

The Wimberley Chronicles

Part Six

A Violet Crown Adventure

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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 37

Edison Fitzwallace

The Cave

I was onto Hedy's games and had been for a while. Honestly, I was enjoying spinning her up. The look she gave me when I ignored her was priceless. Well, that's not really true. There's a price for everything. And my price came in the form of erotic dreams, playing out in my head over and over again.

It was a price I was starting to look forward to paying.

She had her palm on the reader when she smelled my presence and felt my hand on her delicate shoulder, propelling her through the open door. She knew why I was there. I'd heard what she'd said, and now I was going to do something about it. I shut the door and locked it. Wordlessly, I tightened my grip and walked her to the bedroom.

I spun her around and lit into her with a bruising kiss while snaking a hand up her skirt and kicking off my shoes before letting my pants fall to the floor. She removed her blouse and bra and forced my mouth onto her waiting nipple. I sucked on the soft, puckered flesh until she whistled in pain. I trailed kisses between her tits and neck while inhaling her scent and fingering her over her wet panties. She unbuttoned my shirt, letting it join my pants.

I pushed her into a kneeling position as she scrambled to remove my underwear. Her hot mouth devoured my cock, every inch. She worked me over, relentless until I pulled away. Grabbing her arms, I lifted her onto the bed. I pushed her skirt up around her hips and pulled aside her panties. Her lips, spit-slick and red, opened on a gasp as I pushed inside. Cupping the back of her neck, I started slow and forceful, going as deep as I could as I thumbed her clit. I barely held on through her first orgasm, gritting my teeth until the hot, wet pulses faded.

She arched up, scratching my back as I pushed into her. The sound of my name in her mouth drove me to stroke harder and faster. She stiffened, clenching with another orgasm. My body forgot that we were impossible as I detonated inside of her.

I inhaled sharply, waking as my mind rent in two, overcome by twin desires: to be rid of her and to bury myself inside her and never leave.

I'd overheard them talking about the card game and something about Rae being responsible for Hedy's sex life. I thought about how she looked while walking barefoot through the cavern after a night with Arye and how I wished it had been me.

Reaching for the lotion, I coated my stiffening erection and slid my slippery hands up and down until my balls tightened, still full, still in need of release. I imagined her hand on me, delicate fingers finding that right rhythm until little lights went off behind my eyelids. My body shook as the orgasm barreled through me.

Many minutes later I was still a wrung-out washcloth, barely able to open my eyes. Everything felt so real that I half-expected Hedy to be in the bed with me. I looked over and was disappointed to find I was in bed alone.

I didn't think I could hold off much longer, though this wasn't just some desire to get laid. I felt her in my bones. She was a Wanderer on the edge of awakening and her violet-colored dreams liked to keep company with mine. Our souls were starting to bond, and I could barely keep this darker part of me in check. We'd pass in the hallway and it was all I could do to prevent the blackness from taking over both of us.

Chapter 38

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Jack Is Back" – Sonia Leigh

It had been a rough night. I'd had nothing but sex dreams, one right after the other, each featuring my favorite disgruntled redhead. It was annoying as fuck, and I was a helluva lot hotter and more bothered than I would've preferred.

I'm a feather, dammit.

As can be imagined, I was less than pleased to wake up to a sharp rap on the door. Dragging myself to the entryway, I peered through the peephole. It was Edison, and he was either three hours late or two hours early. Covering my unwrangled boobs with one arm, I opened the door wide.

"Edison, it's six a.m. on a Saturday. This'd better be good."

My hair was frizzy and all over the place, I was wearing a stretched-out Def Leppard concert T-shirt over boxers that had crabs on them, and my tits were on walkabout. Meanwhile, the sex scene from Roadhouse briefly flashed in my mind.

I was beginning to regret not grabbing my bra.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Villarreal, uh..." He paused, gripping the doorframe.

"It's early, Edison. Get to it."

He shook his head, rubbing his neck. "Yes, ma'am. The other Dr. Villarreal needs you right away."

"What's this regarding?"

"I'm not sure, but she said that you needed to double time it to the tarmac. You may wish to brush your hair and get out of your clothes." His eyes widened when he heard the suggestion in that sentence. Clearing his throat, he gave me an apparently accidental up-down before correcting himself. "I mean, change your clothes."

Smiling, I scratched my belly, letting the shirt ride up. "Thanks for the style tips, Red. I'll take it under advisement. Tell her I'm on my way," I said, closing the door.

Edison stopped the door with his foot. "Sorry. I'm under orders to drive you over there. Please take five minutes and then come with me."

I shook my head. That order came from Rae, no doubt about it. "Fine, come on in."

My body was buzzy and aware of his gaze, sizing me up as we passed the kitchen into the living area. Goose bumps dimpled my arms and legs. Then, slightly horrified, I remembered I'd taken my bra off while watching TV last night. I quickly leaned over on one leg to snatch it from the arm of the sofa before pivoting to the bedroom. At least, that was the plan.

Not expecting the maneuver, Edison bumped into me, causing a slightly hilarious chain reaction. I tumbled toward the sofa, he grabbed me, and my weight brought both of us down onto the chilly leather arm.

Edison leveraged his hands on my hips to straighten his prosthetic, seeming to pull me in a bit closer and for a beat longer than was absolutely necessary. I'm not saying I tilted my hips so my ass would brush his junk.

I'm not saying I didn't, either.

Come on, Red. Go for it.

"Well, shit." That was Edison's response, and I'm not sure I'd ever heard him curse before. Proper cordiality, my ass.

I grabbed the bra and turned around, his hands still on my hips. Putting my hand on his chest, I looked up at him and whispered, "The next time you need physical contact, Red, just ask."

I topped that off with a wink, and his face went the color of a ripe tomato. He accidentally eye-fucked me before remembering to move his hands.

Point: Villarreal.

"I'm going to go get changed," I said, laughing to myself.

"Okay. Remember, five minutes."

Bless his heart, I think he was trying to sound authoritative. Which just made me laugh harder. "I'll be out in three."

I shut the bedroom door only partway and disrobed as I walked into my bathroom. Edison caught my eye in the mirror, then turned around and sat at the table.

I emerged three minutes later with my hair pulled back, a few swipes of makeup, and wearing jeans, a T-shirt that pictured a stacked blonde eating a Twinkie, a light scarf, and my pink tennis shoes.

“Impressive.”

“Not my first rodeo, Red.”

Edison swallowed hard and led me out the door.

We sped up the long driveway to the parking area by the landing strip. My short legs could barely keep up with him as he step-thumped his way out to the meeting point, where Rae was talking to my mother next to a waiting SUV. Mom finished her conversation with Rae and arched her brow at my T-shirt before walking away. *So much for an important meeting.*

Edison went to the SUV and opened the door. He held my hand as I climbed in the passenger side, grazing my knuckles with his thumb. He closed the door and, for a second, we looked at each other through the glass as the vehicle pulled away. Despite my desire to be a badass bitch, I smiled at him.

Point: Fitzwallace.

Rae cleared her throat and handed me a steaming cup of coffee, fixed exactly the way I liked it. I sipped the hot, life-giving liquid and thanked her for her thoughtfulness while ignoring her smirk. I waited for her to explain what we were doing driving down the road at o’dark thirty, but no explanation was forthcoming. Yeah, this wasn’t good for my anxiety.

“So, Rae, are you giving me this coffee, or are you plying me with it?”

Rae grimaced, which usually meant that she knew the next thing out of her mouth was going to piss me off.

It did.

“A little of both. Before we get into that, I want to remind you that your clearance is limited, and there are things that we have not been able to tell you until now.”

I squinted at her.

“But good news! You’re going to see an old friend, and we’re only an hour away.”

She declined to further clarify.

About an hour later, we turned onto my old street, just off of Koenig Lane in North-Central Austin. I looked at Rae as she pulled up to my house, the one I’d sold after Christine’s death. Saying nothing, she tilted her head toward the front porch. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Jack Taureau, whose warning gave me a chance to get out of my condo alive, was waiting outside for us.

“Surprise...”

“You’ve been lying to me,” I stated.

“Omitting,” Rae deflected.

Looking at the landscaping pots that held mountain laurels in our front yard, the pots that my wife had thrown and fired, I responded, “Pretty sure I sold this house to a young couple about a year ago.”

“Some FBI agents who owed us a favor.”

“Like I said, *lying*.”

I didn’t wait for her response. Hopping out of the SUV, I gave Jack the biggest hug. She was blonde, fresh-faced, and completely put together in her signature cool-casual style—Ann Taylor outfit, layers of James Avery charm bracelets, expensive perfume, and a gorgeous m0851 purse. My subversive T-shirt, pink tennies, and battered necklace looked a bit shabby in comparison, but it was perfect. She was a friend, right when I needed one.

I finally released her and wiped a few tears from my eyes. “You have *no idea* how happy I am to see you.”

Jack gave me a tired, sad smile, “I’m thrilled to see you safe and sound.”

Rae exited and extended her hand to Jack. “Ms. Taureau. It’s good to meet you in person. You’ve been exceedingly helpful these last few months as we’ve tracked down what’s left of Pharaoh’s organization.”

The smallest hint of a scowl curled my lip. Pharaoh was the one who'd ordered the hit on me that upended my whole life. Rae held up her hands and grimaced. I'd seen many of the ops that the crew had gone on, but had no clue that we'd employed outside help. There was also a small part of me that was cheesed that I was doing HR work while there was real analysis going on.

Jack noticed the exchange and laughed then shook Rae's hand. "I'm just glad to be of service."

"When—how did you start working with us?"

Jack smiled. "Honestly, it was because I was looking for you. I thought you'd been captured, but your body was never found. And these people—they like to display the bodies. So I did a little digging and found your father."

"Which is how you found my mother."

Jack nodded. "After I contacted her, I was put in touch with your Mr. Wakefield, whom I've still never met in person. He provided me with a safehouse of sorts, and I was able to continue working on the case."

"I'm guessing this isn't your home base."

Jack shook her head, "No, I drove in to meet with you. I'm already running a little late to get back. Also, I'm not used to standing outside this long, so let's go inside and get caught up."

Rae gave us room to catch up over breakfast. I showed her around the house and we stood for a while in the empty workshop out back. Knowing that time was short, we sat around the kitchen table and talked fast, running through my field trips, the death of Jack's old Basset Hound, my Fitzwallace situation, Jack's lack of a situation, the works. I bet Rae never heard so many topics covered in such a short timeframe.

After finishing a second cup of coffee, we moved to the living room, which now housed a huge conference table. The table was buried under dozens of boxes containing every single note and piece of paper that the DEA had on their rundown of Pharaoh and his organization.

"Something tells me I'm about to be swimming in these boxes," I said, grimacing

“Always my best analyst.”

Opening the lids, I was grateful, I suppose, that things looked well-organized.

“What’s the scoop?”

“I’ve been working on figuring out what Pharaoh’s next move would have been had he not been killed, and I’m stumped.”

“Wakefield’s given me everything that isn’t classified, but I keep running into dead-ends. He’s taking the project away from me and bringing it back in house. I assume to you.”

It was weird, taking the hand-off from my old boss in my old house. I nodded. Bumping Rae’s shoulder, I gave her a hard time. “I just wish your guys would’ve kept the bastard alive long enough to let me question him.”

The two facial expressions that greeted me after that little statement told me that—perhaps—I’d said too much. Jack lowered her head, concealing a smile, and Rae was doing the eyebrow-pursed lips thing.

It’s *possible* she didn’t know that the Cave was responsible for Pharaoh’s death.

“Oops.”

“Never change, Hedy. Never change,” Jack said, laughing as she put her hand on my shoulder. “Rookie mistake. The kind of mistake you’d have never made if your dad hadn’t done such a good job of keeping you out of the intelligence community. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah. *Great*. But hey, am I putting you out of a job? What do they do now—toss you out onto the street?”

She shook her head. “No, Wakefield seems content to let me live for the time being. And hey, as soon as we can get a bead on the rest of his organization, I’ll be able to go home.”

“Then I’ll get right on it, boss.”

Knowing that time was achingly short, we got the boxes out to the SUV and spent a few minutes saying goodbye. Tears were shed on both sides and, after a final, long hug, I took my leave from my mentor and friend.

Back in the SUV, Rae handed me a tissue. I dabbed at my eyes and rested my cheek against the cool glass. "I'm not sure you knew how much I needed to see a familiar face."

Rae made an agreeing noise as she pulled into the street. "I imagine it's not the easiest thing in the world to be completely divorced from everything and everyone you knew before."

"Oh, don't get me wrong—it's been fun. I just really needed that, is all. And sorry about the slip. I'm just so used to telling her everything."

Rae smiled and patted my shoulder. "No biggie. But let's not tell your mom about it."

"Deal."

I quickly sorted out the boxes that didn't have any useful information, then split the remaining three boxes between myself, Rae, and the Wonder Twins. Elliot and Bernard's analytical skills would help us determine if anyone on Pharaoh's team had telegraphed their next move.

We spent the morning reading and re-reading the emails gathered in Pharaoh's bust and looking over the notes from my deceased colleagues.

"Huh. That's weird." Bernard said as he mulled through Pharaoh's credit card statements with his brother's help. After some furious whispering, Elliott held up a document for Bernard to examine with his watery blue eyes.

Rae and I looked up from our infernal paper-shuffling, hoping for anything that would help minimize the sifting.

I walked over to the pile he was working on. "What's weird?"

"Are these the only bank and credit card statements that we have on Pharaoh?"

"Yes."

"He lived in Houston, right?" Elliott asked.

"Yeah," Rae confirmed, now leaning forward in anticipation. "Did you find something?"

Elliot answered while Bernard stared at my tits. "I can see where my brother's going, but at this point, it's just throwing spaghetti at the wall."

"Toss away."

Pulling out several credit card statements, Elliot scanned them with Bernard and whispered back and forth. After a few minutes, he held up receipt.

"Look here. On this one card, I see reoccurring gas station receipts in El Campo, TX over the last two years. That's gotta be, what, twenty receipts? That corridor wasn't one of the areas on the list, right?"

"Correct." I responded.

Rae piped up, "But El Campo is in the middle of nowhere. What the hell kind of business did he have in El Campo?"

"Nothing, as far as I know," I answered. "But I don't think we ever considered it."

"What do they do in El Campo?" Elliot asked.

"I dunno, grow cotton? I only know about the place because back in the day it was one of the few places on the road with a bathroom..."

Shit.

"Hey, Elliott, pull up Google Maps. If you're coming from Houston and stopping in El Campo, what are the most likely final destinations?"

After Elliot takes a few seconds to pull up the map, Bernard responds. "El Campo's the halfway point between Houston and Corpus Christi."

I reviewed the statements again. "Can we—I mean, is Jack available to call? I think we might have something here. Neither the DEA nor the Cave ever went into Corpus."

Rae looked at her watch. "She should be back in place by now."

Within five minutes, Jack's blonde head appeared on the screen. "Hey, Hedy—I don't see you for what, six months, and now twice in one day?"

"Oh, I plan on abusing this video conferencing option as often as I can."

"Perfect. Did you already find something?"

I recounted the gas receipts that we'd found. Our theory was that, whatever their next move was, they were probably using Corpus as their home base while figuring out next steps.

"Dammit," she said, running a hand through her hair. "We checked out El Campo, but there wasn't anything of note. Corpus has a high level of drug use, and we should have been looking there from the start. That took you, what—an hour?"

"Wasn't even me. Elliot and—," I paused, realizing she didn't know about the Wonder Twins. "Um, Elliot over here cracked it."

"Elliot, are you wearing puka shells in your beard?" Jack asked, amused.

"Dammit, Elliot!" shouted Bernard from beneath the sheet of hair.

I surreptitiously moved the webcam away from Elliot as he and Bernard started going after it. Looking into the cam, I shake my head. "Don't ask. It won't improve your day."

"I'm going to take your word on it. I *knew* you would be able to pick up where I left off."

I looked at her and smiled. "Any time, Jack. We'll get back to it then."

"All right. Keep your head on a swivel."

"Ten-four, boss."

Chapter 39

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Bay City Warehouse; Corpus Christi, TX

Internal Soundtrack: The Sound of My Anxiety

Within twenty-four hours of discovering the gas station receipts, Rae's crew were launched into the universe with the general heading of Corpus Christi. I sat next to my mother in the situation room.

Focusing on the body cams, I watched as the team busted into an old warehouse. They were greeted by a group of battle-hardened wise guys, the kind that were a nightmare in hand-to-hand combat. They could punch hard enough to perforate a kidney and knew exactly how to weigh a man down so the ocean never revealed her secrets. But with our fully charged crew, they were lambs to slaughter.

Etienne was going one-on-one with a particularly rough-looking character and ended up on the floor, but Rae was there in an instant, sinking her fangs into his attacker.

An enormous man came up behind Edison and I nearly came unglued. Just as a blade appeared in front of his neck, Edison reached up and bent the wrist in a direction it was not meant to go, stripping the man of his knife. He turned on the guy and a flash of silver then red followed. He then took his attacker's knife and jammed it backwards, catching another man just off-camera.

Nodding in approval at the blade's efficiency, Edison wiped it down and prepared for the next bad guy. But there were no bad guys left. After checking the room, he looked at the camera mounted on Etienne's shoulder and, for a brief microsecond, he smiled. My lower belly went warm and I just hoped that my face wasn't flushed. Refocusing on the entire scene, I felt like I was watching an episode of the *Sopranos*.

And that was the problem.

These were tough men, men who were accustomed to seeing fear in the eyes of others. But not a single one of them was under the age of forty-five or showed any sign of genetic manipulation. More to the point, there were no drugs or manufacturing equipment anywhere to be found. While I celebrated the fact that

we were able to seize this location, the ease of this takedown left me wary. I looked around the table at Pocket, Arye, and my mother. The people with actual combat experience looked troubled.

I turned to Arye. "This isn't right, is it?"

"No. It isn't."

My attention was drawn back to the screen when Edison handed Rae a folded-up printout. Mom pulled her body cam up full screen as Rae read the document, which included a photograph.

My hand went to my mouth. It was Jack, her throat sliced open from ear to ear. The message read:

Thanks for the heads-up.

Chapter 40

Edison Fitzwallace

Hutto, TX

Just outside the small town of Hutto, Texas, Arye and I breached Jack's safehouse and found a horrific scene. Her protection agent lay dead on the floor, a single gunshot wound to the head. There were clear signs of struggle—an overturned kitchen table, a head-shaped hole in the cabinet below the kitchen sink.

On the kitchen floor laid a pool of blood so large that I slipped and nearly fell into it. Bloody drag marks and foot prints, along with remnants of long, blonde hair, led from the kitchen out the door and to the driveway.

I prayed that Hedy wasn't watching the body cams, but I doubted that she could stay away. Later that evening, DNA tests confirmed that Jacqueline Taureau had met a bloody and violent end.

Chapter 41

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Rae's House; Wimberley, TX

Internal Soundtrack: "Hurt"—Johnny Cash

After a few days, we got the final analysis from the medical examiner in Jack's case. Based on the pool of blood left behind, he estimated that she'd had a class-four hemorrhage. Those are fatal unless the patient is already under medical care, and even then the odds aren't good. She was officially declared deceased and her family was notified.

I'm told that the funeral, that I wasn't allowed to attend, was beautiful. In the end, Jacqueline Denice Taureau was memorialized with all the honors and accolades as befits a civil servant who'd given her last full measure of devotion in the service of her country.

With Jack's death, I had no more ties to the outside world. When I could sleep, I dreamt of a boat, lost and alone at sea. Most nights were a combination of insomnia and free-floating anxiety. Recently, another boat began to appear, with a hand reaching out toward me. I would look up and see Edison, but I was never sure that I could trust him. I always woke up before a choice had been made.

God I'm tired.

It was poker night at Rae's and, until this all had happened, I'd been looking forward to the smack talking, the foul language, and the maximum drinking efforts. Now...I wasn't so sure.

I tried to back out, but Rae guilted me into going because she had both promised and delivered one Edison Fitzwallace. I had no idea what the hell I was going to do with him, but I couldn't afford to alienate my friends. Not now.

While getting ready, I realized that I'd reached my limit for the number of times I was willing to wear Spanx. Like, ever. So, I went with minimal primping and a comfy-cute outfit with flip-flops. Once I was ready, Minnie and I rode over with Pocket. I'd more or less made up my mind to focus on drinking and jettisoning this shitty week.

I suspected from the seating arrangement that everyone had colluded to make sure that the only open seat was next to Edison. With the sullen attitude I'd been building on all week, that should have annoyed me to no end.

I just hadn't counted on the fact that Fitzwallace would be wearing civilian clothes.

Nothing fancy—a comfortable black blazer over a white T-shirt and jeans—but it provided the perfect backdrop for that gorgeous, grey-streaked red hair and beard. He looked relaxed and smiled—genuinely?—as I came in. I couldn't gauge exactly how fake my smile looked, but on a scale of one to ten, I was in Joker territory.

Rae had brought two bottles of my favorite local wine, a delightful Sangiovese Rosé from Grape Creek, and I was looking forward to getting mildly shitfaced. I grabbed a bottle, peeled the foil, pulled the cork, and poured an enormous glass, drinking half of it before acknowledging anyone at the table.

“Good evening, Dr. Villarreal—sorry for the rough week,” Edison said kindly.

“Will somebody please tell this jackass that I don't respond to *Dr. Villarreal* on game night?”

“Duly noted, Hedwig,” he countered. *Was that flirting?*

Then Don asked in his low baritone, “Hedwig? Like the angry inch guy?”

Sigh. That stupid musical.

“Red, if those people start singing that song to me, I will kick your ass. It's just Hedy. Think you can handle that?”

“I can handle it just fine, Hedy,” he said, smiling.

Damn, my name sounded good in his mouth. “You know what, Fitzwallace? Of all the money I'll be winning tonight, I'll enjoy taking yours the most.”

His smile was a tiny bit smug as he shook his head. “Oh, I seriously doubt you'll be taking anything from me tonight.”

Okay, *that* was flirting.

A round of laughing and joking followed:

“Ooh, Hedy! The gauntlet has been thrown down!”

“Don’t try to bluff her, dude! She’ll take your money and smile while doing it.”

“I’m tired of giving her my money, maybe I’ll get to give it to Edison tonight!”

This went on for at least a full minute longer than it should have.

I snorted in derision. “Y’all might want to hold off on gargling his ball water until we’ve actually played a hand.”

Bernard laugh as he eyeballed my cleavage. “Geez, you have a mouth on you.”

“That’s what she said,” I replied, punctuating that by downing the rest of the glass.

The table erupted in hoots and hollers, which continued until Rae finally told everyone to shut up and let her deal. Even though Edison was slightly damaging my calm with his proximity and lowkey come-ons, I smiled. This was a good group of guys, and they knew I was having a rough time. Maybe it was the wine, but I was feeling particularly grateful for everyone at that table. Even Fitzwallace.

As Rae passed out the cards, Edison leaned over. “Hey, would you mind if I grab a glass of that wine?”

In doing so, his shoulder met mine. Leaning slightly into his touch, I inhaled his subtle scent. “Not at all.”

He reached behind me to grab another glass from the banquet and, after refilling my glass to the line I’d previously set, poured himself about half as much.

“You’re welcome to have more than that, Grandma.”

“I’m driving both of us back to the Cave tonight,” he said, matter-of-factly. “I prefer to keep it in check.”

I clinked his glass, took a drink, then laughed while shaking my head.

“Is that funny?” he asked, again with a slight lean into my shoulder.

Fucking Rae, I thought to myself.

Aloud I said, “*Pos, con un vino bueno, todo es hilarante.*” With a good wine, everything is hilarious.

Hmm. Maybe that first glass was bigger than I thought. The Spanish only makes an appearance when I'm buzzed or pissed, and I wasn't mad. Wait, am I buzzed? I was feeling warm and fuzzy, must be.

In a low voice, Edison replied, "*En mi opinión, con un vino bueno, todo es hermoso.*" With a good wine, everything is beautiful.

I blushed. *Point: Fitzwallace.* "Of course you speak Spanish."

"Also Romanian, Farsi, and a fair amount of Mandarin, but who's counting?"

Grinning at his attempt to humble-brag, I replied, "I guess that makes my middle school sign language pale in comparison."

He eyed me up and down, then took a sip of wine before answering with a sly grin. "Not at all. I've always thought that would be a useful skill if one's mouth is otherwise occupied."

Pocket, sitting across from us, raised his eyebrow at me.

Yeah, I heard it.

"Wow, Fitz, that's kinda dirty," I said, clinking his glass again.

His nosed wrinkled. "I prefer Edison."

"Mind if I call ya Eddie?" I grin, wondering if he'd ever actually seen *Pretty Woman*.

"Not if you expect me to answer," he answered, smiling broadly.

Bonus point to Fitzwallace for quoting the movie back to me.

The rest of the evening went very much like that, with flirty interludes, small gestures, and touches. I'd like to say that it was all in the name of throwing him off his game, but that would be a lie. If anyone was off-balance, it was me. I watched his hands as he played and thought about the dream, the boat lost at sea. Would I take his hand if he offered it?

Maybe.

Over the course of the evening, we discovered that Edison was a damn good card player. I suspected on several occasions that he was bluffing but only had the

nerve or the focus to call him out on it about half the time. If he didn't need to, he never showed his cards at the end of a hand and his face gave away very little. I'd guess that only Arye had a more disciplined poker face.

"Careful, Hedy—he's catching up to you!" said Fisher, slightly inebriated.

She had nice cleavage tonight—the white freckles on grey skin went all the way down, it seemed. I didn't mind the ribbing.

"Unlike the rest of y'all, this stone-cold serial killer has no tells." I said, gesturing my third—or fourth—glass of wine in his direction. "Not a single one. So, like, I'm having to play real poker while fuddled. *Y ya, todavía estoy ganando.*"

And I'm *still* winning.

Edison smiled at my drunken exposition. He knew I was only ahead because Max followed a sucker bet on trip nines to my trip aces. One by one, everyone lost their shirts to either me or Edison.

In the end, we faced each other. It was almost time to go, and we decided that this hand was for all the marbles. I had a weak straight, 5-9, but stayed with it. He picked two and shuffled the cards around in his hand. On the lay down, the rowdy room went quiet. We had the exact same straight.

I looked at Rae and the purse of her lips said everything.

Chapter 42

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Edison's truck; Devil's Backbone Hwy

On the radio: "Like Real People Do"—Hozier

Everyone was in a good mood, with a fair amount of good-natured grumbling about losing to the both of us, as we dispersed. Edison walked me to the passenger side of his enormous extended-cab truck, where he opened the door for me and gently held my hand as I tipsily mountain-climbed into the cab.

"Why do you have such a huge truck? You are *not* a farmer."

"I'm thinking about buying a boat," he said with a smile. "I'll need something to tow it with."

Minnie followed Edison and made a valiant effort to jump into the truck, which caused him to give up a beautiful, low, rumbling chuckle. Smiling, he scooped her up and kissed the top of her head. Seeing how gently he carried her and how comfy she was in the crook of his arm made my ovaries explode a little.

"This dog is really strange," he said as she bared her happy teeth at him.

"Don't be mean, she's smiling at you."

"It was a compliment. I enjoy strange," he replied as he handed her to me.

He hopped in the driver's side and Minnie immediately went to snuggle up against him. *Traitor*.

See also: slightly jealous of a dog.

As adorable as all of that was, I didn't know where the any of this was going. I was discombobulated by his presence and too soused to overthink it anymore. He turned the radio to the local college station, seemingly content to let us ride in silence, so I followed his lead.

The station was running a marathon of Other Voices, an old live music series set in an Irish church. "Like Real People Do" by Hozier began to play, deeper and more ethereal than the original. I started singing it softly, just to myself, dreamily looking out the window as we passed through the winding, deserted highway.

The darkly romantic lyrics, so hauntingly sung, lit a tiny flame in my consciousness. I straightened in my seat and my head felt heavy with vertigo, though it wasn't the alcohol that was causing my world to spin. I'd gone into the evening thinking that, if the opportunity presented itself, I was just going to fuck him and get him out of my system. But the night didn't feel like that at all, and I didn't have that sense of knowing what was coming next. In a typical encounter, I always just *knew*. This was *so* not that.

No wonder I was so off.

Rae, Max, and Arye had each insisted that Edison's feelings ran deeper than I thought possible and, sitting here in the truck with him, I knew they were right. I could feel it in the energy between us.

And I remembered a pivotal moment with Christine—I was looking at her, knowing that she was the one, knowing that I was safe enough to simply *be* with her. Riding alongside Edison in the quiet, I recognized the sensation as it came over me again. I thought of the dream, alone in a boat that had been abandoned and battered, and this time...I took his hand.

Time to jump, Hedy.

"Hey, we're about to pass a really great overlook. Do you mind stopping for a just a second? I want to look at the stars."

Okay, not my best work, but I could barely breathe, let alone think. Wordlessly he turned in and pulled to a stop and for a second I was too—I really couldn't tell you. If you think of a word, let me know—to do anything but stare off into the distance and try to regulate my oxygen, inhaling the hazy essence of library books and apples and freshly tilled earth. After a few beats, I darted a look in his direction and found that he was looking at me, waiting. Nervous, I quickly lowered my eyes to somewhere around the top button on his blazer.

A few more breaths, my inhales and exhales sounding like the tide. I thought he might get out of the truck to continue the charade, but he wasn't going anywhere. Screwing up my courage, I allowed my eyes to meet his.

And there it was. Raw, naked longing. And oceans of the emotion that I was just starting to grapple with.

My heart lurched in my chest as I held his eyes. I didn't know I could feel this way again. I really didn't. He took off his seatbelt before edging toward me, tucking a few runaway curls behind my ear. He said nothing, simply looking into my eyes.

After a moment, he smiled warmly and leaned in, grazing his lips against mine, a silent ask. I could only open up to him, and his answering kiss stripped me bare.

I don't know if there's a word that describes the perfect "capture" in a kiss, but he had it. Masculine, soft, and intense. As I met his intensity, a dizzying warmth spread down my neck and into my chest then out to my fingertips, until I felt the edges of my body begin to blur. He palmed the back of my neck, holding me in that suspended atmosphere, changing my whole goddamned life.

I wish it could have lasted longer.

Chapter 43

Edison Fitzwallace

Devil's Backbone Overlook

On the radio: "Lost Boy"—Ruth B.

The impact from behind was incredible and violent, throwing us into our restraints and Minnie against the dashboard then the floor. Before we could get our bearings, a second, more terrible impact pushed the truck sideways toward the edge of the overlook. The sound of metal screeching and bones breaking would not be easily forgotten.

Hedy was awake and able to hold herself upright, but the shock-filled look in her eyes and panting breath told me she was in excruciating pain. I was shaken but able to move. Darkness swirled in my eyes.

Good.

I welcomed the black aura; I needed it for what I was about to do. Not wanting to frighten Hedy, I blinked and looked away, grabbing my gun and the knife I'd taken from the good fella in Corpus.

Quietly, I said to her, "Gaia, stay here. I'll be right back."

She gulped and attempted to nod, choking back a scream.

"Hedy, don't move. Please. Just stay here."

I opened the door and cursed under my breath. "Stay on that side of the cab. The tires are half off the edge."

I pulled myself out of the window and over the top of the truck, hopping to the ground. My prosthetic went a little crooked, but within seconds the truck was surrounded by a pack of half-shifted shepherds. Operating on instinct, I was only vaguely aware of the familiar, wet and crunchy sounds of hand-to-hand combat. A body thrown to the ground, the sound of a bone going in the wrong direction, the sound of flesh being punched through with a sharp object and eviscerated. Warm, wet blood coating my hands. A low rumble coming from my chest that sounded like something between a growl and a roar.

A vicious mongrel yanked open the passenger door, pulling Hedy to the ground. I tried to get to her but was quickly overwhelmed by a half dozen or so shifters.

They held me back as he climbed on top of her. She screamed in agony and the low hum of murder settled in my bones. They'd each just signed their own death warrant.

Chapter 44

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

Devil's Backbone Overlook

I screamed as a shifter with crosses on his hands threw me to the ground and pinned me down. Each inhale—mine or his—created new gulfs of sharp, horrible pain. I couldn't move, breathe, or fight. The terrible sound of ripping metal filled the night air as the truck tumbled over the side.

"Minnie?" I sobbed, unable to even look around. She whined softly, a lump on the ground at the edge of my peripheral vision.

Pulling his knife, the disciple ran the dull edge along my neck to get my attention.

"Keep quiet or I'll make it hurt," he said, thrusting against my hip.

Everything that Arye'd taught me about dealing with an attacker ran through my head, and I couldn't do any of it. I had only my wits about me.

Swallowing down the bile, I winked at him, biting my lip. "What if I like pain?"

He pulled his chin back, confused. His hesitation was the last mistake that genetically engineered fuck-up would ever make. A blood-spattered, muscled arm reached around and grasped his jaw as Edison's face loomed into view.

His eyes, which just minutes before were so tender and vulnerable, were completely black—no white at all—and flat with a killer's stare. He was calm as he whipped the man's spine past its breaking point. With the cracking and splintering of bone, his face took on an expression I'd seen on the faces of strangers in my hotel bed, a look of release, of satisfaction long overdue. He stared up into the night sky, inhaling ecstasy.

Surreally, two cars screeched to a halt around us and six of the most finely trained armed forces specialists exited the vehicles.

"You hit the panic button?"

Remembering how much it hurt to nod, I used my words. "Yes."

"I could kiss you," he said, refocusing on the team.

They circled us like wagons, weapons up and pointed out like unwelcome spikes. Edison looked at Rae. They nodded to each other and took up positions.

I was still on the ground and no one was saying a word. The only sound was Minnie, softly panting and whining in pain. Minutes we spent like this, our hearts thumping in time, waiting for a second wave. All of us, breathing in sync, held together by brotherhood and a common goal. Kill anything that moves on us tonight. Protect our injured.

After several minutes of taut silence, Rae raised her fist and the team broke formation. I still couldn't move my head without excruciating pain, but I located many broken bodies in my peripheral vision, including that of my attacker. Walking up to Edison, Rae examined his eyes and shook her head. Edison glimpsed over at me then turned and walked out of view.

I heard him pick up Minnie and gently whisper into her ear before handing her off to Rae. He was saying that she was going to be all right, perhaps louder this time for my benefit.

When the all-clear was sent, my mother and Fisher came screeching up in an SUV. I was put on a stretcher and Edison helped to put me in the back. His eyes looked like his eyes again and worry furrowed his brow. He turned to leave with the others, but my mother was having none of it.

"St. Louis, get in the back of the car."

"Yes, ma'am."

Fisher moved in to let him join us. She inserted an IV into my arm and it delivered pain relief like a warm wave through my body. I leaned into it, hoping to forget what just happened. Hoping to...aaaahhhnnn.

I was in love with that needle. I named him Harold and we would be besties.
Thank you, Harold, you are my friend.

"Baby, what did you say?"

Black-and-blue-eyed Edison was calling me baby. That was nice.

"I was thanking my needle. I've named him Harold."

"Are you in pain?" Fisher asked.

“Nope. No more of that yucky pain-pain. That Harold is a stand-up guy.”

I was slurry and slomo, but she got the point.

“Hey. Why your eyes go so black back there?” I asked, giggling at the way ‘black back’ sounded on my tongue.

Black back. Black back. Fisher looked up at Edison and shrugged her shoulders. Silly.

Oh no, Edison’s looking serious. I wanted to grab his wittle chin-chin and shake it, but I couldn’t move that way.

“Why you so serious? Bring sexy Edison back!”

I know morphine makes other people stupid, but I just get super witty.

“Call me baby. I like that,” I said. It’s all about communicating what you want in a relationship, you know? “But I also like to be bound and gagged, so...”

Fisher purpled around her cheeks and Edison grinned to himself.

“Stop trying to distract me with your sexy smile. Why the eyes?”

Oh no. Serious face. Again.

“I can’t tell you that right now.”

“Classified?”

“Classified,” he confirmed.

I pouted. Stupid classified was stupid. “Can you show me?” I asked hopefully.

Fisher was busy with my vitals so Edison looked at me and blinked. Chilling black demon eyes. *Blink*. Navy-blue kind eyes. *Blink*. Demon. *Blink*. Kind.

I felt turned on and terrified. I wanted him to make love to me with blue eyes and fuck me with black. I wanted a candy fruit stand four-way with the two Edisons and my new buddy, Harold.

I watched him reading me. *Hey there, sexy*. He gestured to Dr. Fisher, and she nodded then looked away. Edison drew the blade he’d taken from the man in the Corpus raid. Well, shit—that escalated quickly. I supposed it was the kindest time

to kill me if that's what he had to do. I hoped he would make it quick before the morphine ran out.

Instead of killing me, he sliced open his own thumb, blood seeping from the self-inflicted wound. He slipped it into my mouth, running it over my teeth. His eyes faded to black, a directive. I allowed his thumb past my teeth and sucked on it, swallowing his coppery, orchard blood as his eyes told me to do. I sucked until his skin was smooth in my mouth. Slowly, sensually, he withdrew the thumb, the line of red completely gone and the surface as smooth as it had been before the blade touched it.

Blink. Kind blue.

I gave in to the morphine.

Chapter 45

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

I woke up the next morning in Medical, the place with the blue floors. I flinched, anticipating deep pain from the whiplash but was surprised to find my muscles loose and the structure of my neck strong. No grinding or popping when I turned my neck. I didn't even have a hangover and my knee, which had been sore since I'd run into Edison, felt just fine. I looked to my side and saw him sitting in the hospital chair. He was slumped back with his head pitched forward, hair a mess.

And there was Minnie, whapping her tail and looking so happy and whole. I didn't understand, but I teared up when I saw that weird little wiggle-butt.

Edison woke up as I stirred and popped Minnie up onto the bed. She pawed at me, prancing and smiling, and I'm pretty sure there's now a foot print on my liver. I looked over at Edison and he was smiling. Grimly.

"How long have I been out? What day is it?"

"It's Sunday."

I exhaled in relief. I'd only slept through the night.

Looking at my rumpled knight in shining armor, I patted the bed next me.

He shook his head, looking down at the ground. "I'm not supposed to be in here."

"The hell you say. You saved my life, healed my neck, and gave me pretty much the best kiss I've ever had. Get in my bed."

His smile was sad and he hesitated, even as his body practically swayed with need. I reached out to him and, after a moment, he took my hand, rubbing his thumb over the back of it. I tugged him toward me, insistent. After checking over his shoulder, he gave in and joined me. He rested on his side, and instinctively I turned to face him, wrapping my arm around his waist as I snuggled into his firm chest.

Just breathing in his air made me feel more whole than I had in a long time.

He checked the door again then wrapped his arm around me, cocooning me in his warmth. Tears welled up in my eyes and I let them fall. "Thank you."

"I'm so sorry that I couldn't stop that one guy from hurting you." His deep voice resonated to my core.

"What are you apologizing for? You saved me from him. That makes you my hero," I said, smiling into his chest.

"I would do anything to keep you safe, Hedy. I hope you know that."

He sure didn't say a lot, but his simple words filled me with effervescence from my chest out to my fingertips and toes. It was a sensation I'd only ever felt with one other person.

"Mmm," I responded dreamily, loving how much he enveloped me. Squeezing his hip, I look up at him "I know you would."

Reaching up, I kissed his neck and chin. He made a grumbling noise in his throat and kissed my forehead. I'd forgotten about forehead kisses and how much I liked them.

Greedy for his warmth, I snuggled in even deeper, only to find him shifting away from me. He pivoted to sit on the edge of the bed, his shoulders tilted downward. I wanted to pull his body back to mine, but the inexplicably dejected slump of his body told me it was a lost cause.

"I can't do this," he said, rising and quickly stepping toward the door. "I'm sorry, Hedy."

Chapter 46

Edison Fitzwallace

The Cave

“What’s wrong, Edison?” Hedy asked, following me on bare feet.

“Because you saw what I did to those Disciples. You saw who I am.”

“So,” she said, hand on her hip.

“I’m just too dangerous, Hedy. I could hurt you.”

She shook her head. “Is this something you’ve been all your life?”

Avoiding her eyes, wishing for any other kind of outcome, I nodded.

“Weren’t you married to someone?”

“Lena never knew about this part of me.”

Her hand flew to her chest as though protecting her heart. “Doesn’t that kind of prove my point? You saved my life last night. Everyone saw that.”

I bowed my head, unable to explain my reticence.

“Dammit. My mom. She saw what you did. She saw their bodies, didn’t she?”

“Yes,” I replied, unable to look her in the eyes.

“Can I guess that you also received a call from my father?”

“Yes.”

She wrapped my arms around me, holding me tight, infusing me with her power and warmth. I couldn’t help but hug her back. It was simultaneously the best and worst thing I’d ever felt, wrapped around her. We stood there for a long time.

“Hedy, I—”

“Call me baby. I like it when you call me baby,” she said, murdering me with her sweetness as she clung to me even more tightly.

Firmly, I stepped out of her embrace and looked down at her, my vision blurry.

“I can’t, Hedy. You called me a serial killer last night, and I know you were joking, but you were right. If you think about it, I’m not that far removed from that thing that hurt you last night.”

“No. *No*. You are *nothing* like that thing from last night.”

“I may do it by the book, but I do have a killer inside of me. That part of me...he wants you too. But I don’t know *how* he wants you, and if it, *if I*, ever...hurt you like that Disciple did, I would never forgive myself.”

“That’s ridiculous, Edison. Even if you don’t trust yourself, can you at least trust me as a professional? You don’t have a diagnosis; this is a thing that survives in the world outside of your skull. And whatever this is, you are not some Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The way you looked at me last night, the way you kissed me...you’re just *not*.”

Standing over her, I blinked, letting the darkness swirl around me, letting my eyes go black. In the darker timbre of this dangerous side of me, I asked, “Are you sure about that?”

The change frightened her, and I felt like an asshole when she stepped back.

“See,” I said gently, blinking to restore my humanity. “You’re afraid of me. And you should be.”

Hugging herself, she swayed a little. “That’s because I’m a bit of an exposed wire right now and you were *trying* to scare me. Doesn’t that speak to the control that you have?”

“Control? No. It’s been damned near impossible to keep this from you, as far back as San Francisco. There’s something about you that draws him out. And I can’t—I won’t—let him anywhere near you.”

“*Edison*. That doesn’t make any sense. We can work this out, I know we can.”

She reached out to put her hand on my chest, but I stepped back, just outside of her reach. Her grieved face made it real, this thing we almost had.

I shut down as I’d taught myself to do decades ago. I could alter the atmosphere with my darkness and the air felt a few degrees cooler.

Shivering, she saw, finally, all that I was capable of. "Okay, then. If you don't want to stay, I can't keep you here."

I wiped the tear falling down my cheek and walked out.

Chapter 47

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Let It Go"—James Bay

I've had a rough go of it: nightmares every night, avoiding Edison every day, mourning Jack in and around all of that. When I was unlucky enough to run into him, he looked at me like I was something stuck to the bottom of his shoe as if he found me disgusting. It hurt more than I cared to admit.

Needing distance from painful things, I dug out my old copy of Edison's schedule and did my best to avoid him, though our proximity made it nearly impossible. By Halloween, I started cooking all my meals in my apartment.

The last time it hurt me to see him, I'd finished a long day and went with Minnie to sit out by the natural pool with a bottle of wine. He'd been outside and was heading up the path to go back into the building. We couldn't avoid each other.

"Good evening, Edison," I said, faltering.

Minnie jumped on him, and he ignored her. That ugly disdain flashed across his face and he moved past us without returning the greeting. Clinically, I knew that was his cover. That he had to be hurting too. But it was painful in ways that were hard to recover from.

I made my way to the pool, opened the bottle, and anticipated more tears. I was so sick of crying. Something about feeling small while looking up at the evening sky gave me perspective. If I was small, he was small. And I was done feeling ashamed and sad about a small man who couldn't love me.

Various departments were hurting for crew, and since several *thorough* scans of my things, our planes, and the entire complex netted exactly zero evidence of being tracked, I was able to convince Rae to let me go back out on short recruiting runs. And by convince, I mean that I channeled Jack and yelled at her until she gave in.

The caveat? My standard accompaniment was doubled and I could no longer bring Minnie with me since her presence added a "layer of uncertainty" that could not be planned for. Fisher and Max got into it over who got to watch Minnie

while I was gone, so Elliot drew up a calendar. I noticed that he and Bernard got her at least once a week.

My first flight out, I ended up in Chicago during a snow storm. I quickly figured out that if the recruit I'd had my eye on couldn't make it to our meeting due to bad weather, he was never going to cut it with Rae's crew. Having barely survived my encounters with the Disciples, I was better qualified to say that an inability to put snow tires on his Ford was a legitimate disqualification.

Two weeks and three duds later I took a trip out to Florida, where I found Odd and Anders Bash. They were a pair of rough-and-tumble, Nordic-looking twins who were originally from Texas, so I liked them immediately. Their backgrounds checked out, their mission in Florida had just ended, and Arye and Max thought they were a hoot. So we agreed to fly them back with us the next day.

What made them such a great catch was that, under all of those delicious muscles, Odd had his doctorate in electrical engineering while Anders was a trauma surgeon who dabbled in experimental medicine. Since we had an evening to kill and my protectors were teetotaling it, the Bash Brothers and I got happy on some local hooch as we watched the ocean waves roll in and out.

By the end of it, I knew the names of the men and women who took their various virginities and discovered a rather useful body disposal option in East Texas, should anything go pear-shaped in the Houston-to-Baton Rouge corridor. God, I was going to love working with these guys.

In addition to being generous booze dealers, the good doctor flirted shamelessly the entire evening. Seriously, *everyone* deserves a solid Anders Bash flirtation. Odd slipped out at some point, and I wasn't surprised when Anders made a serious play.

He patted his lap with a silly little up-nod. "Come on, cutie. I've got a freckle on my ball sack that needs your immediate attention."

I snort laughed, then gestured to myself. "Dude, you've got, like, a twelve-pack for abs. I...*don't*. You sure you wanna see all of this?"

"Mmm," he said, pulling me onto his lap as he palmed my belly. "I do love a round woman. You and I could have a lot of fun tonight."

Not sure why, but my face crumpled, and I started to cry.

“Oh, no, no, no,” he said, putting his arms around me. “What’s wrong, sweet girl?”

His asking only made it worse, and I cried even harder.

“Did somebody break your heart? Do I need to murder someone for you?”

I laughed in spite of myself and punched his arm. “Stupid.”

He kissed my temple and laughed with me. “I mean, I know we just met, but I’d totally do it. I can even throw in a little enhanced interrogation if you’d like.”

Wiping my tears, I poked him in the stomach. “You ain’t right in the head, you know that, yeah?”

“Look, lady. Sane isn’t where I shine. My skills land more in the make-a-motherfucker-pay genre if you catch my drift.”

He handed me a tissue. I blew my nose and laughed a little more.

“Glad to see I could bring a smile to your face,” he said, running his finger along my bottom lip.

Laughing at myself, I shook my head, then made a decision. Couldn’t believe I was going to go through with this, but...I think I had to. For me. “Look, I’m too emotional for you to be sweet to me. But I could use a friend just for tonight. One who doesn’t mind it a little rough and can keep this super casual.”

“A little rough and casual, one-night only romp? That’s my favorite way to fuck,” he answered, smiling gamely.

I stopped him, just to make sure. “If we do this, it’s gonna end up on the logs. Which, to be completely transparent, is exactly what I want.”

“Looking to inflict some existential pain on whoever’s responsible for these tears?” he asked, palming my hips.

I nodded, wiping my eyes.

He squeezed my ass with a big shit-eating grin. “Tell me, will I be working with this unfortunate soul?”

“Yep. Got a problem with that?”

“Nope. I like pushing buttons.”

“Then your target is Edison Fitzwallace. Push away.”

I led him to my room and proceeded to systematically work out all of the pain and unfairness of the last several months. We were both spent and walking funny by the end of the night. It was exactly what I needed, and by the morning I knew we’d be friends.

Some people just surprise you, I guess.

A couple of weeks into recruiting runs and my groove was officially back. In my dreams, I was a white feather sailing on blue skies once more.

Chapter 48

Edison Fitzwallace

The Cave

I walked into Indaja's office for our monthly appointment, my eyes shifting between blue and black, a migraine eating its way through my skull.

"What's going on, Edison? You look upset."

Indaja's wise eyes met mine and she smiled kindly, gesturing to the seat in front of the tiny desk. I sat down, defeated.

"She's supposed to be back today, but they've already got her going on a road trip with Rae. She won't even make it to the building. And she's taking company again."

"How are you doing with that?"

I shook my head. "Not good."

"Why not good?"

"She's avoiding me and going to other men."

"Can I be honest with you?" she asked as if she'd ever skirted around a direct truth.

I gestured for her to continue.

"If you looked at me the way you look at her, I'd avoid you too. And she's allowed to sleep with whoever the hell she wants."

"I know, I know. And I promise, I'm just trying to avoid scaring her," I explained, my eyes lightening into blue. "I don't want to hurt her, I promise."

"I understand, and I've been thinking about this for a while—I don't think we've been going about this the right way."

"How so?"

Drumming the desk, she takes a moment to gather her thoughts. "Are you aware that *all* intense emotions have the potential to bring out your black eyes? Not just fear and hate?"

I stared at the deceptively older woman, trying to understand. “Even...?”

She smiled. “Especially.”

I hadn’t ever considered that. I looked down at my hands, sad and frustrated. “But I loved Lena, and it was never this hard to keep that in check.”

Indaja smiles, and I wonder if I’ve just admitted to loving Hedy.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s that you loved Lena any less or Hedy any more, but don’t forget that she is a very powerful Wanderer.”

It was true. Hedy was far more powerful than she realized. The dream connection we had across the hall from each other was just as powerful when she was in another state. When the blonde-haired twins walked into the gym for their physical tests, I knew exactly which one had slept with her.

And then accidentally broke his nose.

Anders the Asshole winked at me with blood spilling down his chin and Max damn near had to tackle me to the ground to keep me from ripping his head off.

Rae yelled at me and made me donate blood to Dr. Fisher so Anders could continue his training. Turns out, he’s some kind of surgeon, and now he’s curious about this miracle infusion she whipped up for him. He’s been yapping in Wakefield’s ear about how much money they could make off of it. I have a feeling I’m about to become a volunteer pincushion.

“Hey, pay attention. This is important,” Indaja said, rapping her knuckles on her desk.

I snapped my attention back to the present. “Sorry.”

Leaning forward, she patted my arm. “Look, you’ve spent decades hiding who you are, and that may have worked at one time, but now the results are pretty bad.”

I snorted to myself. “Can’t argue with that. But I don’t know what else to do.”

“I want to try something. Do you trust me?”

Just being honest here, I was desperate to try anything. I gestured for her to continue.

“I know that you try to avoid thinking about Hedy, but I want you to go the other way. Give yourself permission to think about her and specifically think about how you wish things were. Don’t worry about logistics or how things are right now. Think about best-case scenario.”

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, I agree to try.

“And really commit to it. Imagine if a few things had gone differently.”

I knew exactly what I wished had gone differently. That kiss in the truck. I would’ve had her in my arms all night long.

As I thought of Hedy, the darkness surrounded me and my eyes swirled black.

“Okay, good. Now keep that image in your mind...and make your eyes blue again.”

My face twitched and I concentrated on that kiss while switching to blue. As I looked up, Indaja was taking a picture on her phone.

“What are you doing?”

She held up the picture. My face was twisted into a scowl, my eyes a dark and stormy blue. Indaja swiped left and showed me the picture she’d surreptitiously snapped just a few seconds before. My black eyes were chilling, yes, but my face was relaxed and happy.

Putting her phone down, she leaned forward again. “So...I wasn’t sure about the timing of things, but I’ve talked to Izzy and to Rae and they’ve both agreed that you don’t have to hide who you are,” Indaja said, ignoring my distressed look. “Your crew and Hedy will get used to the black eyes, but you will continue to push people away if you have to keep hiding your true nature.”

“I just...I worry about control.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I hurt people.”

“How long has it been since you’ve hurt someone outside of a military operation?”

“A few years.”

Tilting her head, she raised her eyebrow. “Try again. I’d bet real money that not even Izzy was alive the last time you genuinely lost your temper.”

I considered that, and she was right. I hadn’t unintentionally injured someone since puberty, over a hundred years ago.

“Honestly, I think that having to lie your entire life has made you more dangerous than if you had simply been allowed to be yourself.”

My stomach tightened. “I’m not even sure of what that would look like.”

“Probably pretty ugly at first,” said Indaja, grinning. “But just to let you know, that’s why we have Hedy going back out on the road. We want to give you a few days to acclimate without her here.”

“So how are we going to do this—say, ‘Hey—look at me, guys. Try not to freak out.’”

Indaja leaned forward and thumped my head. “Have you not met the people on this team? Who, exactly, are you going to freak out?”

I allowed a small laugh. She had a point.

“So, you think the team will be okay with it?”

“Yeah. Just, you know. Try not to kill anybody.”

Chapter 49

Dr. Hedy Villarreal

The Cave

Internal Soundtrack: "Raise Hell"—Brandi Carlisle

Rae was waiting for me on the tarmac, with Max and Minnie in tow. I set down my bag and ran over, pulling my sweet girl into my arms.

"Minnie!"

Her big, snorty welcomes were always the first thing I looked forward to. Having greeted my dog, I turned to the bemused humans.

"Hey, y'all. How's it going?"

"It's going," Rae said, scritching Minnie's ribs for her customary smile.

"So...meeting me on the tarmac—are we getting back on the plane?"

"No, actually, we have a couple of recruits in the area and thought we'd start here."

"Sounds like a plan—just the two of us?"

"Yep. Mind if we take your Civic?"

"Are you kidding? I haven't driven in forever. But if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to keep me away."

She walked me out of earshot of Max. "There's a few things going on with Edison that require a delicate touch. It'd just be better if..."

"...If I weren't there," I said, trying not to think too much about the fact that he could speak to Indy and not me.

"Yeah. But hey, I've got fresh clothes all lined up for you."

"I'm not even going inside?"

"Nope."

"All righty then, let's hit it."

After passing on the recruit we spoke to in Austin and waitlisting the pilot we met with in San Antonio, we ended up at Mi Tierra, drinking margaritas on the patio and catching up with each other. Her relationship with Max was progressing nicely and a few of the people on the team had been let in on the secret. Her tails tended to dance when she talked about him—love was a good look on her.

Pouring herself a refill from a carafe, Rae squinted at me. “These margaritas taste awfully familiar.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Rae,” I said, batting my eyes.

“I *mean* that I believe this is the formula by which you remove cash from my pockets on poker night.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny any such formula, though let it be known that some people should not go all in when they cannot bluff to save their souls.”

“Touché.”

She set down her glass and looked at me, a question in her eyes. “Hedy, I’m sorry, but we need to talk about Edison before I get any drunker.”

“Are you about to ruin my buzz?”

“Possibly.”

I set my glass down and gestured for her to continue.

“He’s not really a human.”

“That’s one hell of a skin-suit he’s wearing then,” I joked, though I’d suspected as much.

Rae rolled her eyes and continued. “He is, among other things, a shifter.”

“Like you?”

“Yes and no. Shifters branched off from homo sapiens, and we broadly refer to ourselves as Singulari. You can think of us as humans with a broad range of mental and physical gifts,” she said, emphasizing this by flashing her fangs.

“He didn’t shift into an animal, though. Everything about him just seemed...sharper.”

Shaking her head, she replied, “Not all of us are animal shifters. Some have only subtle visual shifts, and their gifts tend to be quite a bit more powerful.”

“So, his ability to heal with, like, no scars—that’s his gift? Or whatever?”

Rae signaled for the waitress, pointing to the halfway empty carafe. Turning to me, she nods. “He’s also stronger than he looks. And we’re prepping him to come out to the team.”

A part of me was glad he’d be able to be himself while another, less charitable part of me, was trying really hard not to care. “Did you know about Edison?”

She shrugged, licking a crystal of salt from her margarita rim. “Wakefield wanted him, so I suspected. Started seeing him heal from things that would have someone else down for the count for days, kinda put it together.”

“And when you say that he’s a Singulari ‘among other things,’ you mean...?”

“His full profile is currently classified. But I was there when Indaja explained everything to him.”

“*Indaja?* Why would she be explaining things to him?”

Rae thinned her lips, tilting her head.

“She’s a Singulari, too,” I guessed.

Rae said nothing and instead took a long drink.

Items started to fall into place. “So on my first day in Wimberley, you showed me a video with warehouses full of shifters that had experimented on. Who did that? The Disciples?”

“Yep.” Looking around, Rae explained. “They’re an ancient order who have been trying to destroy the Singulari since they first appeared.”

“With an army of genetically-modified shifters?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s just rude.”

Laughing, Rae takes another drink. “That’s what I said. And it’s why they use the epigenetic compound. It allows the Disciples to control the percentage of shift.”

“To commit genocide more efficiently,” I conclude.

Rae bobs her head again, refocusing on the margarita.

“Dare I ask why?”

“Newest reason? We’re an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.”

“Thus the crosses on the hands. Real reason?”

“World domination.”

Of course. Fucking of course. “And Wakefield didn’t want to involve the government because the genetic tech that the Disciples were using is going to be profitable.”

“Massively profitable. He’ll be the first living trillionaire.”

“But he’s hired you all to kill them and steal the technology.”

“Yes.”

“Thus crippling a dangerous group of people while becoming an actual goddamn trillionaire.”

“You are quite literally right on the money.”

“So, Pharaoh’s Disciples are this scrappy band of genocidal maniacs and fucking Seth Wakefield is the morally gray, capitalist hero of this tale?”

Nodding, Rae topped off both of our glasses, emptying the carafe. Holding her margarita in the air, she toasted, “To the hero we deserve, Seth Fucking Wakefield.”

We clinked our glasses as the waitress replaced the carafe.

“And Edison is a Singulari who can heal and kill with equal efficiency.” I crack my neck, thinking about the taste of his blood.

“Yep. And Seth just found out that his blood can heal other people too. You should’ve seen his eyes when he realized that.”

“I bet there were dollar signs.”

“Sooo many dollar signs.”

I huffed out a breath, gathering my thoughts around the tequila. “And now Edison’s working with Indy to make sure coming out goes well with the team.”

“Yes. Indaja is trying to help him see that he is less dangerous if he does not hide who he is.”

“And...?”

“He had an appointment with her today that went really well and they’re telling the team tomorrow. And I’m going to have you stay at your mom’s house for the next day or two.”

“That’s fine. Is he moving back to the Shed?”

“He can’t. He’s actually...older...than you might think and the older this kind of Singulari gets, the more they need the dark.”

Her words coalesced in an awful realization.

“So...when you say an older shifter in need of the dark, you mean vampire, don’t you? Are you telling me that I’ve been having sex dreams about a *vampire*?”

Rae looked around quickly then shushed me. “*No*. And keep your voice *down*.”

“I swear to Jesus, if you’re trying to turn me into that half-wit Bella, I will kill you with this tortilla chip.”

Rae choked a little and laughed. “I told you, he’s *not* a vampire. God, both you and your mom immediately went full Dracula. Just think of him as...gifted.”

“So that bullshit about keeping me away from him...”

“It’s not bullshit. But I was thinking that we get things squared with the crew and maybe then you could see each other again under less charged circumstances, and...”

“What, be able to work things out? Fall into one another’s arms and live happily ever after?”

“I dunno. Or...at least not hate each other. We’re a tight crew, we can’t have this. It’s bad for business.”

“I don’t hate him.”

Pretty much the opposite, I thought, surprising myself. Shaking it off, I continued, "Tell you what, you get him to stop looking at me like he's gonna spit on me and I'll play nice. But there's one caveat."

"Name it."

"If that son of a bitch sparkles, I get to punch him in the nuts."

"Seems reasonable," she said, laughing as she poured herself another margarita.

We finished the carafe, walked around the market until we sobered up, and then made our way to my mom's house.

Chapter 50

Edison Fitzwallace

The Shed

The card game at Max's tonight was essentially my coming out party, and I had a terrible headache. I'd been getting them again since I'd started letting the shifts happen, and Indaja thought that it might continue until my brain adjusted. I'd downed four aspirin with a twenty-ounce Coke as I walked over and the grip on my skull started to release as I walked up to the door. I knew that Hedy had been asked to stay away, and I wasn't sure if that helped or hurt.

Max opened the door and welcomed me into his living room. I walked in and everyone went quiet. With the tension in the air and the remaining pounding in his head, I felt my eyes swirl to black. I didn't try to stop it, and everyone sat up a little straighter.

"Hi, everyone," I said, my voice deeper with the shift. I turned to Max, "Hey, can we dim the lights, just a little?"

"Sure, buddy."

Rae turned on some lamps while Max turned off the ceiling fixtures. My headache receded further into the background.

Etienne came up to me. "Hi, Edison. It's nice to meet you. For real, this time."

I relaxed and smiled, my eyes swirling to blue. "Thanks. And thanks for the lights—that helps."

Pocket spoke up next. "So tell me, Sailor. You've been ordered to let the cards fall where they may in our company, so to speak."

I nodded, eyeing the Tasers on everyone's belt. "Yes." My eyes felt iridescent, anticipating.

"Does that mean you can't hold back, even to cover a tell?"

I laughed, fully relaxing into blue. "Correct. You may find that I am not as good a card player if I can't use my tricks."

A big woot went up around the room and everybody began trash-talking.

“You’re going down tonight, Red.”

“Finally, a chance to win back some of my money from you!”

While it would have been natural for them to think about Hedy, I noted that no one brought her up during the evening. Looking around the room at the people who would fight and die with me, I felt for the first time that I truly belonged.