here, Edison?”

“The team knows about me. I’m working with Indaja to integrate these two parts of me so I can trust myself.”

He paused to, I don’t know, let that sink in. I gestured for him to continue.

“And it’s giving me headaches. So that’s why I still have to stay in the dark room across the way.”

“Yeah, I know all of this already. Seriously, why are you here?”

“I—I wanted to see you. See how you were doing.”

“I’m *fantastic*, thanks for asking,” I said with a chilly edge to my voice.

“I wanted to see if we could maybe clear the air so we don’t have to try so hard to avoid each other.”

“Today is not the day for that, jackass.”

I made to close the door, but Edison stopped it.

“*What?*” I asked curtly.

Edison swallowed and went back a half step, his eyes black. “I’m sorry—maybe you know that Lena died from stomach cancer.”

Stepping forward, I closed the gap between us. I was reminded briefly of that first day in his office.

“I don’t give a cold shit about how *your* wife died. Today is about *my* wife.”

He pulled back from me, confused. I clenched my jaw, letting my lip curl into a snarl. If I were being honest, I wanted to draw a little blood.

“Who knows, maybe Lena was the lucky one—looks like your little thumb trick couldn’t save her. Or maybe it could and you just decided, *fuck it—let the puny human die*. Stay the hell away from me.”

I punctuated the final sentence by slamming the door in his face. I looked out the peephole to see his reaction. He was facing the door, crestfallen. He raised his hand to knock again, but decided against it, turned on his heel, and walked to his apartment across the alcove. Point: Villarreal.

I admit, I may have cut a little too deeply on that one.

Chapter 53

Edison Fitzwallace

The Cave

Fuck, that hurt. I slumped on the couch, my brain pulling up the sound of the gunshot. For one terrible day, my department head suspected that I'd killed my wife, but the gunshot residue on her hands was unmistakable. I'd hoped her soul was free, that she would consider forgiving me and maybe coming back.

Hedy had once said she was from "Kerrville Fucking Texas," just like Lena. The dates lined up, the Wander-like serendipity of it made sense. It was maybe foolish to hope that Hedy was my Lena.

I fucking hated this life sometimes.

One thing I knew for sure was that Hedy was in pain and lashing out. Knowing she was expecting an update on our conversation, I put through a video call to Indaja. She was walking in downtown San Antonio with double-decker busses and people all around her.

"Hey, that was quick. How'd the conversation with Hedy go?"

I shook my head. "Not well. I'd woken her up and she said something about not sleeping well. I think she's having nightmares."

"Damn. I was hoping for more of a sheepish call from her bed," Indaja said as she stepped around a group of tourists taking pictures.

As if.

"No chance of that. And, hey, did you know her wife and my wife died of the same cancer?"

Indaja's expression fell. "Shit. What's the date?"

"Uh, January fourteenth, I think."

"Fuck. Dammit, this is my fault," she said, walking into a lobby. Finding a place to sit, she looked apologetically into the phone. "It's the anniversary of Christine's death."

“Wait...you sent me over there *today* of all days? Lena’s been dead for over forty years and I still can’t function on that day. What the hell, Indy?”

Closing her eyes tight as tears fell down her cheeks, she let out a sorrowful sound. “I know, I know, I know. I’m sorry. Between my dad and Izzy, I’m going back and forth between San Antonio and Wimberley every week and I’m running on fumes. I’ll reach out to her and let her know this was on me.”

“No, I get it. We’ve been busy too. Sorry for yelling.”

“No, you’re fine. I’ll...figure something out.”

Feeling bad for her, I asked, “Do you think it’d be helpful if I said something to her?”

She chuckled. “I don’t know. How do you like the placement and existence of your balls?”

“Maybe a note then.”

My phone started lighting up with messages from Max and Rae. “Hey, Indy, I’ve got to run.”

“Of course, go take care of things. And...I’m sorry about that.”

“No worries.”

Switching over to the messaging app, I read that Max was taking Hedy to her mom’s house and Rae was sending me the latest decrypted message. Reading between the lines, it was clear that they’re testing the fence, trying to find a weakness. No way in hell was I letting anyone in.

As I thought through the scenarios, I got another notification on the TorChat app.

ash74: hello balaur

balaur:

ash74: i wouldn’t ignore me if i were u

ash74: <rememberthis.jpg>

It was a picture of the half-shifted animal on top of Hedy, her face a mask of pain and fear.

balaur: Fuck. You.

ash74: <job4.enc>

balaur: No.

ash74: u can't protect her from me

balaur: I am going to put a bullet in your head.

ash74: is that wanderer bitch really worth it?

balaur: -has signed out-

I needed to kill this motherfucker. Soon enough, I'd bring Izzy in.

Chapter 54

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Dr. Isidora Villarreal's house, Blanco, TX

Internal Soundtrack: "Drink You Away"—Justin Timberlake

I needed more than just the thoughts in my head. I needed my mother. I spoke with Rae, and a few hours later I was in my mom's kitchen, drinking Bloody Mary's and enjoying her delicious migas while Max sat outside in the Civic.

My mom was a solitary woman and enjoyed her peaceful bit of land just north of Canyon Lake. Looking out the window, she asked, "How long has it been since you've been to my house?"

As she said this, she tossed Minnie a chunk of egg and melted cheese.

"Mom, her belly. I dunno, two to three years. Can you get me another tortilla?"

"Si, si. Be patient. And tell me why you look so bad today."

"Thanks, 'Amá."

"I'm just saying. You've looked better."

I sighed. Honestly, I probably should have just stayed in bed.

"Mom, do you know what today is?"

"No, mija. ¿Que día es?"

"*Catorce de enero.*" January fourteenth.

I was facing my mom's back as she cooked the tortilla, and her body sighed. She turned off the stove and walked up to me and held her arms out.

"Come here, mija. I am so, so sorry. Come, let me give you a hug."

I stood up and hugged her tight. She was barely five feet tall in shoes, so I practically towered over her.

"You know, your father and I—we would do anything to prevent you from getting hurt. We loved Christine so much and it kills us that you went through such a sad thing. If I could take away this pain from you, I would, mija. I really would."

"I know, Mom. I know."

“I just...your father and I interfered with Edison, and we shouldn’t have. If you have feelings for him, you should pursue it. Life is short, and if you have another chance at something beautiful, you should take it.”

“I don’t know how I feel about him, momma. I thought I let him go, but when I see him, it hurts.”

She nodded and wiped away a few tears from her eyes. My mother could be a fearsome woman to deal with, but seeing her sad face ripped away the angry cloak I’d been wearing all day, and the pain was sharp. I hitched, trying to stop myself, but it was a lost cause. I stood there in my mother’s kitchen, sobbing as I held onto her. Sobbing like I had as a little girl. Sobbing until I was exhausted and spent of tears.

I stayed at my mom’s house all day, and when I returned that night, I found a letter under my door from Edison.

Hedy,

I’m sorry about how this morning went. I didn’t realize about the date. I know as much as anyone how bad the anniversaries are, and I couldn’t have chosen a worse day to talk to you. I wanted to say that I was sorry for treating you so cruelly after that night. I’m sorry for all of it.

With Indaja’s help, I’m learning more about who I am, and slowly but surely I am starting to believe that I am not what I always thought I was.

The dark room is another kind of therapy, and I wanted you to know that it’s already made a big difference. I don’t want you to feel like you have to avoid me when you come back home.

Pienso en ti,

Edison

PS—I was never trying to look mean. I was trying to force my eyes to stay blue.

I sat there, on the couch, looking at his neat hand and precise words. I held the paper to my nose and inhaled earth and apple. Around that time, I received a notification on my phone.

Indy: I owe you an apology. I sent Edison over there to talk to you and didn’t realize what day it was.

Indy: This is gonna sound weird coming from me, but don't give up on him. He's working hard.

Indy: Also, he mentioned that you might still be having nightmares. Let me know if you need a trauma specialist. <flower emoji>

I'd been so angry with Edison this morning, but his letter gave me pause. On one hand, it meant a lot to receive his apology and to know that he would work to make me more comfortable. But it further opened the door on a sense of loss, a creeping sadness that may have been around longer than I realized. When I read Indaja's words, I was similarly torn. That tiny, stupid part of me wanted to hope. And when I hoped, I felt the most awful dread.

Chapter 55

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Morning Song"—Lumineers

I needed to get my head in the game; if only out of respect for Jack's memory. Rae and I had once again been looking at the reports for the weird happenings with the border patrol agents, and nothing was clicking for me. I realized that I was going to continue to be useless while I still felt at loose ends with Edison. I'd also thought a lot about what Indaja said.

Don't give up on him.

So, I got up early—having once again dreamt of the boat and Edison—pulled up my big girl britches, and walked across the dark alcove to Edison's apartment, the one built into the wall of the cave.

"Hi," he said, wiping the sleep from his eyes as he opened the door, letting his earthy essence out into the dark space around us. He was wearing pajama bottoms that slung low and a T-shirt he'd clearly just pulled on.

"Hi," I responded, awkward. "Just thought you'd like to see what it feels like to have someone wake you up at o' dark thirty."

"Seems fair," he said, yawning and blinking against what little light was filtering through the cavern.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark I could see that his sleepy eyes were a blackish iridescent color. I stepped back, my amygdala wreaking havoc on my heartbeat. He looked uncomfortable and held up his hands.

"This is what they look like first thing in the morning. It's kind of their neutral setting."

They looked like a labradorite necklace that I had—almost cat-like. Beautiful, in a deadly, underworld kind of way.

"How's the transition going?" I asked, awkwardly.

"The dark helps."

“And your headaches?”

His eyebrows wrinkled together. “Mostly better, except for today. Yours?”

I hesitated, not realizing that he knew about my migraines. “If you’ve got a headache, maybe I can come back.”

“No, you can stay. I want you to stay.”

We stood there for an uncomfortable amount of time, looking anywhere but at each other. Finally, Edison broke the silence.

“I’d invite you in, but I need to keep the lights off.”

I hesitated, peering into his blackened apartment. Maybe this would be easier if I didn’t have to look at him.

“I don’t think I need lights. It’s not like I’ll be using sign language.”

He smiled wryly at our inside joke and held the door for me to go in. When the door closed, the apartment was cloaked in a black so intense that I felt like I was floating. I reached back, just to verify that the door was still behind me.

“I can get a candle, that wouldn’t be so bad,” said his voice in the dark.

Edison moved through his apartment with ease, checking drawers and cabinets. Finally, the striking of a match, followed by the glow of a candle in a glass jar.

“Boo,” he said, grinning as he held the jar under his chin. His black eyes were hollow and the shadows highlighted a killer’s bone structure.

I’ll be honest, I may have peed a little.

Setting the candle on the coffee table, he shook his head, immediately regretful.

“Wow, I am never going to get this right, am I?”

I couldn’t tell which agitated me more—the fact that he scared me or the fact that he seemed genuinely sorry about it.

“Probably not.”

The spare light given off by the candle revealed that this space was an efficiency and, in fact, a mini cavern. The natural formations on the wall were stunning—mostly flowstone with a field of cave corals just above his couch. On every bit of

free wall stood bookshelves teaming with all manner of books, some new, some very, very old. Edison stood there, watching me, and I couldn't tell if his eyes scared or intrigued me. Probably a little bit of both.

"You know what, this might be better in the dark," I said, sitting on the couch.

Nodding, Edison sat and turned to face me before blowing out the candle. Cloaked in darkness once more, I only had his breathing to orient me. After a few synchronous breaths, I smiled, a stupid thought crossing my mind.

"Why are you smiling?" Edison asked, bemused.

"You can see me in this ink?" I asked, self-consciously.

"I can."

"I was just thinking...you kissed me *once* and you ruined my life. Which sounds completely melodramatic when I say it aloud."

"Funny, I've been thinking the same thing."

"God, we are a pair of drama queens."

"Yeah, we are."

It felt good to finally break the ice, and we sat in comfortable silence for a moment.

"Thank you for your note."

"Thank you for reading it. After we spoke, I realized if you were that angry, it wasn't just the awful timing. I was trying so hard to avoid scaring you that I ended up hurting you more. And I am very sorry."

Maybe I needed to hear that more than I'd realized. A tear escaped down my cheek.

"I didn't mean to make you cry."

I wiped away my tears. "I know. I'm just...I'm sad. I can be sad. But I do appreciate your apology."

Even if I do think that you were wrong about us.

“Okay.” He didn’t sound sure.

“And I’m sorry for what I said about Lena. I was aiming below the belt.”

“Direct hit,” he said softly. After a pause, he continued, “You know that I would have saved her if I’d known how, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And I found out that my blood increases cell reproduction...not so great if you’re battling cancer.”

I let out a horrified breath. “Oh, Jesus. I am an *asshole*.”

“No, you’re not. Don’t say that about yourself,” he said, briefly touching my arm. “It’s just...there isn’t a thing I wouldn’t sacrifice—my own happiness, even—to protect someone I loved.”

It was my turn to fall into awkward silence. God, this hurt. I could feel the scratching at my brain—if only, if only. My body ached for the feel of his arms. In all of this, the thing that I regretted most was not being held by him.

“Hey,” he said. “Are we...good?”

I hugged myself and smiled, which despite the yearning was mostly genuine.

“Yeah, Edison. We’re good. Thank you for...um, talking to me. See you on the job.”

Chapter 56

Sid Peterson Memorial Hospital
Kerrville, TX 1974

The gunshot was louder than she could have imagined, but the release and the relief were immediate. Lena felt herself detach and float away from the wretched body she'd inhabited for nearly thirty years. It was wonderful to feel nothing again. To be simply nothing without sensation; to be only thought. How marvelous. She hoped that Zeke would forgive her for using his gun, then again, she didn't know if she could forgive him for not ending her pain sooner.

As she floated through the rooms, she found herself in the nursery. She could not see or hear as she could in human form, but the energy of the newborns was unmistakable. She was drawn to one particular baby, a fellow Wanderer. Her aura felt the way the color indigo looks, vibrant and beautiful, and Lena joined with the newborn. She could feel the curiosity of the child reach out to her like a physical presence, so serene.

Such innocence, it was easy. So easy.

Lena reached in and plucked out the soul from its new body, then let it go without another thought. Settling in, she felt her heartbeat for the first time. Blinking, she took on the corporeal being and memories of the child, which were none.

Baby Denice Pharaoh blinked again and saw that she was being held by a soft lady with dark skin. She reached out to touch her face and smiled. The plump candy striper knew that the child had lost her mother that morning in the delivery, and it made her sad. She hugged her tighter, kissing the newborn's sweet-smelling head.

"Look at your pretty smile," she cooed, hoping that the child had a chance at a decent life.

Baby Denice reached out and grabbed the shiny metal pinned to the candy striper's uniform. It was a name tag, and on it was written, "Izzy."

Chapter 57

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Regulate" Jane G feat. Nate Dogg

I slept better that night than I had in a while, so I got up early on Monday, hoping for a good start to the week. I sat alone in the mess with my ear buds in, catching up on my emails. I had a message from Fisher reminding me it was time to donate blood again, which was about the only useful contribution I'd made up to this point.

Another email was from my father. He'd rented out my condo in South Padre to Flo and Stan, my winter neighbors from last year. He forwarded along their well wishes, as well as a super-cute picture of them on my balcony at sunrise.

"Good morning, Hedy... Oh, are you talking to somebody?"

God I missed those sunrises and that first cup of coffee on the balcony.

"Um, Hedy?" Edison reached out to touch my shoulder, and I startled then jumped again when I saw his black eyes looking down at me.

"Damn, serial killer—scared the shit out of me."

"I'm sorry." He shifted on his feet, looking awfully uncomfortable.

"No, no, it's all right—I just need a little more caffeine and acclimation."

After a brief hesitation, he asked, "Not that I have any right to, but can I ask a favor of you?"

"Shoot," I said, inviting him to sit. "What can I do for you?"

"Can you not call me that?"

That one took me a minute. I'd called him so many things. "Oh, what...serial killer?"

"Yeah. Sometimes your nicknames for people catch on, and I don't want that one to—"

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. I’m still trying to get people to stop calling Bernard goiter head, so, point taken. Won’t happen again.”

“It’s not that I don’t deserve it.”

“No, it’s not like that. I guess I just always meant it as a compliment. From the situation room, I could tell that you were never anxious or indecisive. And after the card game. The way you...”

“Yeah,” he said, uncomfortable. *Swing and a miss.*

Pivoting to a different subject, he nodded at my screen and asked, “So, who are the old folks?”

I smiled. “That’s Flo and Stan—they’re the snowbirds renting out my condo.”

“Snowbirds?”

“It’s what we call the retired folks who come south for the winter. I swear, the United States’ top export into Mexico used to be old people, but with the cartel violence they stay on this side more. Flo and Stan are our honorary Winter Texans. It’s kinda cute—she’s always wearing that snowflake pendant.”

Edison looked at the picture again. “Hedy, that’s not a snowflake.”

“Sure it is—I’ve seen her wear it a million times. She’s never not wearing it.”

“That’s because it’s a cross. A Jerusalem cross, actually.”

I zoomed in on the picture.

Huh.

“Flo the Disciple,” he said, smiling.

“Wait—what did you say?” I asked. Something almost clicked.

“I know she’s not a Disciple, Hedy. I’m just kidding.”

I stared off into the cavern. Snowflakes. Jerusalem crosses. The blood of Christ.

“Hedy? Hello? Did I lose you?” he said, waving his hand in front of my face.

“Uh—sorry. Talking about that pendant jarred something loose. Something about snowflakes. And blood, weirdly enough. Man, I feel like it’s right there in front of me.”

“I know what you mean,” he said with a wistful look.

I looked down at Minnie, who licked my hand. Oy, this was hard.

But I needed my brain to unscramble. I needed to think. Snowflakes. Snowflakes. Sno—oh, *shit*.

Shit, shit, shit.

I stood up and grabbed Minnie.

“Edison, I think I just figured out a piece of the puzzle. I need to go find Rae.”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“Yeah, get ready. And sharpen that knife of yours.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Thirty minutes later I stood in the situation room with my mom, Rae, Bernard, and Elliot all looking at me with doubt in their eyes.

“What makes you think that Jack is behind this?” Rae asked.

“When we did that video conference with her—was that call recorded?”

“All calls are recorded.”

“Then get the recording. It’s her,” I said with absolute certainty. “She’s taken over for Pharaoh.”

Bernard looked up, a quizzical look on his face. “Are you talking about Ms. Taureau, your late mentor?”

“Yes. And maybe not so late after all. Can you pull up the video from the call?”

Elliot and Bernard banged out something on their laptop and opened the file. We were riveted to the screen as the call progressed.

“Okay, go through it...faster...wait, wait—stop, she touched her hair. Go back to that.”

On screen, Jack raked her left hand through her hair, exposing the silver charm bracelet on her wrist. The one she always wore. It was bedecked with tiny wreaths, Christmas trees...and snowflakes.

“Weird to be wearing that bracelet in early fall,” commented Rae, looking at the date-and-time stamp.

“She never took it off. They look like snowflakes, don’t they?”

“Um, yeah...”

I asked Bernard to zoom in a bit more. Sprinkled throughout the holiday cheer were not snowflakes, as I’d always assumed. No, they were crosses. Jerusalem crosses. A low hiss came from the back of Rae’s throat.

“And she’d been consulting with the Cave for a while before her death, right?”

“Yes. Very sharp analysis,” said Rae thoughtfully. “Good recommendations.”

“Almost like she knew exactly where to go.” I said, hating that I was right.

Rae nodded, adjusting her jaw. “The Junction location was on a list that she’d given to us to search out.”

“Why would she help us with that?” I asked. “We stole and blew up millions of dollars’ worth of their research.”

Rae shook her head, pissed. “She wasn’t helping us,” she practically hissed.

“Junction was a clusterfuck. They’d lost complete control of the level of shift and those shepherd shifters had formed a pack and eaten every human at that site. She sent us in like a bunch of janitors.”

“Clean-up job, right. Sounds a lot like the op in Corpus.”

“Yes, it does,” spat Rae, her fangs descending.

Mom, putting things together, asked the next logical question. “You really don’t think she’s dead? The medical examiner said that to survive that much blood loss, she would have needed the transfusion going into her arm at the time of injury.”

“I was checking my emails at breakfast and got a message from Dr. Fisher reminding me that it’s time to donate blood again.”

“Okay....”

“That got me to thinking. She’d need four to five pints of blood to make the pool of blood they found in her kitchen and it wouldn’t have to be fresh to still have her DNA. Probably take her a few months to save that amount.”

Mom looked slightly disgusted. “*Qué asco.*”

Rae retracted her fangs. “Okay, fine. But what’s her connection with Pharaoh? And why would she fake her death? Surely she had to know that we—that you would figure it out.”

I held up my hands. “I don’t know, but I think we’re looking at it all wrong. Think about all of these weird incidents happening along the border. And then, at breakfast, I was telling Edison about Flo and Stan—”

“Wait, you spoke to Fitzwallace and there was no bloodshed?” Rae asked incredulously.

“We’re adults, Rae. We spoke, cleared the air, and now we’re okay.” I mostly believed that.

“Man, there is some kind of freaky magic in these caves,” Rae said, cracking herself up.

“I feel like we’ve gotten off track here,” warned my mother.

“Sorry, Izzy,” Rae responded, concealing a smile. Turning to me, she continued, “So, you spoke to Fitzwallace and came to the stunning conclusion that...”

“Maybe all of these weird incidents... What was happening to people?”

“They were going missing. On both sides of the border.”

“So, that’s Disciple shit, too? Right?”

My mother looked angry. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, but...who are they trying to genocide?” I snap my fingers. “The Singulars, or whatever Edison, Rae, and Indaja are.”

“Singulari.” My mother’s eyes ping ponged between me and Rae.

“Exactly, the Singulari. So, if you’ve got a Singulari problem, it’s time to call in the Disciples, no? Makes me wonder if anyone has a Singulari problem at the border. If so, maybe then we can figure out what the Disciples are up to.”

“*Shit.*”

“Something you’d like to share with the class, Mom?”

My mother pinched her nose and shook her head. “*Los cárteles.* Seth worked with the administration in the US and Mexico to install several Singulari in key security and government positions across the major ports of entry on both sides. The crime had been decreasing, but we’ve noted a resurgence.”

I wondered what the US and Mexican governments were willing to overlook for a little black-market help with a common problem.

“Okay, so let’s think logistics. The Disciples use genetically modified shifters to do their dirty work. How are they controlling them?”

Rae put on a patient look and explained to me, again. “The epigenetic compound.”

“That’s right! The white liquid DNA presto-chango solution that y’all stole from the DEA right before this all went down.”

Pinching her nose, Rae nodded. “Close enough.”

“Remind me why they do it that way?”

Gesturing to herself, Rae answers. “Unlike what they did to me, it allows them to have more control over the shift. And don’t forget that it also has low levels of GHB to further control the shifters under their influence.”

My mother continued, “Going back to the timeline for a second, Jack reached out to us a couple of weeks after you came to live with us.”

“And if I recall correctly, we blew up that slaughterhouse in Junction a few weeks later.”

“Correct,” she said carefully.

“So, y’all take all their drugs, you kill Pharaoh, and now for some reason it’s up to Jack. So if she’s working with the cartels, then Junction isn’t just about losing her control mechanism for a batch of shifters; it’s about losing an order to a cartel. If there’s anything I know about those guys, it’s that they’re super understanding and flexible when shit hits the fan.”

Rae points at me like I might’ve accidentally said something helpful. “Perfect time to go underground and then come up dead a few months later.”

Really helpful if your consultant is a greenhorn blabbermouth. *Winning, Hedy. Winning.*

I snap my fingers. “Bingo. Hole up somewhere and start rebuilding. And, maybe, since there’s more than one cartel, go with their enemy. Offer the next shipment to them in exchange for protection.”

“That’s a lot of maybe’s and probably’s, mija,” my mom said cautiously.

“I know, ‘Amá. But even if I’m half-right, she’s made the jump across the border and thinks that she’s unreachable. We need to figure out her next move. She thinks we’re looking entirely in the wrong direction. Let’s see what we find when she thinks we’re not looking.”

My mother watched me thoughtfully. “The more recent border incidents are further north, close to El Paso. So maybe now she’s in bed with the Juarez cartel.”

“If you have any Singulari friends in Juarez, now might be the time for some international cooperation because they’re about to get hit hard.”

Knowing we still didn’t have it all, I had Elliot and Bernard do some digging. Grim-faced, Bernard handed me two printouts: certificates that documented the live birth of Denice Jacqueline Pharaoh, born to Sandra Pharaoh, who died in childbirth. Both birth and death certificates came from Kerrville, TX, from the same hospital where I would be born less than a year later.

Bernard also handed me a petition for divorce, signed by Sandra. From the text of the filing, it appeared that Sandra, whose family name was Taureau, had fled Robert Pharaoh and gone to live with her family.

Jacqueline Taureau was Robert Pharaoh's daughter.

I came to learn that Jack and I had many eerie similarities—including being born in the same hospital less than a year apart. If a few things had gone differently... We would have known each other, gone to school together, and certainly been friends.

From what we could gather; after Sandra Pharaoh died, Robert Pharaoh went down to Kerrville to take custody of his daughter, and her maternal family never saw her again.

Chapter 58

Edison Fitzwallace

Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico

Wakefield reached out to his friends across the border and discovered that a prominent councilwoman and a prosecutor in the Juarez area, both Singulari, had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The team had to act quickly and decisively to put this threat down, and based on the intelligence we received, an old expeditor's warehouse just across the border was deemed a high-probability, high-priority target.

I wasn't a huge fan of bringing the Bash brothers on this mission, especially Anders fucking Bash, but we were still short-staffed in operations.

That set, we went in on the warehouse, guns blazing. Hoping for stacks of drugs and dozens of Disciples, what we found were ten adults and children, including the councilwoman, the prosecutor, and three American citizens. They were being guarded by six Disciples with the crosses slashed on their hands.

Scratch that, six dead Disciples, compliments of Anders and Odd Bash. I still didn't like that fucking guy, but his brother was a decent fellow and, bright side, they both seemed to like murder as much as I did.

Further testing would confirm that the people being held captive were all Singulari, including two shifters, but none had the slashes on their hands.

Max called me over to check out a little girl that stood aside from everyone else. She was wearing a pink dress, and her eyes were solid black. When she saw me, she began screaming bloody murder.

Max and I exchanged a look, then he picked her up and distracted her by pulling a coin from her ear while speaking to her softly in Spanish. After a few minutes, her beautiful brown eyes made an appearance, and she giggled in delight as he found coins in her other ear and then two more out of Arye's nose. She admired Odd's cool sunglasses and he promised he'd buy her a pair when she got home.

We would have to process everyone through the American embassy, determining who could come back to the States, who could travel back to their homes in

Mexico, and who needed amnesty. A few very special ones, including the young girl, had a standing invitation at the Cave.

We hadn't found the Disciples, but it felt good to save a few innocent souls.

Chapter 59

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Vice"—Miranda Lambert

I limped onto the tarmac with Minnie by my side, the morning sun obnoxious in its cheerfulness.

"What the hell happened to your ankle?" Edison asked, joining me and Rocky by the plane.

In the weeks after coming out to the team and freeing the Singolari in Juarez, Edison seemed more relaxed. His eyes still took some getting used to, but that was one hundred percent better than the snarled looks.

He even picked up on some of the joking back and forth that the ops team liked to have with me.

Not totally sure how I felt about that.

"I thought there was a snake by the pool," I said, bringing my hand up to cover my eyes from the bright sun.

His chuckle made me smile. "I take it there *wasn't* a snake."

"It was a stick," I mumbled.

Throwing his head back, he laughed, hard.

"Stop it!" I said, knocking my shoulder against his arm.

"Didn't you make fun of Pocket for that exact same thing?"

"Shut up," I grumbled, climbing up the stairs.

Rocky climbed up front, and I got settled in with Minnie at my side. Despite the ample number of seats elsewhere, Edison sat facing me.

I squinted at him, wondering if he was going to continue making fun of me. "S'up, Red?"

Pointing at my ankle, he pulled out his knife. "Let me help you with that."

I nodded, and he drew the blade across the pad of his thumb, which he then offered up to me. I leaned forward, sucking the tip into my mouth like I'd done that night at the overlook. Within seconds his skin healed over and my ankle started to feel better. As he withdrew his thumb, he let it linger on my lip.

Huh.

I shivered involuntarily, then pulled out my laptop to distract myself from whatever *that* was. He leaned back in his seat, staying where he was as he pulled up his phone. Both of us, it seemed, were overwhelmed with emails and reports and... Jesus, half of running a black ops site is the damn paperwork.

Once in Denver, Edison and I got in the waiting SUV, leaving Rock behind at the airport. He didn't do or say anything untoward, making me wonder if I'd imagined the moment on the plane. Professional as always, he drove me to meet my new recruit, so I followed suit, not allowing myself to look at him or think of anything else the entire way over.

Luckily, the recruit was exactly what the Cave needed, and I arranged to have her meet us in Wimberley next week. We had planned on leaving right away, but Rocky called and said there was a mechanical something or other with the plane and I should get a room for the night.

I thought of my favorite oops-there's-only-one-bed-left romance novel, but the cute boutique hotel I found downtown unfortunately had enough vacancy that Edison and I each got our own rooms. Once we got checked in, Edison and I walked to the chophouse around the corner. I had a bloody filet and a bright, beautiful unoaked red. He had the fish, and our conversation was a pleasant recap of the day.

As we walked back to the hotel through the snow in comfortable silence, I decided that I had been imagining things.

Walking into the old foyer, I shook the remaining ice particles from my jacket as I admired the use of marble and burl wood throughout and the plush leather and low lighting of the bar area.

"Can I...buy you a drink?" he asked, his voice low and soft.

Maybe I wasn't imagining things.

I smiled and gestured ahead of us. "Lead the way."

The bartender was a handsome, silver-haired woman with hair cut short on the sides and back, the top a slight pompadour. She was Irish and one hell of a flirt. "Now why didn't you walk in here an hour ago? It's twenty minutes to last call and that's a damned shame," she said, winking at me.

Edison sat down next to me, looking slightly disgruntled.

Smiling, I mentally adjusted my order. "Then I'll need a double. Knapp if you have it."

With an approving smile she grabbed a cut-crystal tumbler and set it on the bar. "That's a fine Irish Whiskey. And that I do have. Would you like it over ice?"

I dramatically placed my hand over my heart. "You wound me."

She leaned across the bar, skimming her nimble fingers over the back of my hand. "'T'was a test, m'dear. And you passed."

She poured a generous double and finally turned her attention to Edison, decidedly less flirtatious. "And what can I get for you, sir?"

Edison grumbled something under his breath and pointed at the tap he wanted. She grabbed a pint glass, poured the IPA, and handed it to him without ceremony. He grunted an approximation of a thanks, and her eyes darted to mine, rolling at his bad attitude.

Another guest walked in, so she knocked the bar in front of me. "Let me know if you need anything else before I shut down, doll face. More whiskey, my number, a pocket in which to stash your extra key card..."

She patted the pocket on her vest, in case I'd somehow missed the memo.

I blushed, smiling at my whiskey. "I'm fine with the whiskey for now, but thank you."

She winked again and sauntered down the bar to take care of the other guest. Edison growled under his breath, downing half of the biting ale.

Knocking my elbow into his solid arm, I teased, "What, you don't like it when a cute bartender flirts with me?"

He considered his beer, then glared down the bar at the silver-haired butch. I laughed, and he turned his intense, hooded eyes in my direction. *Blink*, solid black. *Blink*, ocean blue.

Fucking hell. Grabbing my tumbler, I maintained eye contact with him as I swallowed down the rest of the smooth whiskey.

“That’s it,” Edison said, setting down his pint glass with enough force to slosh its contents onto the counter. Grabbing my arm, he dragged me off the stool. “You’re coming with me.”

The bartender laughed at the scene he was creating, and I turned around, waving as Edison walked me out the bar.

We got to the elevators and were joined by an older couple. Edison harumphed but didn’t loosen his grip on my arm. I smiled at the older lady, who looked Edison up and down and shot me a thumbs-up.

Grabbing my key card from me, he ordered, “Stay here. I have to check both rooms.”

He stomped through the adjoining rooms, pulling back curtains, ruffling sheets, checking trash cans.

“Hey, are you mad at me?” I asked, managing to keep the laughter out of my voice.

“*No*,” he grumped from the other room.

I was waiting there with my hand on my hip when he came back to the door. He looked down at me, trying not to smile.

“You’re clean.”

I chuckled. “That’s *not* what she said.”

Pulling me into the room, he shut the door and lowered his mouth to my ear. “I don’t give a shit what she said.”

Desire flooded my belly as he tucked a stray curl behind my ear, his black eyes never leaving mine. “Hedy...”

I pressed my cheek into his hand as he scented the length of my neck. Inhaling raggedly with my eyes squeezed tight, I nodded. *"Please."*

With a low grumble, his lips found mine, all power and heat. I gave myself over to the kiss, melting into his strong arms as time was suspended around us. Pulling aside my collar, he kissed the skin of my shoulder, his soft, scratchy beard and warm lips sending fire and chills through my belly and chest. He pulled me in closer, cupping my ass.

"I need you, I need you, I need you," he whispered into my hair as he pulled me further into the room. We lay down on the bed and he covered my body with his, making my head spin with powerful, demanding kisses.

"Can I take this off?" he asked, fingering my blouse.

I nodded and helped him remove that and all of my layers. He slowly smoothed his hand up and down my body then dipped down to capture my nipple with his hot mouth. I arched up into him as he pressed his hard length against me, his clothes rough against my soft flesh.

He thumbed open the button on his jeans, and just as I started to kneel a terrible crash startled us. Someone or something had broken down the door to his room. *Goddammit.*

With lightning-quick reflexes, Edison grabbed my clothes and picked me up, carrying me to the side of the bed. He pushed me down between the wall and the bed, then shoved my clothes and backpack on top of me. Dragging on my underwear and a thin camisole, I unzipped the middle compartment of my backpack. I snagged the spare cartridge, tucking it under my breast, definitively failing the pencil test. That set, I grabbed my gun and clicked off the safety.

Edison shut off the lights and softly opened the pass-through door. Seconds later a terrible crunching sound filled the room. It was the sound of some poor bastard's top vertebrae being crushed and then violently separated from the base of his skull.

I quieted my breath and lifted an ear to hear the surroundings. A clip being loaded, the door swinging open. I stayed low, hoping that whoever it was couldn't hear the drumming of my heart. I steadied my hand and raised the gun as he

moved closer, finger poised by the trigger. Just a few more feet. I aimed for center body mass just like I was taught, putting my finger on the trigger as he rounded the corner.

Edison. Relief flooded my chest.

He motioned for me to stay down and another person entered the room. I recognized the smell and breath sounds immediately. My heart began drumming in my chest and my hairline went cold. I heard an 'oof' that sounded like Edison taking a gut punch before his prosthetic dropped to the floor, followed by his body, then footfalls in my direction. I raised my gun and was ready for the Disciple when he came into view. I pulled the trigger three times in quick succession.

I could have hit him point blank and the bullets would have bounced off him like Tic Tacs. He was wearing body armor. Next generation, very advanced.

I'd raised my gun to aim at his head when his body began to buck. Larger rounds began to hit him from the other side and his fancy armor could not withstand the foot-pounds of force being unloaded on him. I was certain I heard his ribs crack. Before he could gather his bearings, I unloaded the remaining bullets into his head. He hit the ground with a dense thud, his branded palms facing up.

I dropped the spent cartridge, retrieved the spare from under my breast, and pushed it into place, sweeping the room. Edison was on the floor, resetting his leg, blood dripping from his mouth. I looked through the opening between the rooms to see the other Disciple on the floor, his neck twisted at a sickening angle. Minnie let out a soft whine as she looked out from Edison's room. I called her over and held her. She was shaking like a leaf.

Whoosh.

The main door to my hotel room splintered into pure light, as did my window and the corner of the building across the way. Two more Disciples rushed the room. I raised my gun, aiming at the closest one, and put three in his face before the other one reached me. The second one pushed me to the ground and got on top of me, knocking away my gun. I froze, completely unable to control the panic cascading through my body. Minnie rushed him, snarling and barking, and he batted her away with a vicious swipe. She didn't even yelp as her little body thumped down on the floor.

Oh. He...he really shouldn't have fucked with my dog.

I felt something crank in my brain and Arye's training kicked in. I grabbed my head and pulled my arms down in front of my face, just in time to deflect the powerful, grunting blow that he'd aimed at me. I could feel the impact bruise and crack the bone of my forearm, but I was still in it. I grabbed a handful of his waist and pivoted my hips up and over, using his weight and momentum to move him off of me. Mid-pivot his groin became exposed and I used my outer leg to donkey kick his balls into his throat. He made an "oof" sound but kept coming.

He grabbed my gun and was up so fast that I could only instinctually move my head to the right, maybe a few centimeters. He squeezed the trigger and burning lead edged my temple as hot blood began to pour down over my ear.

This all had happened within a matter of seconds before, suddenly, Edison was there, a feral look in his eyes. He grabbed the Disciple's right jaw and left shoulder in a murderous bear hug and, with a growling roar, ripped the beast's head clean off. He threw the head and torso down on the ground with a heavy thud.

I'd pushed myself into a seated position against the bed, blood soaked and breathing hard. The bullet had deeply grazed the side of my head, and I was bleeding badly. He took off his shirt and gently held it against the wound. He, too, was breathing heavily, and low, rumbling growls punctuated each inhale and exhale, his apple-and-charcoal earth scent heavy on the air. He looked like Edison, but his facial features were more pronounced as were the muscles in his arms, chest, and legs. This was his shifted state.

"Can you hold this against your head?"

I nodded and pointed to Minnie.

He grabbed his knife and knelt down next to her. I heard a sharp inhale of breath, then a whine, then her tail thumping against the carpet. I could not believe how she'd gone after that Disciple, and that Edison had once again saved her life. And mine.

He sliced his thumb again, and I took it into my mouth. As I sucked, swallowing his blood, I held his gaze. The line started to heal and he made to withdraw his

thumb, but I continued to pull. With the violence and his bare chest, desire shot through me like a bolt of lightning.

“Gaia, baby, we have got to go.”

Adrenaline is one helluva drug. And he called me *baby*.

I nodded and grabbed my bug-out bag. Edison stood there with me as I whipped off my bloodied underthings and pulled on fresh underwear and a sports bra then jeans and a black T-shirt. He wetted a washcloth and scrubbed most of the blood off of my now-healed wound, and I threw my sticky hair into a bun to hide what we couldn't remove quickly. While he changed out of his bloodied clothes, I shoved my feet into my tennis shoes then grabbed Minnie. After a final once-over of the room, we headed out the door.

Racing to the car, we peeled out of the downtown area. I called Rae, which I generally didn't do unless shit had hit the fan. When she picked up, I could tell she was walking fast.

“Gaia, what's the situation?”

“Blown at the hotel. St. Louis and Minnie are with me. What are your orders? Go back to the airport?”

“No. We don't know how they're tracking you, we don't know how many they have, and we have to assume the airport is blown as well. You'll need to do a clean scrub, including vehicle. Head south.”

A clean scrub meant leaving behind every gun, phone, item of clothing, piece of luggage, bottle of hair product, and, in this case, vehicle that you had in your possession and buying new from a previously unvisited location. I relayed the message, and Edison put on some additional speed. His eyes were still black.

We drove in silence until Edison pulled off into a Walmart parking lot about an hour south of downtown Denver. He gave me his clothing size and told me which ammo to purchase.

“We are not scrubbing our weapons tonight,” he explained.

We'd have to wait until the morning to get the car and the guns, and I wasn't going to contradict him. He reached into the glove compartment and handed me a fat envelope of cash. I kissed him rough and then ran into the store.

Making my way through the aisles, I tossed in clothing and supplies and ammo as quickly as I could without drawing attention. I rolled by the dog section to pick up some food for Minnie and stopped short as I glanced over at the collars.

God bless it. The collar that Minnie was wearing at this very moment had been a gift from Jack. I immediately dialed Edison.

"Gaia, is this an emergency? We are a clean scrub, we cannot use these phones anymore," Edison said with annoyance in his voice.

"St. Louis, it's Minnie's collar. It was a gift from Jack."

He swore under his breath. "Got it. Did you get enough ammo?"

"Bought everything they had on the shelf."

"Then get through the line as quickly as possible. I have a bad feeling about this."

I rang up the items, reset my phone, and threw it in the trash on the way out the door. I was scared but buzzing with adrenaline and a purpose, and I felt more alive than I had in a long time. Staring into the darkness, I realized that Edison and a very naked Minnie were waiting for me in a late model gold-beige Toyota Camry.

"You bought a car?"

"Not exactly. Get in."

"And the collar?"

"Scanned it and uploaded the file to Elliot. Left it back there with my phone."

I threw my bags into the car and we drove off. When we hit the side road, there were three men circling our rental, parked in the back forty.

"That's not going to work out for them," Edison said with a grim smile.

Just as we were easing back onto Highway 25, an explosion rocked the area. Soon enough, emergency vehicles started screaming in the other direction as we

headed out of town. I crawled into the back and changed out of my clothes, including bra and underwear. I looked for Edison's eyes in the rearview mirror and thrilled when I found them, black and foreboding.

When I crawled back into the front seat, Edison turned to me. "Gaia."

"Yes?" I was hoping for something along the lines of "blow me as I drive down this dangerous highway," but that didn't happen.

He looked unhappy.

"I'm sorry, your necklace and ring have to be scrubbed as well."

That was going to hurt.

I knew that Christine herself would tell me to get rid of it if there was even the slimmest hope of avoiding danger; she'd be annoyed that I'd even hesitated. Silently, I removed the delicate chain from my neck, held the ring to my lips for a few seconds, and then handed it over to Edison.

"I will get this back to you," he said solemnly.

I nodded my head, knowing that he couldn't possibly keep such a promise. We stopped behind a dumpster, where I watched as he stripped naked and put on his Walmart clothes. He was close enough to touch, but I kept my hands fisted at my sides. When he finished, we threw all of our old clothes into the dumpster. I activated our burner phones and called Rae, giving her an update on our situation.

"Gaia, how are you doing? Indaja is worried. So am I."

"I'm fine. Killing a couple of those Disciples goes a long way in the healing process, you know?"

I could hear her smile. "Good, good. Let the hate flow through you," she wisecracked. "Let me speak to St. Louis."

I handed the phone to Edison and watched as Rae told him a great many things, most of which, if his expression was any indication, were not pleasant. He silently handed the phone back to me.

“Gaia, this next part is going to be rough. You two are going to drive straight through to the Cave tomorrow. Lay low tonight and head south in the morning. You’re going to change vehicles at least two more times. Call signs until you hit the Cave. Are we clear?” She said it like a command, but I could hear the concern in her voice.

“Crystal. Sissy, I am good.” And I felt it. I was good.

“Look, Gaia. There’s something else. Wakefield brought this to our attention tonight and we need to let you know. I’ve worked with him, and I don’t think it’s a thing, but you do need to know.”

“Okay, well, now you’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, I’m doing this badly. You need to know that the recommendation for St. Louis came to us from Jack.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, not daring to look in Edison’s direction.

“No, I’m not. She made a few recommendations while we were working together, but his was the only one we took seriously.”

I’m sure Rae could hear me knocking the phone against my forehead.

“What’s the connection?”

“She said that she got the recommendation from her commanding officer. And it may have been a genuine recommendation; she needed us for a while there.”

I sat there quietly. Jack never did anything without a specific purpose. Sure, maybe she was just trying to ingratiate herself to Wakefield, but I was left feeling uneasy.

“Gaia, I’m telling you, I trust him with my life. I’d trust him with your life. And we don’t have any proof that this is Jack. As far as we’re concerned, she’s dead.”

I knew differently and so did Rae. This had Jack’s fingerprints all over it. But Rae was right about one thing. I did trust Edison.

“We have some additional intelligence that we’re trying to sort through right now, and we hope to have something for you by the morning.”

“Okay, Sissy. Good to know.”

I hung up and handed the phone to Edison. He looked pensive.

“Spill it, St. Louis.”

“We have to talk about Minnie.”

The smile faded from my face. I knew what he was going to say.

“Y’all think she might have a tracker embedded in her.”

He nodded. “Maybe.”

“Are you telling me we have to abandon my dog?”

“No. And no one would ask you to, okay?”

I nodded my head, the corners of my mouth twitching down.

He continued, “But we have to get her away from you. And she needs to be x-rayed. So, Rae did something, but I’m not sure you’re going to like it.”

“Rae? What did she do?” I asked, realizing that this was the reason Edison looked so grim on their call.

“She contacted Rocky then sent Elliot the upload from the collar. He had to shake some company, but he’ll be here in a few minutes to pick her up. And we need to be gone before he gets here.”

Minnie and my necklace were the two things that kept the thread of Christine in my life and Jack had made them as items to be scrubbed. I knew that Minnie would be all right. But I would be walking naked in the world for the first time and it left me with a profound sense of grief that I didn’t have time for. More broken shit to work through later.

I hugged my goofy dog for all she was worth, tears leaking out. I forgave Rae for not being able to tell me herself. I tied Minnie up behind the dumpster and gave her the chewy I’d purchased for her at the store. She sat there, going to town on a pig’s ear, not even realizing we’d left.

We headed down the road and ten minutes later I got the call from Rocky.

“I’ve got Minnie here, she’s all right. Happy as always.”

I could hear her tail thumping in the background. “Thanks, Rock. This means the world to me.”

“Look, Hedy—you just be careful out there. St. Louis is a good man, and he’ll take care of you if you let him.”

Rocky was not one to offer up advice, and I knew that he was talking about more than just tonight. “I will.”

“Keep your head low and your chin up, and you’ll get out of this just fine,” he said, then hung up.

We drove until we came to a titty bar, where we dumped the car and took a cab to a cash motel on the other side of town. Emotionally, I was a hot mess, but I’d been buzzing since Edison had removed that Disciple’s head and had dark intentions for the night ahead.

Chapter 60

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Roadway Inn, Pueblo, CO

Internal Soundtrack: "Closer"—Nine Inch Nails

We walked into the spare but clean room and Edison immediately sat at the table, re-conning the ammo. I grabbed the plastic bags that contained a bath routine and used the facilities then showered, trying to scrub off the smell of gunpowder. Blood and bits of bone and ruined shifter ran into the drain as I washed my hair, one image swirling in my head. Edison, standing there with the Disciple's head in his hand, drenched in blood.

I was tired of waiting.

Wearing only the towel, I walked into the room.

Edison was still at the table, organizing for the road trip. He looked up as I neared and placed his gun on the table. He breathed in heavily and so did I. I ran my hand through his thick, wavy red hair, grasping as I did. I leaned down to kiss his forehead, the tip of his nose, and, finally, his lips. We deepened the kiss, and his hands went to my hips, slipping beneath the terry cloth fabric until the knot released and gave way.

Pushing aside the ammo, I straddled him on the chair. I put my hands on his chest and could feel his heart beating fast beneath the clothing, skin and bone. His arms encircled me and he looked at me with a longing so intense that my skin felt like it was on fire. He blinked. Edison the Black had returned.

A thought clouded his face and he pulled his hands away. "Gaia..."

"Yes," I said, answering the question unspoken.

Yes, I am here with you. Yes, I want you. Yes, I need you.

I captured his face with my hands and leaned in, kissing him as the beating of his heart knocked against my chest and belly. His hands returned to pull me in close and the smell of apples and freshly worked earth and old books made my chest flush with desire. Our kissing and hunger deepened in equal measure. This is what that first night could have been. Would have been.

He pulled back again, searching my eyes. I mouthed *yes* and the atmosphere shifted. He found the clip that had been pinning back my curls and released it, letting the hair fall around my shoulders and face. He pulled me in and inhaled my scent. Soap and blood and gun powder. Some things just can't be scrubbed off.

His low, rumbling growl returned and his growing hard-on sent fire through my belly. Edison removed his shirt, and I smiled, thinking about the first time he came into my office. Tentatively, I reached out and ran my fingers through the dark auburn curls on his chest.

"Never did get to work on that six-pack," he purred in my ear. The vibrato in his words sent pleasure through my earlobes and down my neck.

"Thank God," I breathed back as I reached into his jeans and delicately adjusted his dick so it lay flush against his body. As I began to grind against his button-fly covered hard-on, he buried his face into my neck, kissing the hot skin, working his way down to my breasts and gently grazing the nipples with his teeth.

"Harder," I begged, and he complied until the sharp sensation of pleasure pain mixed with grinding against the rough, ridged denim sent a quick, intense orgasm through me.

Wrapping myself tightly around him, I whispered my desperate needs into his ear. I wanted him, I wanted under the armor, but I needed him to shake me out of tonight's violence with some brutality of our own. He growled again, louder this time, and stood up with me still clinging to him. Making the bed in two steps, he threw me down, the impact violent and dark. He knelt before me and spread my thighs wide, purpling them where his fingers dug in.

With long, broad strokes from ass to clit, he licked the salted honey of my orgasm, his beard tickling my inner thigh. He grunted in pleasure, inhaling deeply as fresh moisture appeared on his tongue. He sucked and swirled right above my clit, using the indirect pressure to draw out the sweet torture until he moved down to suckle on it in earnest. Another orgasm followed, my thighs squeezing together hard, milking the sensation until he tapped the bed to come up for a breath.

He stood up and flipped me around so I was face up with my head at the edge of the bed, pillows shoved haphazardly underneath. I knew what he wanted, and I was on fire to give it to him. He unbuttoned his jeans, pausing to taste the

transfer of wetness on his fingers, then let them fall to the floor with his boxers, revealing a towering hard-on. As he stepped out of these final pieces of clothing, I moaned with desire. I reached up and back, pulling him into my mouth, drawing down on as much of him as I could handle. He grunted with pleasure as I reached up and gently rolled and pulled on his balls.

I opened my thighs, an invitation. He placed his knee on the bed and laid down on top of me, his full weight pushing me down into the bed. The pressure of his body on mine, the fullness of his dick in my mouth, his tongue probing and pushing and sucking on my clit...nnhhhggg.

I thrilled under the sensation of being barely able to breathe, and my whole body began to shake with pleasure. His breath came in short growls, and I grabbed his ass with both hands to pull him in more deeply, wanting to taste it. With one final push, the warm liquid pulsed into my mouth, and I swallowed and sucked, whimpering for more. His rumbling satisfaction vibrated throughout me.

We put the pillows back at the head of the bed, and he removed his prosthetic. I ran my hands over the edge and kissed the place where he lost his lower leg, letting him know that it didn't scare me anymore. He laid beside me, kissing me deeply, his strong hands softly learning the curves of my body. When his hard-on returned, he entered me without mercy, never once breaking eye contact. His creepy black look sent chills through me. He looked like he could kill me as soon as fuck me, and that fed a deep, unspoken need.

I arched up as he pounded down, and when he put his hands around my neck, I shuddered and nodded, silently begging him to squeeze. He continued with the relentless, deep thrusts and squeezed gently, just enough to make me feel floaty and safe. Just as the periphery of my vision would start to dim, he would release then squeeze again, careful to make sure he was restricting blood flow, but not oxygen.

He tightened his grip with each squeeze and each time he held a little longer, a reminder that I was now well and truly under his control and that he could do with me as he pleased. And I wanted him to. I wanted him to be pleased. The harder he squeezed, the longer he held, the closer he brought me to the brink of ecstasy.

I started to orgasm more intensely than I ever had, a slow rolling shock wave shuddering down my thighs and up into my belly. He released my throat at that moment, and the combination of restored blood flow and orgasm sent me completely out of my body, pure pleasure.

When I came down, he pulled out and I groaned with want. His hard-on, from tip to balls, was wet with my orgasm, and he prepared to fulfill my final whispered request. He reattached his leg and pulled me to my feet, then bent me over the bed, my ass in the air.

“Yes,” I said, raising on my tip toes, pushing up for more.

He made sex sounds as his gripped my hips, leaving more love welts in his wake. He roughly probed my wetness with a finger, then two, then three, in a scooping motion that set my senses buzzing again. Satisfied that he had enough of my lubricant, he roughly pushed those fingers into the fold of my ass until they were gliding through, smoothly. He wet both of his thumbs, then slide both into my ass at the same time. Again on my tiptoes, I pushed hungrily against him. He pulled and stretched mercilessly, the angle making the wetness drip along my belly.

“More,” I moaned. I didn’t want his fingers.

He dipped his hard dick into my wetness and stayed for a few extra seconds, enjoying the moist suction of a slow pussy stroke as he penetrated my ass more deeply with his thumbs. Fully lubed, he pulled out and pushed the plump head of his slippery dick at the entrance.

His girth created a stretching ache that made my entire undercarriage pulse. I took Lamaze breaths as I pushed against him, and he growled as his head was swallowed by the tight space. He thrust all the way in and pulled all the way out, slowly, until pain became pleasure. Satisfied that I could handle him, he thrust violently, deliciously. I hissed in sweet agony, my pussy flush with wetness.

He snaked one hand in front and his chest vibrated and purred against my back when he felt how wet I’d become again. He balled up his fist against the soft flesh, the last knuckle of his thumb pressing sharply into my clit, his weight and mine pushing down, hard and unforgiving. I came again, clenching against him.

Growling, he gripped my hips and thrust ferociously, lifting me again and again to

the tips of my toes. When he couldn't hold on a second longer, he pulled out, leaving a warm mess on my ass and back.

He had been exquisitely brutal and it was everything I'd needed.

He wiped me off with a rough hotel towel then led me to the shower, where he bathed and rinsed me, using delicate strokes on the tender, abused flesh. We stood under the water for a long time, locked in an embrace until the water ran cold.

We lay down on the bed and held one another, sleeping until we had to rise for the long day ahead.

Chapter 61

Edison Fitzwallace

Roadway Inn, Pueblo, CO

As I slept, I dreamed a familiar dream.

“Wait for me,” she said. “You’ll see me again. Be patient and look for someone with my laugh.”

I rolled over and looked at Hedy: her wavy hair around her like a sweeping wind, her relaxed body with its soft, leaning belly, large thighs that curved up into a plump, round ass, and breasts which had snuck away from each other in the middle of the night, her gorgeous freckles and warm skin, the usual crinkling around her eyelids relaxed in sleep, hiding eyes so beautiful that it was a shame that she had to sleep at all. And all around her was a soft violet aura that danced as she slept. I finally knew why I’d needed her from the moment that I’d met her.