



The Phantom

by
A.W. Hart

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Chapter One

Cripple Creek, Colorado
January 2:05 am

Rhiannon Brennan surveyed the casino floor from her vantage point behind blackjack Table Four with a weary eye. The interior of the small, elegant casino looked like the aftermath of a frat party during rush week. Ash trays overflowed with cigarette butts, empty beer bottles lined the tops of slot machines and stools were scattered haphazardly down the slot aisles.

Raised voices told her the last few revelers were about to be escorted from the Silver Pearl Casino. She glanced at her watch and smirked. Exactly five minutes after closing. Hardcore gamblers. They never could get enough.

With a sigh, she flipped her dark hair over one shoulder, and the residual aroma of cigarette smoke and beer wafted out of the black strands, making her wince. She stank. Everyone who had entered the doors of the crowded casino during the evening rush for even a moment probably smelled like an ashtray.

The blackjack pit would not be sorted out for at least an hour. The pit supervisor stepped up beside her to place the clear, Plexiglas cover over her chips and lock up the table.

"We'll count the table down and sort cards in a few, Rhi. Go take a break," Stephen, a slender, well-dressed man, told her. He appeared haggard and his eyes were red-rimmed from the smoke and noise of a ten-hour holiday shift.

"Your eyes could pass for a Denver roadmap." Rhi ambled over to lean on the center podium and watch him lock down her fellow dealers' tables.

"Yours ain't much better, my sweet," he replied over one shoulder. "Boy, things were a bit over the top on the maniacs tonight. Did you see the guy get hauled out for peeing in his token cup instead of taking two minutes away from his slot to hit the john?"

Rhi grinned. "Things could have been worse. Crazy Cootie didn't make an appearance tonight."

The pair shuddered in unison.

"I think he's still in jail over his last world tour." Stephen nodded at the dealer next to him, signaling her to clear her hands and step back from the locked down tray of chips.

A visit from the legendary hermit to the casino meant a confrontation over Cootie's losses, if the man were sober. If the hermit had buried himself in the town's stock of Kentucky bourbon, a visit from Cootie meant a brawl.

"Ahh, the casino life!" Marie Collier, the dealer Stephen released from her table, joined Rhi behind the podium. "Spit, beer, tobacco..."

"And money," Rhi reminded the petite blonde.

"Oh yes, we can't forget about the money, filthy stuff!" Marie yanked her bow tie loose and glanced at the clock. "Hitting any parties?"

"Are you nuts? I'll barely be awake enough to drive home after we get done," Rhi replied, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I was gonna hit a few to let off some steam, wind me down...you know."

Marie swiveled on one heel, pouting. Rhi moaned inwardly. The girl would be unbearable to work closing duties with if she didn't get her way.

"Go on, get out of here. I'll close."

"You mean it?" Marie squealed and hopped across the velvet rope.

Stephen, examining a new cigarette hole on Table One, straightened and eyeballed Rhi in disgust. "You know cutting slackers loose is *my* job, don't you? Now you're going to get to count down two tables."

"I don't mind. Anyway, do you want to put up with her for another hour?" Rhi grinned, watching Marie's retreating back as she headed towards the heavy steel side door leading to the downstairs offices and locker room.

"Uh, you do have a point."

Within ten minutes, Marie had returned to the main casino floor, dressed for the hike to the employee parking lots.

"That was fast," Rhi told her dryly. She lounged in a chair at one of the tables, resting her feet and sipping coffee.

"Oh ... Rhi, you aren't closing for *everyone* are you?" Marie gave her a pitying glance, which annoyed Rhi. The pretty blonde openly detested her. She shrugged. She would rather close alone than listen to the other girl's whining.

Marie put an arm around her shoulders, mistaking Rhi's silence for embarrassment. "Come on, sweetie! Surely some fine piece of man flesh is waiting at home for you!"

"The only piece of man flesh I want in my house is the cable guy so I can get upgraded to the deluxe package. My dog can't watch HBO right now and missing *Rome* is making her cranky." Rhi picked up her coffee cup, hoping the movement would signal to Marie the conversation was over.

"Well, you just need to get out more! Live a little!" Marie whirled to head for the front doors, where she bounced impatiently as she waited for the security guard to unlock the doors to release her. Rhi observed as the guard lectured Marie for a moment about casino regulations mandating that workers leaving the casino after a shift were to exit via the employees' entrance. Marie pouted and began to whine, her nasal pleas carrying to the pit. The older man, a grizzled Cripple Creek native, shook his head in despair and unlocked the doors.

Rhi began to turn back towards the pit when a shiver down her spine caused her to pause and stare again at the etched glass of the casino's double doors. A shadow passed between the casino and the streetlamps lining the street. She gazed at the entrance through narrowed green eyes and blinked. She must have been more exhausted than she thought. The clouds of windblown snow moving in front of the streetlamps had taken on monstrous shapes in her mind.

"What's wrong, princess?" Stephen busily sorted cards on the table. A plate crowned by a doughnut had miraculously appeared next to her coffee mug.

"You're too good to me," Rhi told him, settling back into her chair to sort the used cards. The cleaning crew and slot techs slammed and banged about behind the rows of slots but compared to the casino two hours earlier, the cavernous room was almost

peaceful.

“The brat gone?”

“Finally,” Rhi replied. She hesitated and lowered her voice to speak again. “Is it just me or is something weird in the air tonight?”

Stephen laughed. “That’s just where the guy wearing the redneck sweatshirt puked in the corner around eleven. The air in here is gonna be weird for a while.”

“Ugh. You didn’t have to share that one, you know.”

* * * *

The odds of spotting a virgin on the street at this hour were about the same as hitting a jackpot on one of Slim Willy’s video poker machines.

The dark figure snorted with laughter at the notion as he balanced on the rim of the Palace Hotel’s roof, watching the street below. He’d brought his favorite demon along for company but the thing kept moaning about being cold. They both needed blood and entertainment. The solution: settle for a bit of tarnish on the girl.

With an eye on Cripple Creek’s deserted main thoroughfare, he flipped a knife into a discarded wooden billboard. Nearby, the naked figure of the demon cowered in the cold, the icy mucus that covered its wings and body a testament to the frigid temperature.

The smaller creature edged closer and reached to wrap itself in a corner of its master’s cashmere overcoat. The moment its abnormally long fingers touched the rich fabric, the blade flickered and impaled the pathetic being against the rooftop.

“Naughty, Adolph,” the demon’s master murmured. He jerked the smoking knife out and wiped the blade clean, first in the snow, then on his coat.

Adolph got up and tottered backwards. Black fluid poured from the cut and sizzled when the demon flopped to the ground. The hideous wound healed in seconds, the ebony flow slowing. Muttering, the creature scrambled a few feet away, hunched over, and rocked back and forth.

A lone woman emerged from one of the casinos across the street. She tucked a long strand of blonde hair behind one ear and surveyed her surroundings before setting off up the street for the employee lots.

The predator on the rooftop examined her aura. Not a virgin, but with those delicate features, who cared? He shifted and took a quick look at the faint glow of his designer watch. Time to announce his return.

* * * *

Marie stepped out of the swinging doors of the casino into a beautiful winter’s night and an unidentifiable stench. She wrinkled her nose. A horrific stink had joined Cripple Creek’s regular brew of bourbon and cigarette smoke. The burnt metallic smell made her eyes water. God only knew what some idiot had dumped nearby to create such a reek.

She paused to take a last glance at the stain of light that spilled out of the casino’s plate glass windows onto the sidewalk and shouldered her backpack to start the long trek up Bennett Avenue.

Marie hated the ink black alleyways of the old town. Late at night, the old brick buildings creaked and moaned and the dark side streets sounded as if they were filled with something unspeakable. Damn the casino owners for making their grunts hike so far to the employee lots. She had been forced to park in the furthest corner of the most remote lot in town earlier in the day because she was an hour late for her shift. The more

accessible lots were filled with the cars of dealers who were conscientious enough to get to work on time.

The blackjack dealer's hiking boots crunched pockets of snow as she trudged past another casino. The laughter of the closing employees and ring of slot machines shutting down floated outside. Marie glanced up but none of the crew joined her on the street. A few "Creekers" still puttered about but no one else headed to the parking lots.

The ghost of a grin crossed Marie's face at the mental picture of Clark's face when she got to his house and showed him the lace teddy she wore under her clothes. A little booze, a little pot, a scrap of lace and Clark and his one hundred thousand dollar-a-year casino manager salary would be locked up.

Behind her, a tiny figure scampered out of an alleyway. It stood on the sidewalk for a moment, head cocked, watching the woman. The creature gave a little shiver of glee before scampering away.

Marie glimpsed movement out of the corner of her eye. Whirling, she spotted nothing.

New Year's Eve had been busy, as usual. Dealing blackjack to the masses filling the old gold mining town to capacity for the celebration had exhausted her. Marie's leg and back muscles ached but her mind already spent the tips she pulled in during the long grind of the evening. She concentrated on cleansing her lungs of secondhand smoke by sucking in bucketfuls of clean air.

After an eternity of striding uphill, she turned down Fourth Street, descending to the Myers Avenue employee parking lot. There, her Jeep stood like a sentinel by a forlorn lamppost.

The cold worked its way up her coat sleeves, and she fumbled with the cuff of her parka while quickly marching towards the back lot.

By focusing on the cuff and not where she stepped, Marie sank a booted foot into the center of a smoking pile of fresh burro dung. One of the wild descendants of the miners' pack animals that roamed the streets at will had deposited the manure within the last few moments.

Cursing, Marie stooped to scrape her boot on the curb, trying not to breathe in the fumes rising from the moss green goo.

Nearby, a shadow detached itself from the darkness behind the Old Homestead Whorehouse. The graceful white brick building was the sole remnant of Myers Avenue's main source of revenue in the gold rush years, the shadow-filled alley in back of the building designed for discreet stealth.

Marie's heart skipped when she heard a soft breath behind her, like a gunshot in the quiet air. Every muscle clenched as she whirled to stare into the shadow's face. With a choked cry, she spun to race for the security of the Jeep. The pursuer made no sound as he flew along behind her, a long blade dangling from his right hand.

She slammed, sobbing, into the side of the truck and ripped open her pack to dig for keys.

A black-gloved hand swung her body around to smash her against the door. She couldn't find her voice because of the vise-like fingers around her throat. Silent, her mouth gaped, desperate to scream.

The night hid the sight of the rise and fall of the steel blade. Marie crumpled to the ground, where she lay helpless and drowning in her own blood.

Her killer knelt and placed a gloved hand on her cheek in an almost comforting manner for a moment. Then he cut her jacket, her shirt and her new baby blue satin teddy away from her body. The cold sliced into her bare chest the same moment he cut out her heart. She made another gurgling effort to scream before succumbing to the spreading blackness.

Holding the heart in one hand, the killer's sleek black head bent to feed at the fountain he created. Beneath, the snow turned black.

Chapter Two

Cripple Creek, Colorado

January 1, present

3:00 AM

Rhi was the last dealer to leave the Silver Pearl Casino.

After counting down the blackjack pit, Rhi waded through the night's piles of used cards for an hour. In spite of her earlier misgivings, she left without an escort to her truck, knowing Stephen would be going over paperwork for another hour.

"What the hell was I thinking, moving here from nice warm Mississippi?"

She asked the question aloud as she stared at her breath turn to crystals in the air. Towards the west end of Bennett Avenue, her SUV stood parked in the driveway of one the last private homes that remained on the town's main street.

She felt like a Popsicle. Thank God Stephen, a Cripple Creek native who inherited his period home, shared his driveway with her on nights like this.

The overgrown holly bushes to her left softly rustled. Rhi stared into the mass of greenery, straining to see.

Nothing.

She paused to check out her surroundings five times on her trip this evening. She shook her head, disgusted with herself. Casino life included a certain amount of negative energy, and some of negativity must have escaped to follow her imagination home.

There were days when dealing blackjack in Cripple Creek was what the job was supposed to be – harmless fun. But too often a true gambling addict materialized to play at Rhi's table. Eyes alight with The Fever, the fanatic's hands shook with desperation as he watched the cards fall. Rhi often left work with their greed following her like a dark, oily fog.

Whatever followed her tonight didn't feel greedy, though. It felt hungry.

Rhi stopped beside the truck, dug for her keys, unlocked and climbed up into the vehicle. She started the engine and sat for a few moments, allowing the block to warm up. When the snow on the windows began to melt, she hopped out armed with a small broom she kept in the back. She swept as much snow as possible off of the windows and hood, working fast, one eye on the street.

Finished, Rhi jumped into the toasty vehicle and locked the doors. After backing out of the driveway, she turned up the street. A sudden giant-nails-against-a-chalkboard scraping followed by a whooshing thump caused her to almost jam the brake pedal through the floorboard.

Crap.

She skidded to a stop in the center of the empty street to check her rearview mirror. Seeing nothing, she pulled up a bit and cracked open the door to lean out and check behind her. A pile of snow lay in the street. The cap of frozen snow on the truck's roof had slid off.

She slammed the door shut and goosed the gas pedal.

Behind the SUV, a small, winged creature burst from the pile of snow. The truck headed out of town and the demon took to the air to fly just above the SUV.

Clouds of snow crystals blew across the frozen dirt road as Rhi passed Mt Pisgah Cemetery. The interior of the vehicle reeked of the cigarette smoke clinging to Rhi's hair. A stale spicy scent joined the mix, rising from the to-go box containing a burrito she left under the seat the night before.

Driving past several Victorian wood frame houses, the evergreens in the yards humped over with the weight of the new snowfall, Rhi ignored the hulking gray and white menace of the cemetery's forty-acre hill to her left. But the road took a turn, forcing her to face the massive burial ground, sole proof that the tiny town of Cripple Creek had once been a thriving metropolis, considered as a potential location for the state capitol in its heyday. The thousands of snow-covered gravestones and mausoleums resembled a malevolent crowd gathered on the hill.

A sudden gust forced the truck towards the side of the road. Startled, Rhi managed to avoid slamming on the brakes again.

"Oh, hell!" she gasped.

When the truck skidded into a sluggish slide on the ice, she composed herself enough to remember to gently pump the brake pedal. After a long skid, the truck stopped in the center of the ice-covered road, cockeyed. She sat for a moment, taking a few deep, calming breaths, while she waited for the muscles in her neck to loosen up.

A thought scurried across her mind. Did she check the cargo space before she got in the truck?

"Yeah right, an axe murderer is crouched down behind the back seat," she muttered.

Rhi's pit supervisor once informed her in a superior male manner that "only women worry about those urban legends." But for Rhi, it seemed like a reasonable fear for a woman alone in the night. And this, for some unknown reason, seemed like a good night to embrace a few of her more exotic paranoias.

Over the last few weeks, a series of nightmares plagued Rhi, made up of flashing scenes of Cripple Creek during the Gold Rush era. The nightmares brought back lost memories of childhood nightmares, populated by the same faces as the more recent dreams, one face in particular distinct and disturbing. A man, the weathered planes of his face marked by sorrow and loss, stared out at her in every vision.

Dark, anxious thoughts on an icy road were dangerous. The glow of the cell phone in the cup holder caught her eye. "Time for some company."

She flipped the phone open, punching redial and the speaker function, while keeping the SUV from sliding off the road with one hand and a kneecap.

"What the hell are you still doing out this time of the night, little girl?" A booming female voice filled the confines of the truck. The sheer decibel level of the woman could probably set off an avalanche or two in the high country. Pam Douglas, Rhi's self-appointed best friend and landlord, seemed to be in fine form for a woman who just finished a 10-hour shift. The single mother held down two jobs, alternating between the Long Branch and the Silver Pearl, working a 60 to 80 hour workweek and then taking off a week every month to spend quality time with her young daughter. Her ten-year plan was to retire with a comfortable nest egg. And Pam was well on her way.

Rhi grinned, envisioning the tall, gawky woman with frizzy blonde hair on the other end of the line, dressed in her favorite pajamas: an old fashioned red union suit with an honest-to-god button flap on the rear end.

"You didn't see anything when you drove home tonight?"

Rhi hesitated before she answered. How could she tell her friend about sensing something wicked in the wind? "No, I didn't see squat. Wait, I saw snowflakes. Yeah, thousands and thousands of snowflakes. Billions and billions..."

"Well, if you see *anyone* stranded on the side of the road, don't stop. Just run them down and come home," Pam advised her soberly. "Houston called to check on me. We had a murder downtown - the whole place went nuts about fifteen minutes ago. Lock up tight and take the big goofy dog to bed with you. I told you to get a gun - a girl can't have too much firepower these days."

Rhi stared at the white road unfolding outside the windshield, trying to absorb Pam's words. "Murder? Here?"

She would have expected bloodshed in Tunica, Mississippi - the gambling town in which she began her casino career. The damp heat made people mean. But Cripple Creek? The weird feelings of earlier in the evening aside, a murder in Rhi's new hometown was unthinkable. It was like a slime-covered monster had popped up in Mayberry, albeit a gambling and eccentric-filled Mayberry.

The bizarre town had the occasional alien sightings, Bigfoot encounters and hauntings. A week earlier a frantic gambler on her table swore he'd seen a dragon on one of the town's back roads. But other than those occasional hiccups, Cripple Creek was a peaceful, weird little town most of the time.

"A murder?" she repeated. "Did somebody piss off a boyfriend?"

"No, sweetie, this was the real thing. Jack the Ripper would think of this guy as a model student. A girl got hacked to death in the employee lot on the far end of Myers."

Rhi's blood turned to ice. She stuttered before asking the question. "Who?"

"We both work with her and though my maw maw taught me not to speak poorly of the dead, neither of us can stand her. Marie Collier."

"Oh God." Rhi clutched the steering wheel, swallowing the bile rising in her throat. Marie. She gritted her teeth against the unbearable urge to pull over and vomit. "Pam, I told her to go home early ... I let her go."

"Rhi, *everybody* let her go home early. She was a pest. But a good dealer." Several metallic clicks sounded in the background as Pam spoke. Clicks corresponding with the sound of a large caliber gun being loaded and checked.

"What are you loading?"

Pam replied with an evil laugh, "My boyfriends, Smith, Wesson and Mr. Remington. This idiot from town shows up here and I might leave enough of his DNA on the floor to ID'em ... if I'm in a good mood. And we know how cranky I get when I don't get enough sleep."

Heaven help the slasher who decided to invade *that* particular isolated home.

Squinting through the windshield at the slender beams of light put out by the headlights, Rhi resisted the urge to floor the gas pedal. If a lone stranger popped out of a snow bank on the side of the road, she *would* run him over. Right after peeing in her pants.

"I suppose they haven't caught the guy yet." Rhi tried not to sob as slow tears ran

down her face.

“Of course not. Our cops handle liquored up military retirees from Colorado Springs, bikers and tourists. They’re more freaked out by this than we are. But freaky towns attract freaky people,” Pam pointed out, pausing for dramatic effect before continuing. “Houston said whoever did this took her heart with him.”

A stop to vomit was not an option. She needed to concentrate. “Please tell me you mean her love and not the pulsing thing in the center of her chest.”

“Sorry. And yes, I’m freaked out too. Want to come over? We’ll have a sleep over and eat lots of popcorn and make stupidly fattening cocktails.”

“I’ve gotta go get my dog and I want my own bed.” Rhi sighed. “I just hope if he’s out here, he comes to your house first. If he does show up, give me a call. Because a friend will help you move, but a good friend will help you move a body.”

“And don’t think I’m going to forget!” Pam hesitated. “Rhi, are you alright? You sound a bit weird.”

“Uh, you just told me about a kinda gross murder in the town and I was maybe the last person to speak to the victim. I didn’t like Marie very much but ...” Rhi trailed off, thinking of the shadow outside of the casino earlier. “You *do* realize I just walked alone to my truck right in downtown Cripple Creek? You’d sound weird too.” She set her jaw. Freaking out would have to wait. “I can see the lights from here, I’m almost there anyway.”

“Call me when you get inside, okay?” The other woman ordered, her voice booming again.

“Yes, Ma’am!” Rhi flipped the phone shut. Lights blazed ahead as she pushed the switch to engage the four-wheel drive and gunned the engine to take the slope of her driveway. The SUV burst through the new powder to arrive at her small A-frame perched on the side of a hill off of Horse Thief Gulch, snow frothing to the sides of the drive. Rhi sat in the driveway for a moment to scan the gray shadows between the pines.

The feeling of menace from the road hadn’t followed her up the slope. Relieved, she examined the picture postcard scene of her home and the clearing.

Strategic timers lit the house, inside and out. The lights made her comfortable coming home to an empty house a quarter of a mile from any neighbor.

The nights in her new home thrilled Rhi when she arrived in Colorado. A stunning, solitary spot, the little house in Horse Thief Gulch possessed an unobscured view of banks of clear stars marking the night sky, unblemished by the pollution of city lights. The night sounds of the mountains hypnotic in any season, civilized noises were prohibited.

She spent the warmer evenings on the deck beside her fire pit, a glass of cabernet in hand, admiring the sky. But as the snow formed falling patterns of Battenburg lace in front of her headlights, the mountains that once offered solace felt menacing.

Rhi’s huge bloodhound, Ellie Mae, stuck her head out of the heated doghouse when the trucks lights hit the clearing. The fortress-like dog pen surrounding the doghouse had been caged on all sides and the roof to keep wayward, hungry mountain lions out. The dog could not be left inside the house for the duration of a double shift because of her size. The 20-foot long dog pen offered enough room for Ellie Mae to stretch her legs and enjoy the sights and smells of the mountains.

The dog’s deep baying could be heard inside the vehicle. Rhi grabbed a leash and

large cardboard box from the passenger seat before stepping out of the truck to make a run for the kennel. She allowed the dog two minutes of enthusiastic tail wagging and slobbery kisses before picking her way through the snow to the front door with the dog at her side and the cardboard box balanced on one hip.

She unlocked the deadbolt and threw open the door to allow the dog to check out the premises.

“Pity the fool hiding in our house, huh, girl?” Rhi grinned and locked the door. She turned to observe as the animal prowled through the entire house, inspecting every room. Finished, Ellie Mae returned to nuzzle her mistress’s hand and stroll to the overstuffed couch to stretch out full length across the plump cushions.

“I’m glad someone’s comfy,” Rhi muttered. She placed the heavy box on the kitchen table, stripped her outer clothes off and dropped them on the bench by the door. Heading upstairs to the loft bedroom, she pulled an oversized sweatshirt, leggings and wool socks over her chilled skin.

Rhi’s long black hair fell over her face for a moment, the smell almost suffocating. Too tired to shower and wash the mess, Rhi sprinkled her offending mane with baby powder and ran a brush through the strands as she headed downstairs.

After making hot chocolate in the kitchen, she carried her cup and hairbrush to the living room. Ellie Mae sat up on the couch and gave her a reproachful glance.

Rhi flipped a light switch to turn on the cheery flames of the gas fireplace and picked up the remote. She spared a wry smirk for Ellie Mae, whose tail eagerly thumped against the couch cushions.

The dog’s mournful brown eyes met hers.

“I’m sorry I didn’t turn the idiot box on, okay?” Rhi apologized. “I’m a bad pet mommy! How about Animal Planet tonight? Maybe *Emergency Vets* is on.”

She switched on the set for her media addicted dog and glanced through the entrance to the kitchen. A new goodie box of used books and interesting bits of junk from the antique store in Victor sat on the battered kitchen table, beckoning. She contemplated delving into its depths to escape the mental picture of Marie Collier’s fate. No.

Instead, she seated herself in her easy chair with the cocoa and propped her aching legs up on the ottoman. She was home and safe. She would not allow herself to believe otherwise.

A half a cup of cocoa later, she slept.

* * * *

In the kitchen, a soft red glow rose from the box of books on the worn table. A low humming sound flowed through the house. Ellie Mae cracked opened an eye to observe the radiance rising from the adjacent room. Hackles rising, the dog growled as the light and sound hastily retreated.

Chapter Three

The town burned. The weathered, gray wooden buildings belched orange and red flames. The cracked wood, dry from years of exposure to the arid Colorado climate, caught the sparks and held them until they grew to adulthood in seconds.

Black smoke rolled out of doorways, carrying the reek of rotten eggs and stinging Rhi's eyes.

A red-haired woman half-carried, half-dragged Rhi, ignoring the crowded boardwalk. Instead, she steered them through the filthy center of Meyers Avenue.

Ash fell on the fleeing crowd as thunder shook the hillsides. Most assumed the fires reached a cache of dynamite in one of the mines. Rhi knew better. Monsters and men wrestled beneath the mountains, beings of such power there would be little protection if they burst free.

What was the name of the woman who dragged her along unmercifully? Oh yes, Pearl DeVere. The most famous madam west of St. Louis.

Rhi gritted her teeth, trying to not to scream. Her unforgivably damaged body made each step Pearl forced her to take pure agony.

A detached part of her mind dully watched the skirts of her dress dragged through manure, rotting garbage, and pools of urine. Pearl struggled along with Rhi's arm over a shoulder. Rhi did her best to keep up but her wounds hampered her, and she couldn't catch more than a tablespoon of air in her lungs at a time.

Pearl's cupid bow lips moved but Rhi heard silence. She made an effort to speak but coughed instead, and felt the blood run down her chin.

They fought through crowds of fleeing miners and dance hall girls until a man barred their way, holding a broadsword in one bloody hand. He spoke and Pearl shook her head several times before relenting, reluctantly handing Rhi over. The newcomer looked as if he had crawled through a ditch filled with mud and glass, and his clothes were covered in blood and filth.

He took Rhi in his arms after tucking the sword into a scabbard at his side. Pearl gathered up her skirts to do an unladylike trot behind him. They made an odd group and should have gotten a bit of attention. Pearl, dressed in her tenderloin district finest, had her more obvious charms on partial display. But the citizens of Cripple Creek were busy, salvaging possessions and fleeing the fire, looking nowhere but at their feet, the better to avoid slipping in raw sewage.

The man with longish black hair thundered along with Rhi clutched to his chest. She glanced down and realized her dress had been on fire at some point, the fabric ripped and scorched in places. She was marked by strange, oozing wounds and noticed they covered her benefactor and Pearl as well. A nasty bite oozed near Pearl's slender neck. Deep bites and scratches covered the trio and their clothing was in tatters.

The man whispered and Rhi tensed. He wanted something but she couldn't hear. Pain creased his features as he spoke.

Another massive explosion rang through the mountains and the ground rolled beneath them. A geyser of ash and dirt spewed into the air from the hillside behind Meyers Avenue.

Losing consciousness, Rhi's eyes closed on the sight of the burning gold rush town and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains shining in the distance. She curled against the man's shirt, listening to his heartbeat. Sangre de Cristo, 'The Blood of Christ' mountains. Blood – she'd seen enough blood today.

* * * *

Ellie Mae remained on guard as Rhi struggled in her sleep. The dog crept nearer to nuzzle the woman's hand and the blanket covering Rhi fell to the floor. Then the animal lay down nearby, ever watchful, glancing occasionally towards the kitchen doorway. But the sound and the glow knew better than to approach Rhi's guardian again.

The woods surrounding the house should have been silent. Instead the trees whispered and moaned. Down the gulch, the falling snow obliterated small prints resembling those of barefoot children. Hundreds of tracks in circular patterns cut off abruptly at the foot of the hill. The tracks milled and paced, their makers an impatient bunch, stopping next to an invisible barrier bordering the land near the house.

The prints' makers wanted her. Badly. The girl was close enough to taste.

Chapter Four

The ring of the phone shattered the dream into a thousand mirrored pieces. Each bit reflected the mountains named for the blood of a messiah.

Rhi clutched her head. A railroad spike pounded through her skull. She rolled out of the chair and climbed to her feet. A drowsy Ellie Mae eyed her from the floor.

The phone continued to ring as Rhi stumbled about the room.

Where had the damned thing gone? There.

The noise stopped before the answering machine kicked on. She stood for a moment with the phone in her hand before she dropped the receiver and made her way to the bathroom to dig in the cabinet for her migraine prescription.

She slid to the floor with the bottle in one hand and a cup of water in the other.

The dreams were misty scenes in the muted tones of old-fashioned daguerreotypes. The stink of late 1800's Meyers Avenue still clung to her skin.

As she wiped something wet from her chin and gaped at the red stain on her fingertips, the phone rang again. She staggered to her feet and made her way back to the living room.

Only one person would call at four-thirty in the morning on New Year's Day.

"Rhi! Why the *hell* haven't you called me?"

As usual, Pam's shrill voice hurt a bit.

"I fell asleep ... until the phone ringing scared the crap out of me! What are you doing still prissing about at this hour?" Rhi's voice came out as a croak.

Pam lived with her small daughter across the mountain in a second A-frame and it suddenly occurred to Rhi that she had forgotten to call her friend after she had locked herself inside her house. She shuddered - shocked Pam had bothered to phone to see that she was alive instead of calling in several neighbors to form up a lifelong dream: a real posse, guns and all.

"God! I'm *so* sorry that I didn't call!" Rhi bit her lip to keep down a moan. A box of tissue sat nearby and she grabbed a handful to swab the blood off of her chin, upper lip and nose. A quick glance at her arms and the front of her shirt eased the fear that there might be hideous little bloody bites all over her body.

"Do you have any idea how close you were to having half of the Cripple Creek police force along with the fire department in your house?" Pam lectured. "And turn some of those lights off, your place looks like a disco from over here."

"I forgot."

"Just come over to stay and I'll shoot anything that wakes you. Or we can have hot toddies and watch our favorite movie again, for the four hundred and eighty sixth time. My sitter braved the snow to go home so it's just us girls."

Rhi glanced at the bolted door and the dog dozing on the couch. "Ellie Mae'll grumble if I take her back out in this weather," she replied. "Anyway, I've got to get up and unpack some more. These last few weeks have been so busy and I've still got moving boxes everywhere. And I keep adding stuff. I've got to stay out of thrift shops

in Victor.”

“I’ll come over to help in the morning,” Pam offered. “The junk you manage to find is freaky.”

“One woman’s junk is another woman’s shabby chic. See you in the morning about 10 a.m.?”

Pam groaned. “Southern girls get up way too early. You work in a casino, Rhi. When are you going to learn casino workers don’t function well in bright light, kinda like vampires. Those ethics might be contagious but I’ll be there.”

“Did you have to say vampire? I’m alone over here and I’m not a badass ex-marine like you. Can you really kill someone with your pinky finger?” The idea of Pam in a Marine’s uniform intrigued Rhi. Her contentious friend couldn’t have taken orders very well. “Tell Katie I’ll make her some pancakes and sausage.”

“Please don’t. She thinks there’s something lacking in me because I don’t keep a ‘Martha Stewart’ clean house like you. All I need is for her to see you cook. And if my daughter starts preferring you over me - I’ll have to kill you with my pinky finger.”

“Bye!” Rhi put the phone in the pocket of her shirt and plopped into the chair. She needed to relax, read and not sleep for the rest of her life.

So what if a murderer was on the loose? What self-respecting, axe wielding killer would tromp out this far in this weather?

A yawn exploded out of her mouth and she reconsidered the ‘not sleeping again’ scheme. Maybe the dreams were over for the night. She had a job to keep and she could not afford to be groggy on her blackjack table, she liked her job too much for that. She pulled the quilt over her legs and leaned the chair back to snooze position.

“Ellie, if anything bursts into the house while I’m asleep, please eat it and don’t wake me unless there’s a ghost standing over me, holding a tray with some doughnuts and coffee.”

In response, the bloodhound rolled over onto her back with all four legs in the air and snored.

* * * *

A few hundred feet away from the house, darkness gathered to form the outline of a man standing in between the two evergreens guarding the driveway. Jack Blackthorne’s jeans, turtleneck, calf-length sheepskin jacket and work gloves were woefully inadequate for the weather but he didn’t notice the cold.

He could feel her in the house, the girl and her ridiculous dog. Of all of the animals she could have owned, how did she end up with one that could sense his presence? A hound of the Templars. Those guys always *did* get on his nerves, some more than others.

When Blackthorne spotted Rhi Brennan in the casino a few hours beforehand, his chest felt like someone had hit him with a two-by-four.

She gave him a little sideways glance as she dealt, sensing his presence. Certainly she didn’t know why she sensed him or who she felt staring as she dealt hand after hand of blackjack. But she knew she was being watched.

He stood there like an idiot and stared for an embarrassing amount of time. She had no idea.

Now, in front of her home, Blackthorne reached out to touch the invisible barrier surrounding the house. So close ... he could smell her life force. A warding held him

back. Additional, weaker wardings kept the hillside demon-free but allowed him through without any fireworks. His hand glowed red against the wall of snow. He could break the second ward with a snap of his fingers.

One person in town knew how or would want to ward the girl and that knowledge irritated him even more. He took another glance at Rhi Brennan's windows and turned to leave before pausing to stare hard into the stand of evergreens to the left of the drive.

With a weary sigh, he trudged towards the darkness gathering in the empty space between the trees. He got close enough to view another empty clearing and fresh tracks marked by black stains in the snow. His uncanny sense of smell told him the color of the stains in daylight would be scarlet red. The blood would turn into frozen red lumps by morning. He didn't make the effort to glance in the direction of the dozens of slitted, red eyes blinking in the darkness down the hill from where he stood. He didn't need to see minor demons, their scent was easy to identify, even in the wind.

"Isn't this delicious, Blackie? She's here!" A familiar voice hissed beside his ear. The smug superiority in the voice annoyed him almost as much as the wards.

Blackthorne whirled and his sword appeared in his hand. No one. "Not up to a good brawl tonight, Manus? But, I forgot, you prefer your opponents a little less able to kill you." He swished his sword around in the air, for intimidation and in the hope that he might impale the little prick.

The voice continued in a conversational tone. "I've been here for weeks, don't you know. I was a little miffed you hadn't arrived yet. Pearl's been here for a while. You'd think she'd drop you a line or something. Let you know the gang's all here."

The idiot droned on as the number of red eyes in the woods multiplied. Did Manius hope Blackthorne didn't notice?

"How long has it been since we have been thrown together, bro? Bosnia? Afghanistan? Iraq? The Bronx? My work is so varied and far reaching since I got back - one would think you would've been here earlier to chase after me. You must be getting old."

The source of the voice changed several times during the one-sided conversation. Blackthorne grimaced. Manius was jumping from tree to tree to keep from getting a sword jammed in a very uncomfortable place. He spent an enjoyable moment thinking about the picture that kind of 'accident' would make. "You don't have an accent anymore," he remarked. "You sound American."

"I've been watching television a lot. By the way ... love the modern guy in a duster with a sword look."

"I don't have a lot of time for television," Blackthorne replied as he prepared himself for a fight that was a bit premature. But the diminutive house was too vulnerable. "The idiot box will burn your brain out. Is that why you shortened our father's name to Black - because you now have the attention span of a gerbil and can't remember the original?"

Laughter filled the air.

Blackthorne stared up at the shadow as the dark form took to the sky, disappearing into the remnants of the storm. Drops of blood rained down onto the snow. He knew better than to hope Manius had been wounded. His brother's voice had been swelled with the power of human sacrifice, the evidence of his crime the globs of frozen blood against the whiteness.

As he stared down at the snow, a small hand touched his shoulder and he whirled, prepared to gut whoever had managed to sneak up on him. A smaller blade parried his sword.

The woman holding the opposing weapon grinned as she lowered her blade. “He always could make an entrance, huh? He’s been up and about for a couple of years and already watches too much television.”

Pure silk, the woman’s husky tones were capable of bringing most men to their knees – except for the ones on the receiving end of her pit viper temper. The sword vanished into the luxurious, dark furs she wore. An outfit for every occasion. Classic Pearl DeVere.

“He swished by to greet you, huh?” Pearl stepped back to allow Blackthorne time to recover from the humiliating fact that he, an honest-to-God knight, had been taken by surprise by an overdressed fashion plate half his size. “If anyone had been interested in my opinion at the time we would not even be here, freezing our butts off. Damn those old bastards for letting him live, Blackie. Only men would decide something so ridiculous.”

Blackthorne stepped closer to her and stared down into her face. Pearl raised an eyebrow, daring him to say diddly. “You knew,” he growled. “These woods are filled with *his* creatures! With *her* here - alone.”

His best friend Pearl. Some days, in an organization comprised of several hundred men and one woman, his only friend. Blackthorne felt betrayed. Pearl’s natural impulse was to screw with men, and he usually accepted her quirks with more grace. But he didn’t feel like dealing with her stiletto sharp cleverness tonight.

“Yes, Manius is still not shy about summoning hordes of the little monsters,” Pearl replied, not bothering to acknowledge the accusation. “I hope he hasn’t gotten too brave. A dragon or a demon prince might be a bit of a pain. But he didn’t have nearly enough the last time, did he? He got smarter over the years. Plucking thoughts, whispers and information out of the air with his mind while he lay trapped, he must have prepared for decades. While you idiots believed you had him contained, he attended antichrist-college. I wonder how much blood he took to find out when she would be here.”

“You didn’t answer me.”

She waved a cashmere-gloved hand in the direction of the A-frame nestled on the breast of the mountain. “I didn’t imagine you needed any more torture than you already subject yourself to. The hill is warded, and her house. Heck, I even warded the car. Demons won’t enter. Manius wants to see what she’ll do as much as we do. All *he’ll* do is hover about and make nasty comments to irritate you.” Pearl’s eyes filled with blue incandescent light in the gloom. “Fate sent her here, Blackthorne, and we can’t interfere.”

Blackthorne’s face set into a grim series of planes and angles as he stared at the tiny house.

“Are you going to stand out here in the dark all night? You’re going to look silly in the morning, covered with snow. We *do* have work to do,” Pearl told him in an impatient tone.

“Like what? We’re as blind as he is. We have no idea where the damned thing is and we can’t do anything until the new moon. If he gets to the key first – all we’ll be doing is dying,” Blackthorne replied. He sounded tired. The sight of the A-frame made

everything worse.

“Quitting, Blackie? That’s what got you into trouble in the first place.” She stepped away to examine the blood in the snow. The wicked little blade reappeared in her hands. “We can hunt some of these beasts in the woods and keep them from eating the locals, like this poor creature.”

Blackthorne stood in Pearl’s wake for a moment before he trudged after her slim, gliding figure. He reached to free his sword from its sheath. She was right, they had work to do.

* * * *

Inside the house, Rhi slept but Ellie Mae sat near her feet at attention. The dog’s sensitive nose picked up a strange scent. An uncomfortable scent. The dog stood and paced the floor, the golden fur on her neck on end. Ellie Mae stalked back and forth between the door and Rhi for several minutes until the smell dissipated, allowing the dog to resume her original position with a puzzled expression on her wrinkled face. First the glowing box, now this.

Mountain lions, bears, raccoons, Ellie Mae scented them all since moving here. The dog didn’t fear these creatures. But although Ellie Mae didn’t recognize the new smell, the dog knew it should be feared.

Chapter Five

Sleep engulfed Rhi and her mind wandered. So close - she could feel his touch. Fire ran through her. His mouth on hers as his callused hands stroked her skin. Where did a man get such thick calluses? The room filled with blue fire. His dark hair brushed her shoulder, and his gaze met hers. His eyes glowed with an unearthly blue light and Rhi had a moment of terror. Her lungs weren't working. A brick wall had been built on top of her chest. She coughed violently. The pressure wouldn't stop and she fell away from his hands. She couldn't get a breath of air, certain she was suffocating. She shook herself awake, still coughing and her lungs on fire.

Rhi stumbled to the kitchen for water. Her hands were shaking and she almost dropped the glass before catching herself. What had been in the nachos she'd shared in the break room with the rest of the casino crew? Angel dust?

"More like demon dust," she muttered and double-checked the doors. She would give up the recliner for the evening, even though Rhi preferred the cozy chair sometimes to the big, empty bed upstairs.

After rousing the dog, they stumbled to the bedroom, where Ellie Mae climbed in to curl up beside her mistress in the sleigh bed. Rhi scrunched her eyes closed, trying to remember who the dream man could have been. Not her ex-husband, a blonde with a sculpted body, the result of hours in the gym in front of workout mirrors. The man of her dreams was not a bodybuilder. He was muscled like a predator. A *big* predator.

She couldn't decide whether to call the episode a nightmare or a wet dream so she settled for ignoring it like the rest of the hallucinations of the evening and snuggled next to the dog to sleep.

* * * *

In the morning, the sun rose in a glorious show of orange and yellow. Up and about after two hours of sleep, Rhi shoveled and swept the deck clean to perform her ritual of morning stretches and Tai chi moves outdoors in the cold sunlight.

The dreams and fears of the night before dissipated as she stood on the deck wrapped in a blanket over her workout sweats. She savored her aching muscles as she took in the magnificent view of the mountains, covered in eight fresh inches of white magic. The clean air flowed through her, purging the last shreds of the dreams from the night before. The Rockies pulsed with a power like no other.

Behind her, she could hear the chugging sound of Pam's truck making its way up the road. The battered green pickup slid into the driveway and stopped behind the newer SUV, not quite bumping the rear bumper.

"I'm up with the chickens because of you. Have you been *outside* working out? Stupid question - of course you have," Pam shouted as she hopped from the vehicle. The tall woman turned to unfasten the car seat of her three-year-old daughter, Katie. "I feel so healthy and wholesome I could puke. Please tell me there's coffee containing caffeine in your house."

"Rhi! Come get me now," Katie demanded as she struggled through the snow

while her mother unloaded a backpack and huge purse from the truck.

Rhi obliged the little girl, wading through the snow in moccasins to pick her up. Snow spilled into Rhi's shoes and melted into her wool socks. Better dressed than her rescuer, Katie wore a shocking pink snowsuit and boots. The outfit gave her the grace of a tiny feminine Michelin Man. Picking her up was the equivalent of picking up a squirming pink pillow.

"I *have* caffeine and food that doesn't require the use of a microwave," Rhi shot over her shoulder as she climbed the steps to carry Katie in the house. She deposited the little girl on the couch to strip the snowsuit off of her tiny form. An even pinker Nike tracksuit hid beneath the snowsuit, the color almost blinding. Rhi blinked.

Freed, Katie ran squealing over to pet Ellie Mae. The dog lounged by the warmth of the woodstove, resting after a morning romp in the snow. Rhi started the sausage links and poured another cup of coffee.

Pam struggled through the door and kicked it shut behind her with a boot. The little A-frame filled with the intoxicating aroma of pancakes, sausage and good black coffee.

"My God, what a fabulous *smell*!"

"This is what is known as cooking. These little knobs on the stove make the food hot. We just put the pan on the stove with meat products inside," Rhi instructed soberly, miming putting links in the pan.

"I don't suppose those are fat free." Pam eyeballed the links of brown sugar and honey sausage cooking in the pan. She grimaced at the sight of a platter of sliced fruit and shed her coat and boots before plopping down at the breakfast table with a cup of steaming coffee to root through the box of books.

"I thought you told me we burn off calories quicker at this altitude?" Rhi raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Was I drinking when I told you this?"

"Of course."

Pam leafed through several dusty books, exclaiming when something caught her attention. "By the way, if we get snowed in for days on end, I think we should eat Ellie Mae first."

"She'd taste a bit gamey if you ask me. But I guess if anyone in this house is gonna qualify as an Alferd Packer it's me."

"Who's *Alferd* Packer?" Pam glanced at her quizzically.

"I can't believe you've been up here for three years and are a Colorado *native*. Don't you read? Alferd is the state cannibal. He got caught in a snowstorm on the way to the gold fields in the late 1800's with a group of men and good old Alferd was the only man to walk out of the mountains still breathing a few months later. Everyone noticed he seemed pretty well fed for someone lost in the mountains that long. He murdered and ate his companions. The University of Colorado named a cafeteria after him." Rhi's grin shone in the sunny kitchen as she tended her stove. "There's a great cookbook written in Alferd's honor I've got somewhere. It's mostly pork dishes."

"Ewwh! Sorry I asked," Pam grunted as she dug again. "Nasty, dusty books. Can't you carry home something interesting? Like a man? Oh, great! This is disgusting - a beautiful Bible with a dragon and skull printed on the inside of the cover. What were people thinking? Did the Hell's Angels exist when this thing was published?" She held

the book gingerly, taking care not to damage the gilded lettering and designs on the black leather cover. "Isn't this kind of sacrilegious?"

Such a book occupied a place of honor in the homes of a bygone era. The Bible's gilded pages, hand-sewn binding, ornate cover and illustrations were beautiful and of the highest quality.

The book's splendor had been one of the reasons Rhi claimed the tome for her own out of the dusty bin of a Victor, Colorado junk store. But she'd missed the skull.

A skillfully rendered human skull filled the flyleaf of the book Pam held up for her inspection, the colors a strange combination of dark purples and shades of green, rich and textured. A rich purple outlined the eyes and mouth of the skull and ran in veins through the rest of the head, combined with mottled shades of green. A small black dragon had gracefully wrapped itself around the skull, the creature's emerald green eyes the exact same shade as Rhi's.

"How beautiful!" She took the proffered book to examine the picture. "What on earth is it doing in a Bible? The picture must have been printed as a part of the original book - and what about the caption below?" She squinted to decipher the stylized script. "*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.* Where have I heard that before?"

"Revelations," Pam replied and took a gulp of coffee, trying to ignore Rhi's questioning glance.

Rhi cleared her throat.

"Okay, okay - I'm a fallen Catholic, if you must know. And things like my mother forcing me to memorize Bible verses are what made me fall." Pam took the Bible to stow the book in the box. "Bibles give me the willies and this one's creepier than most."

The sausages were done and the pancakes browned and warming in the oven. Rhi took her coffee to the breakfast bar to lean and face her friend. She glanced at Katie, who had managed to find the cartoon channel on the television in the interim. By mutual, unspoken assent, they had avoided the subject of the last night's events thus far.

"The *accident* last night - any other news?"

"Nope, but we will know more this morning. They're sending someone out to talk to us since I knew Marie and you ... well you *were* the last person to speak to her, they think. I left a note on my door. They'll be here in a few minutes."

"Great. You've invited the cops here and I only have enough sausages for us." Rhi hurried to the freezer and dug for another package of sausage links.

"If they send the cop I think they will, I doubt he'll break bread with us. He thinks casinos are the root of all evil. He opposed the vote a few years ago when they held the gambling referendum. Like my maw maw always said - cards are the devil's play pretties." Pam waggled her empty plate in front of Rhi's nose. "He's also the owner of one of those god-awful gingerbread houses you worship."

"Okay, okay. No wonder you've been divorced twice, demanding little creature." Rhi turned to the stove with the plate to fill with food. "Is he some old miner turned cop?"

Pam grinned. "No, he's not an ex-miner and he's not old - unless you think I'm old. Besides, in the right light, Nick's kind of cute."

Rhi dished out lumberjack-sized portions of food for her guests and placed the plates on the breakfast table with the coffee pot, orange juice, butter and syrup.

“Come and get your chow while it’s hot!” She pretended to cower as Pam and Katie rushed the table.

Rhi took her seat as Ellie Mae jumped up to start voicing the bloodhound’s characteristic bass howl in response to the sound of the doorbell.

Pam glanced up as her hostess stood. “Watch out, the testosterone level in here might go up a few notches, even if it is only Nick. You know, you need to let more men into this house or you might just dry up.”

Rhi ignored her friend and opened the door to be greeted by a rounded bundle of nylon and down that topped off a baggy pair of Levis and hiking boots. Not much taller than her own five and a half feet, her guest lowered his hood to reveal a jolly, round face covered in a neatly trimmed brown beard.

She stifled a giggle. He resembled a young Santa Claus.

The twinkling blue eyes narrowed at the sight of Rhi, body lost in giant woolen socks and baggy sweats, black hair gathered into a heavy braid hanging over one shoulder.

“Well, here’s another eastern carpetbagger moving in to suck us dry,” he said dryly, his eyebrows moving up a notch.

Rhi almost stepped back when he pushed forward into the house without an invitation. She stopped, blocking his path. He paused for a moment.

“Mind if I come in?”

She forced him to wait another heartbeat before nodding and stepped back to allow him into her territory. Rhi noticed that the moment he stepped through the door and removed his Stetson, the lawman examined everything and everyone in the room, ticking off some unseen mental checklist. She almost offered him her camera to take a picture before deciding back off as her newest guest examined her well-furnished little home.

“I’m from the South. Where I come from the term *carpetbagger* is worth a black eye!” Rhi turned her back on him to sit back down to breakfast.

“Ms. Douglas found someone to feed her child something besides frozen entrees?”

“She can clean too,” Pam announced around a mouthful of pancakes. “Chief Nicholas Boyd, Rhi Brennan. Rhi Brennan, Nick Boyd, but I am the only one who gets to call him Nick.”

Katie attacked her breakfast, ignoring all stimuli in the room but her syrup coated plate.

Ellie Mae ambled over to the new visitor and gave his jeans the once over with her nose. He knelt down to scratch her ten- inch long ears. “Well, someone who has a dog like this can’t be all bad.” He smiled, Looking all the more like the jolly old elf.

Saint Nick. Rhi snorted a laugh down.

Suddenly all business, Cripple Creek Police Chief Boyd took a small notebook from his jacket pocket and turned his attention to Pam.

“Katie, since you are done eating, why don’t you go up to my bedroom with Ellie Mae to watch cartoons,” Rhi suggested. “You guys can lie on the comforter and not have to hear us interrupt your show.”

“Okay, Rhi. Come on Ellie,” the child chirped and jumped up to head for the stairs, the dog trailing behind.

Rhi offered up a mug of coffee to the invader. He accepted, not taking his eyes off of his interview subject.

“Cream and sugar, Chief?”

He grinned again and his round face lit up the room. Rhi revised her estimation of the man.

“Call me Boyd and no frills, thanks, I don’t like my coffee scared.” He plunked down in the chair closest to Pam. “I’m sure you know the details of what happened last night, Pam. Telephone, telegraph, tell a Pam.”

Rhi shuddered. Yes, they were aware of the details.

“Rhi, let’s run down your evening. I’ve talked to Stephen and a few of the other dealers. But I need your version too.”

Rhi took a deep breath and told the chief everything she could remember about the Silver Pearl’s New Year’s Eve bash. No, she didn’t notice anyone eyeing Marie at the table. Yes, there were a few weirdoes in the casino the night before but there were *always* weirdoes in the casino, any time.

His eyes narrowed.

“Weren’t you worried about her heading to the lots alone?”

“Why? We all walk to the lots alone, all of the time ... I didn’t like her very much but ... oh hell,” Rhi sat back in her chair with her head in her hands. Why hadn’t she insisted on Marie staying to help close?

“Yeah, there’s another problem I’ve got,” the chief shook his head as he jotted another note in his book. “It seems everybody in town detested the girl and quite a few wives had some serious reasons to hate her. And there is a rumor, Pam, you threatened to kick Marie’s ass more than once.” He hesitated before speaking again, examining his hands as he spoke. “I hate to ask this, but I have to. You and Marie had a big falling out a little while ago, didn’t you? Where were you last night at about two twenty or two thirty?”

“If you’re asking if I murdered Marie in that Gawd-awful way because she was a spoiled little slut who liked to gossip, the answer is no.” Pam was obviously not bothered by the whole ‘don’t speak ill of the dead’ thing. “She tried to convince everyone I dumped to try to steal the pit supervisor’s spot from me a few months ago.”

“Now Pam, you know I don’t know diddly about casino lingo.”

“Dumping, Chief ... reshuffling the cards when they grow cold to dump more money to the players and up the tips. The trick is illegal if you get caught. Marie did the dumping in that casino and we all knew it. I might have told her I would kick her ass a few times, I don’t know. It’s a figure of speech. As for where I was - I was home to set loose Katie’s sitter at two on the nose on this side of town. If you think I drove back into town with my sleeping daughter in a snowstorm to cut some girl’s heart out, you’re crazy!”

“Do either of you have any idea who’d want to do this to her?”

Pam sat back and stared ruefully at the licked clean plate in front of her. “No idea, Nick. I can’t see her making anybody that angry. Maybe the boyfriend who traveled up with her from the cruise ships in Key West, but he hated the cold and took off a few months ago. He was kind of a jerk but this?”

Boyd nodded. “We’re digging him up and going over her house. I brought her cat to you.” He glanced sideways at Pam, who was famous for taking in every stray that

wandered across her property.

"Drop the fuzzy-wuzzy off at my house. I gave the kitty to her in the first place. Bart knows how to get to the barn to keep warm with all of his buddies." Pam sighed and patted her bulging stomach. "I'm glad I've got you to feed me, Rhi. I won't be able to afford food with all of these critters taking over."

"Did any customers get angry with her last night?" he asked as he scribbled in his little notepad.

The two women exchanged tired looks.

"Nick, you've got to know enough about casinos to know we piss off about a hundred people a day." Pam fidgeted with her silverware as she spoke, a sure sign of restlessness. "We're blackjack dealers - we make twenty people angry enough to commit murder every day of the week."

"She dealt to the same lunatics we all do, Chief," Rhi added. "I've gotten two death threats in the last week. Gaming tracked them down through pictures from the security tapes. Can't you check out the tapes of Marie's tables for the night? You might get lucky."

"My guys are reviewing her tapes as we speak, Miss Rhi." The chief stood, his knees creaking, his gaze taking stock of the well-kept little A-frame. "You girls need to be careful out here. Someone nasty visited town last night."

"I think we can handle things, sweetie." Pam grinned at him wickedly. "A locked door is nice but there's no substitute for a product from Smith & Wesson. You need to tell Rhi guns don't kill people. There's always a warm body pulling the trigger."

"Guns need a hand on the trigger that knows what to do and has respect for the weapon. If Rhi doesn't know how to use a gun - she doesn't need one."

Rhi sputtered, spewing pancake over the table. "Mrff - I didn't say I *couldn't* use a gun. I just never liked using one." She stood to glare at him. Direct eye contact was a rarity for her. "I grew up in North Carolina. Back home, we like to shoot something every day, just to keep our hand in."

"Then, living out here with the lions and tigers and bears, you might want to think about some firepower," the chief replied. He pointed out Ellie Mae as she made her way back down the stairs towards him. "Unless you want to depend on this mutant lap dog to protect you. How much bourbon have you guzzled this morning, girl?" he asked the dog, who leaned against his leg, staring up beseechingly. He obliged and rubbed the dog's golden head.

Pam inquired, "Can we expect some police protection out here in the wilds?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Since you are the one female who I know I could drop off in a battle zone and pick up a week later looking like you just visited a spa - no! Ms Brennan," he nodded in Rhi's direction, "It has been a pleasure. Don't let Pam eat you out of house and home." He stood to begin the process of refastening his cold weather gear.

Rhi walked him to the door. The moment she opened it, Ellie Mae rushed straight through to jump into the bed of the police pickup in the driveway, eliciting a hiss from the cat carrier in the truck's bed. Rhi moved to retrieve the dog but the chief breezed past her.

"I think I can get my own dog if you don't mind."

"We wouldn't want those delicate southern tootsies out in this cold, now would

we?” he answered, reaching in the truck to grasp the dog’s collar. “Come on, old girl, we can maybe go out for a cocktail later,” he whispered loudly to the dog as he led her back up the steps where Rhi took hold of the dog’s collar.

Moments later, as the chief’s truck steered down the drive, the hair on Ellie Mae’s neck rose and a low growl rose in her throat. Shocked at the unfamiliar sound, Rhi gaped at the dog, who stared into the woods off to the side of the house. Rhi clutched the animal’s large leather collar and made soothing noises to the frantic hound.

Pam joined her, hands on her bony hips, staring after the truck with disgust. “You mean to tell me with us hot, lonely women here in this godforsaken forest, he asked out the dog?”

With an uneasy laugh, both women began to return to the warmth of the house, Ellie Mae’s discomfort almost forgotten. Ellie Mae was protective of her mistress, but to Rhi’s recollection the dog had never growled in her life.

“What do you think of Nick?”

Before Rhi replied, Ellie Mae jerked herself free of her restraining hand to bound, yelping, into the grove of pines covering the side of the hill across the yard from the deck. The baying of the dog rose to a fevered pitch as Rhi and Pam ran to the open area where the animal dug and sniffed. Rhi grabbed the dog’s collar in time, as Ellie Mae stared up at her, pleading to follow the scent.

“Oh, no, you don’t, I’m not chasing you to the Sangre De Cristos today.” Rhi gritted her teeth as the tops of her moccasins filled with snow and she tightened her hold on the dog’s collar. Bloodhounds were notorious for following a scent to the bitter end.

Pam hunched down in the snow, poking at the fresh powder Ellie Mae had excavated a few moments earlier. The other woman’s face turned grim. The crusted, red snow beneath the powder stood out in stark contrast with the fresh white snow and the deep green of the trees.

“You had a visitor last night. Probably a mountain lion with a fresh kill - somebody didn’t watch their poodle close enough.” Pam rocked back on her heels when an unexpected movement behind them startled her enough to fall over in the snow.

The trees rustled, and Ellie Mae struggled against Rhi’s hold. The hound began to bay, and Rhi whirled to see a man clad in black, white and gray snow camouflage and holding a large shotgun rise from the cover of several bushes.

Chapter Six

Pam scrambled to her feet as the stranger approached. Shocked, Rhi realized that she appeared unconcerned about a man who had crawled out of the underbrush, wearing more guns than a rap star.

Refusing to let Pam know she was shaken, Rhi took a moment to examine him further. The man's shotgun was tucked under one arm, a game bag hung off his shoulder, and his camouflage ensemble was starched to perfection. The newcomer's heavy boots were spotless, the creased pants tucked neatly into the tops.

His guns, both the foot long forty-four strapped to his side and the pump shotgun tucked under his arm were immaculate. The blue-black metal shone dully in the morning light. The sixty-something man's salt and pepper hair had been buzz cut and his leathery face had no acquaintance with SPF 30. Hard blue eyes took in the scene, narrowing at the sight of the stained snow.

"What have we here, ladies?" he queried, approaching to examine what Ellie Mae and Pam had dug up. "This looks fresh - but where's the carcass? I don't see any bits and pieces?"

Rhi's stomach gave a lurch, and she surveyed the snow around her, fearing the worst.

"Maybe something dragged away after one of those big cats brought it down?" Pam suggested. She went to Rhi's aid, who struggled with the dog, trying to hold her back. Both women succeeded in getting knocked down by the bloodhound, which made a beeline for the well-starched visitor.

The man stood immobile, his empty hand held out for the dog to smell. Ellie Mae skidded to a stop in front of him to examine his open hand, sniffing at it before giving the unoffending limb a long bath with her tongue. She turned her back on him to rejoin her mistress and stand protectively to one side.

"Interesting choice for a dog, ma'am," he said in his gravel filled voice to Rhi. He nodded at Ellie Mae. "Purebred bloodhounds like this one can smell or sense anything. Even ghosts."

Pam huffed. "Bobby Wayne, if you're trying to freak us out, jumping out of the bushes armed is good. You don't need to add a ghost story on for good measure." She turned to the house where Katie observed from the door. "I told you that you could hunt on the property but not near the houses. You'll scare off my tenants."

"I think this lady and I are your *only* tenants. Besides, I was just strolling through. I've been hunting up on the ridge." He glanced at Rhi, then at Pam.

"Oh, crap, am I being *rude* again?" Pam exclaimed insincerely. "Bobby Wayne Bedford, this is Rhi Brennan. Rhi, this is Bobby Wayne, the nut job who rents an old hunting cabin from me." She whispered, in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next valley. "And if you give him a chance, he'll tell you about the end of the world. He's stocked up. You, too, can survive!"

Rhi nodded at the intruder. He offered her a gruff nod in return before squatting

down to examine the stain in the snow. He continued, ignoring Pam's jibes. "Snow is covering the blood, which I find curious. Whatever left these stains did it during the storm last night. And what predator in its right mind would be out hunting in that weather? But I've seen more than a few odd prints covered up with fresh snow this morning," he mused, digging around with a gloved hand.

Even his gloves were crisp, Rhi realized before she caught the intense expression on Pam's face. What kind of predator was crazy enough to hunt in a snow storm? Only one predator killed for fun. Suppressing a shudder, she nodded towards the house. "Mr. Bedford, you're welcome to some breakfast if you're hungry."

"Bobby Wayne," the man corrected her as he stood. "I'd be honored, ma'am."

As the group marched back to the house, Pam whispered into Rhi's ear, "Good thinking. Have no gun - feed the owner of the nearest one."

Inside, Rhi served her newest guest some fresh coffee and breakfast before sinking into a chair to enjoy her now cold meal.

"What did you mean, Ellie can sense ghosts?" she asked, interrupting Pam and Bobby Wayne's running monologue of local news and gossip.

Bobby Wayne gave Rhi a hard stare, his watery blue gaze almost disappearing into the weathered folds of skin around his face. "Pam, you haven't shared much of our town's curse with our pretty newbie."

"She has enough problems without loading her up with that horseshit," Pam replied from where she lounged in her chair, sipping coffee. "There's no use bringing it up this morning."

He ignored her and turned towards Rhi. "In answer to your question, darlin', your dog is a descendant of an ancient breed of animals bred by the Templars during the Crusades. The knights were mixed up in the dark arts and there are rumors that their dogs' abilities were of a supernatural nature. Ellie Mae is much more than a mere tracking dog."

"Why should this matter to me?"

"Pam hasn't seen fit to fill you in so I will. Cripple Creek is one of the country's most haunted towns. We've got more ghosts than we do cockroaches," he noted between sausage bites. "A dog like Ellie Mae might come in handy. Or if something nasty has gotten loose from the control of those idiots down at Fort Carson, she might give you some warning. You do know they let loose their Bigfoots in the area now and then to scare off snoopers around Cheyenne Mountain and NORAD."

The close proximity of the legendary military command center located in the hollowed out confines of Cheyenne Mountain above both Cripple Creek and Colorado Springs had always been an uncomfortable itch in the locals' psyche, Rhi discovered a few weeks after her arrival. Rumors of government conspiracies and odd experiments were interspersed with the grim knowledge that in a nuclear confrontation, NORAD was ground zero - a gigantic bull's-eye for a multi megaton nuclear blast. The population living in and around Colorado Springs would be reduced to dust. This fact made the surrounding populace nervous. And a bit batty.

Pam rolled her eyes at Rhi and broke in before Bobby Wayne could detail what conspiracy the government and the local military bases had unleashed on them this week. "It might be nice to have someone around who can point out the difference between the real and the otherworldly in this town, if you know what I mean."

They peered towards the living room where the television belched the inane noise of cartoons and Ellie Mae lay stretched out beside Katie, absorbed in the cartoon along with the little girl.

Rhi sighed. There was no way her dog was anything but spoiled. "If Ellie did have ESP of some kind, her mystical power has been burned out by all of the television she watches. She might look intimidating, but I suspect Ellie's under the delusion she's a lap dog."

"Well, remember. If your dog has something to say, listen. And I'll leave you my card as well, Miss Rhiannon. If you need anything, please feel free to give me a call. I'd be honored to drop by and take Miss Ellie out for a run now and then. But don't call my cell unless there's an emergency. You don't know *who* is listening."

Behind his back Pam pointed her index finger at her head and swirled it around.

Rhi swallowed a smile.

Thanking Rhi for the hospitality and admonishing both women to stay out of the woods until he checked out what had left the blood in the snow, Bobby Wayne took his leave of them, marching out through the snow in true 'Bridge on the River Kwai' style.

"Yes, he's as nutty as my Aunt Roxy's Alabama rum fruitcake," Pam told her in a low voice as soon as he got out of range.

Rhi raised an eyebrow in the direction of their latest visitor. "I'm beginning to believe I'm living in a train station with all the company I've had this morning. How close does that guy live to me?"

"Over the hill. He's harmless and if the revolution comes tomorrow we'll have a place to hide and food to eat. But I don't want to think about what he'll want in exchange."

The women began a long morning of unpacking various boxes of belongings that seemed, to Rhi, to belong to another woman. She held up a black evening gown covered in bugle beads. "Where would I wear this thing up here?" she asked and tossed the garment in the pile for Goodwill.

Gasping, Pam snatched the dress back up. "Honey, if I looked like you do wearing this thing, I would *find* a place to wear it." She dug through the pile of discards to see what other treasures had been tossed. "This stuff is beautiful! What could make you want to throw clothes like these away?"

"These aren't me, not anymore," Rhi replied. She held up a dress, noting the shimmer of light on the beads and the slight scent of Mike's cigarette smoke that still clung to the fabric. She shook her head and dropped the dress into the pile, where it slithered, snakelike, into the mound.

"You'll need the lost part of yourself someday, Rhi." Pam had wormed Rhi's entire life story out of her by judicious applications of sympathy and beer the night Rhi moved into the neighborhood.

Grabbing another beaded gown, Rhi dispassionately examined the slick lines of the dress. "I'm not sure what part of me ever wore this."

Pam dove into the pile of boxes. "At least you're at the point you'll consider a man in your life. When I met you, your only ambition was to be the old lady down the street with cats."

"I remembered I didn't like cats," Rhi replied pointedly. Pam tried to foist one of her charges off on her at least once a day. The other woman ignored her, digging through

the box.

Rhi gazed out the window at the azure sky. Air was a knife-like cold that fought to crawl between the windowpane and sash.

Pam straightened and her back popped loudly in the sudden silence. "Can I ask a favor?"

"After unpacking and hogging every bit of pork sausage in my house? Shoot."

"I think we're gonna get more snow, I can smell it." Pam twisted a silk scarf in her hands and for a second her mask fell, revealing a haunted expression. "They'll need an icebreaker to plant Marie up in the cemetery. I think we need to go to the funeral. I know she was a pain but I hate the idea of her family alone in the cemetery, wondering where all of her friends are. I'm gonna go and I'm gonna fake it. Will you go with me?"

Rhi put a comforting arm around her friend's bony shoulders. "I think that can be arranged *and* I think we both need hot cocoa with fresh whipped cream and nutmeg."

"Fresh whipped cream and nutmeg? Have you been watching Emeril again?"

* * * *

Outside, the wind whipped up glimmering clouds of powder and the swaying pines moaned. Several sets of eyes watching the house turned from the view of the window and vanished into the brush of the mountain.

In the living room, Ellie Mae hauled her large golden form off of the pile of pillows she shared with the little girl and nosed the cold glass of a nearby window. Wind blew hunks of snow off the roof into the glass, rattling the pane. The dog waited.

* * * *

A few miles away, Chief Boyd barreled down an ice-covered back road with the typical lack of concern shown by most of locals when confronted with deadly patches of ice underneath their vehicles.

He'd kept watch on the area surrounding Horse Thief Gulch for weeks, as ordered.

Boyd allowed himself a moment of pity for the girl and whatever she had been caught up in before a flash of movement in the sun-dappled woods caught his eye. He skidded to a stop in the center of the desolate stretch of dirt road. After a long pause, he reached for one of the rifles in the gun rack and alighted from the truck. A smoldering patch of something that resembled raw meat lay several feet beyond the road. The pile had burned a hole through the crust of snow. He had knelt to poke through the heap with a stick when the barrel of an old-fashioned pistol pressed against his neck.

A whiff of exotic perfume told him exactly who had gotten the drop on him. "I should've known you'd be up to your armpits in this mess. I don't suppose when you kill these things, you could manage to hide the carcasses? They tend to gross people out."

The silk-smooth voice behind him wove its way into his mind. "And get that muck on my hands? Are you serious? So – how's our girl today?"

Boyd swore and wondered what he'd done to deserve the return of this particular Cripple Creek curse in his lifetime. He rose and turned to face the owner of the voice with a sigh.

Chapter Seven

A subdued crew manned the casino that evening. After the prerequisite expressions of horror and sorrow over Marie's death, staff and dealers put on their game faces and went to work. By silent mutual agreement, they told morbid curiosity seekers and reporters employees were not permitted to comment about the murder.

On her table, Rhi rolled her head in a circle, listening for her neck to pop, before she brought her focus back to the card layout.

The blackjack table served as an effective buffer for most of the night against the rehearsed lines of a group of young soldiers up for a day of gambling and fun from Fort Carson. But the happy, mindless banter had begun to wear her down.

She never understood the need or impulse to gamble for hours on end, but gamble the soldiers did as she dealt hand after hand, deflating both their wallets and their pride.

"They play like kids at Go Fish," Stephen, the pit boss, whispered from behind her. "Are they drinking strawberry daiquiris? Ten inches of snow on the ground outside and they're drinking boat drinks!"

"I think they're cute," Rhi whispered back as she cleared her hands and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Stephen stalked away shaking his head, muttering to himself about the dubious alcoholic tastes of the U.S. military.

Rhi gave the baby-faced recruit seated in front of her a weak grin. "Care to place a bet, sir?"

Her customer shook his shaved head at her, shoving himself back from the table with two startlingly muscular arms, almost falling over in the process. His companions roared with laughter and each anted up another five bucks for the next hand.

Stephen sidled over to whisper in Rhi's ear, his favorite method of communication when he wanted to insult customers. "They're cute, like basset hound puppies. Want to take one home? I'll bet if you get them young, you can train them."

"All bets set? Okay!" Rhi called, refusing to acknowledge her supervisor. She dealt the cards. The green felt of the table showed an ace, ten, deuce, seven, and a five for the dealer. The hand would probably be a profitable one for the players if they paid attention.

The dreams of the night before were a haze of sensations in the back of her mind until she caught the stare of the large man occupying a seat at the next table.

Rhi's heart lodged in her throat as she recognized the animal stare of her dream man. The handsome planes of his face were weathered. Silver threaded his black hair, and his hard, blue-eyed glare made her want to hide.

Her hands faltered as her mind struggled to comprehend how her dream man managed to stroll into the casino to take a seat and play a few hands of blackjack.

Drops of sweat slid down her neck as she concentrated on the cards, willing him to disappear. King, jack, ace, deuce, double, split. The hand was over in seconds. She glanced up.

The moment Rhi met his gaze with her own, the cards on the table leaped into the air as if possessed. Invisible hands swatted her body, lifting her into the air and slamming her against the supervisor's podium. She sprawled on the paisley carpet of the casino floor, gasping for breath.

The entire four-table blackjack pit erupted into anarchy. Stephen frantically locked down each dealer's set of chips and froze the games as casino security swarmed the pit.

Rhi's dream man made his way to the edge of the pit, his hands reaching out. She choked, feeling the unseen pair of hands around her throat. The veins in her eyeballs swelled as eerie laughter filled the air. She could feel calluses on the thick fingers squeezing the life out of her. As she blacked out, the smell of burnt flesh touched her nostrils.

The tall stranger ignored the velvet rope sectioning off the blackjack pit, stepping over the barrier to breeze past a strangely dazed Stephen and oblivious security guards to where Rhi struggled with her invisible attacker. He chanted under his breath as he knelt down and lifted her into his arms.

Her hands tore at the suede of the jacket, desperate for air. The act of touching him sent electric currents through her body. His hand touched the bare skin of her arm, and the other, unseen hands jerked away from her throat.

Rhi balled up on the floor, gasping, as the stranger held her arm in a burning grip. When she finally recovered her self-control, she shoved away from the warm, spicy scent of her rescuer. Staggering to her feet, she almost knocked Pam over, who had leaped into the pit, fresh from a break.

The other woman put an arm around her, steadying Rhi's shaky stance, her face marked with concern.

Gasping, Rhi explained to her friend what happened.

"Calm down, sweetheart." Pam turned on Stephen, who stood gibbering in shock nearby. "Call 911, you twit!"

The stranger, whose clear energy reached straight for Rhi's heart, spoke up. "I think we have a case of altitude sickness, right, miss?" His face was a mask of calm but Rhi could sense a wealth of emotions emanating from him in an angry cloud.

Not knowing why, she nodded and started to leave as a concerned crowd gathered. The idea of burnt finger marks on the tender skin of her throat underneath the tuxedo shirt and bow tie terrified her. And the man she made love to in a dream stood in front of her. All six-foot-three of him. She swallowed the insane urge to jerk up the back of his jacket and shirt to see if his back had been marked and pocked with the scars of a hundred battles. Scars she had run her fingertips over in a dream.

Pam's eyes narrowed. "Thank you for your help, mister ... I don't believe that I got your name."

"Blackthorne."

The casino filled with the noise of sirens, and the emergency crew arrived. Rhi's rescuer turned and strode out of the pit, gliding over the plush red paisley carpet. The crowd moved in behind him to get a better view of the drama. When they scattered, he was gone.

The scent of sulfur drifted past her face, and Pam took her hands as Rhi began to shake uncontrollably.

* * * *

Manius Black leaned against a pillar supporting one of the many porches hanging off the side of the granite monolith christened the 'Castle' by Cripple Creek locals, gazing at the magnificent vista of night sky over the mountains.

A frosted glass of Blue Goose vodka, straight up, stood nearby on an elegant side table. A delicate plate holding an eight-ounce tin of Iranian Beluga caviar accompanied the cocktail. Manius' snack was presented in a rose ice bowl sculpture accompanied by artfully arranged chopped egg, sour cream, and toasted slices of baguette. The petite little chef who so carefully prepared the food would wet himself if he had any idea what his employer preferred for dinner.

Adequate fare, Manius decided as he lifted a wafer of bread to his lips, smeared with an obscene amount of the caviar. Last night's snack sated his other appetite as well as having served the purpose of building the fear in the town he and his minions fed on.

The lord of the castle had chosen his attire to coordinate with his new home, his sculpted body encased in Armani casual. His clean-shaven face and coiffed, coal black hair was a striking combination. He liked to think that he resembled Michelangelo's David – and he did, except for the petulance that hovered around his mouth and his almost feminine, full, red lips.

"Reunions are such a bore - until the old wounds are trotted out and opened up for examination." He smiled at the thought of his brother's face when the girl started to choke. What a shame he could not have been there in person.

"Sir?" a respectful voice asked. Manius turned towards his assistant, Troy Myers. The slim, blonde man stood at full attention nearby.

"Nothing, my friend," he replied. "This place makes me dwell on the past too much. Let's go try out the new plasma television and see what the Home Shopping Network is offering this evening. I think some washed-up sitcom star is selling dolls tonight."

Both men strolled together from the room, the prudent servant one step behind the master. The curtains rustled when they passed and Manius frowned at the small, greenish claw that clung to the decorative tassels. Mud dripped down the curtain to puddle in the floor.

"Troy, something has entered the house without cleansing itself. Dispose of it, will you?"

Troy pulled a pistol, loaded with silver tipped bullets dipped in holy water, from a holster hidden beneath his sport coat. He aimed the weapon at the curtain and pulled the trigger. A squeal rang through the room as a pool of slimy green liquid ran out from under the curtain to mix with the mud.

"Damn it, Troy, *look* what you've done to my drapes!" Manius complained, watching the puddle begin to smoke. Emotionless, Troy pulled the curtain down and wrapped the offending creature in the fabric. He stuffed the bundle under one arm and faced his master.

"You were changing these draperies, sir. Remember? You wanted black and gold instead of royal blue and gold?"

Manius nodded. "Of course, how could I forget? Get rid of this thing so we can entertain ourselves, my boy. We need to take a few minutes to relax, because I've got an exciting evening planned."

Troy had been with his master for a few years - after the boy and his girlfriend, Cassie, dug Manius up from his grave in Mt Pisgah Cemetery in a bizarre satanic ritual. The couple was attracted to his gravesite because of the mystical symbols on the headstone holding Manius prisoner.

A patron at the bar where Cassie worked as a waitress pointed the grave out to them one evening, noting that the ornate carvings on the tombstone could signal more plunder.

In the 1800's and early 1900's, the dead were buried wearing their valuables, a fact Troy put to good use many times over his high school career. He'd plundered several other graves in the secluded corner of the graveyard, far from the watch of the local police.

The teens were fascinated by the appearance of a fresh corpse in the coffin they had pried open after hours of digging. The body had been impaled with a large wooden stake. Ignoring the rules of every vampire movie ever made, the teens jerked the stake out of its chest and watched with excitement as the body began to smoke and then heal itself.

Manius awoke to find the pair standing over his coffin, chirping about somebody named Lestat. He hadn't been impressed with Troy's methods but had to admit that the boy was enthusiastic. Plus, he had a delicious girlfriend. Manius slaked his thirst by ripping open the girl's throat where she stood.

Instead of running away like any sensible person, Troy observed in fascination when the vampire fed. Thinking that a pet human might be useful, Manius spared the promising lad to train as a servant.

The pair was on the run for a few years. The moment he awoke, Manius realized that Blackthorne and Pearl were probably aware of his rebirth. Blackthorne tracked him all over the globe; always arriving too late to catch Manius but always in time to pick up the pieces of whatever mayhem Manius had involved himself in. Annoying his brother and causing chaos while he waited for the girl to rediscover his prize pleased Manius for a while. Until he got bored.

Pearl, being a realist, ignored the brothers and sat back to wait until fate dragged them all back together. She chose her side battles to get involved in, some of which amused Manius more than his brother's pathetic flailing around. Neither changed one iota while he lay in a state of half-death. Their masters waited in silence for the two to succeed or fail - he wondered if even they cared anymore. Eternity could be quite the numbing agent.

Chapter Eight

The smoke of a prior group of dealers' last cigarettes clogged the air in the casino dressing locker room. Pam hovered near Rhi as the smaller girl sat on the cold wooden benches in front of her locker, trying to dress for the ride home.

Rhi's hands shook as she tied her boot laces, staring at the floor instead of the lockers. One had been sealed with yellow police tape.

As usual, the temperature in basement resembled the Antarctic. The casino owners kept the heat in their employee section as low as they legally could get away with.

She finally exclaimed in exasperation, "Pam, you're going to knock me over if you get any closer! The medics checked me out, I swear. And where in blazes are you going in those?"

Momentarily distracted, Pam struck a dramatic pose in her form-fitting leather pants. "Mom picked up Katie to keep at the farm for a few days so I figured I'd hit the town. I need a drink; I think we all need a drink." She caught her friend's hands. "Go with me! We'll burn this place down!"

"I think someone already did that in 1896, according to the book I'm reading. But these jeans," Rhi indicated her worn Levi's, "are no match for your ensemble."

Pam wrinkled her nose. "You could show up in a paper bag and everyone would still gawk at you, girlfriend. We need to blow off some steam!"

"What about Ellie Mae?"

"Let's call Bobby Wayne. We don't have time to go get the dog to barhop with us and I think Bobby's a bit in love with her already."

Pam wasn't kidding about taking Ellie Mae barhopping, a Colorado peculiarity Rhi enjoyed tremendously. Many of the more rustic bars in the area welcomed canine companions. The custom was probably a good thing because from what Rhi had observed, everyone in the state owned at least one Labrador retriever.

Rhi tried to smile as she pulled her turtleneck high to cover the bruises and blisters on her neck. Maybe her head would clear after a few shots of top shelf tequila. Or maybe a few gallons. If Bobby Wayne took care of Ellie Mae, they could get rooms in the town for the night if they over did it on the tequila.

Outside, a black and silver crystalline night lay on the other side of the double doors of the casino. The hulk of the surrounding Rockies cut through the starry heavens like stone blade.

They stood on the sidewalk admiring the view, and Pam drew in a lungful of air. "The air tonight is as pure as a virgin from Kansas at a Christian rock concert!" She gave a little impudent grin as Rhi rolled her eyes.

"I want to know how *you* have any idea what a virgin is," Rhi demanded before joining her friend in laughter. They strolled arm and arm into the night, the feminine sound ringing down the street like silver bells.

Along Bennett Avenue the casinos were almost empty in spite of the holiday.

Most of the vacationers and retirees had scattered down Ute Pass to Colorado Springs earlier in the day and news of the murder cleared out all but the most diehard gamblers. The dinner hour left the brick walkways empty, the lights of the gas lamps and casinos coloring the street a deep blood red. A wild burro ambled past, taking a sniff of air. The animal's eyes rolled in its head and the beast shot down the street, fleeing the shadows and startling both women.

"Damned burros. They should've sent them to winter pasture by now," Pam snarled. Her love of animals didn't extend to the descendants of the boomtown's original pack animals. The town's burros were notorious for leaving 'presents' in the street and begging for food by sticking their heads into open car windows. Visitors considered them colorful but locals considered them a nuisance.

"I think they keep them close to town now. The tourists want them around, even in winter. Part of the ambiance - especially the smell of their excrement," Rhi pointed out, nodding at a pile of manure nearby.

"Excrement? Can't you call the stuff crap like the rest of us?"

They headed down a side street towards a local watering hole, the *Dancing Elk*. A couple in full period dress strolled past, the gentleman tipping his hat in their direction. The woman's costume was perfection, down to the tiny mink stole wrapped around her shoulders and the outrageous hat pinned to the top of her pyramid of curls.

"Those outfits are amazing!" Rhi glanced back to examine the couple but they were gone. "Where'd they go? They were just here."

Pam shrugged but her expression was wary. "Rhi, if I were you, I'd not look too close at people wandering the streets or buildings in this town with costumes like those."

"Oh, Pam. Come on! Those people weren't ghosts! I think you've been at high altitude too long."

"All I know is the residents of this town sometimes see dead people and I prefer not to know too much about it." Pam squirmed and shifted her giant purse to the side so she could dig at the back of her leather pants.

"If those are dead people then I want to talk to them. Wouldn't that be the coolest?" Rhi turned to head in the general direction of where the couple might have gone.

Pam grabbed her by the arm and yanked, turning Rhi around to face the direction of the bar.

Rhi glared at her friend.

"You get attacked by some kind of entity in the casino and you're going to trot off after a few more? Let this go, Rhi. I'm changing the subject! Did you know the state with the most microbreweries per capita is Colorado? It makes a girl proud ..." Pam broke off her praise of homemade beer with a gasp as Rhi stepped off the curb.

A large panel truck appeared around the corner going too fast for the autobahn, let alone a side street in Cripple Creek. A big, scarred hand grasped Rhi by the collar of her barn jacket, jerking her out of the way.

He had shoved Pam out of the way as well. She fell against a worn brick wall nearby, stunned. "He jumped out of nowhere as fast as the truck!"

Shocked, Rhi dropped onto one of the benches that lined the sidewalks and put her head between her knees, in an effort to control her breathing. Beside her stood the dream man, who watched as the truck continued on its way, the driver oblivious to the

damage he almost caused.

Rhi glared up at him, meeting his sullen stare with her own. She took a moment to study his appearance as she collected herself.

The man was dressed in typical mountain garb: jeans, hiking boots, sweater, and a heavy suede bomber jacket. The clothes were expensive and the man who filled them built like a linebacker – or a panther, Rhi couldn't decide which. With the blazing blue eyes and roughhewn features of a warrior, he could wear a kilt and carry a sword for the cover of one of the romance novels Rhi indulged in once in a while on her days off.

But at that moment he could have been a Greek god with a dozen roses for all she cared. She struggled to her feet, her face blood red.

"I'm beginning get a bit paranoid when you're around, whoever you are." She bit off the words, her arm still burning from his touch. The flame spread to other parts of her anatomy in seconds. "Who in the hell *are* you?"

"Hope to God you never find out," he replied. The deep smooth tone of his voice set off her alarms as the sound wound its way through her thoughts to curl up to stay in a deserted corner of her subconscious. He stood close and the feel of his breath on her cheek made her heart bounce an extra beat.

He spun to stalk away from them. "You and Miss Douglas might want to stay at home for a few days. It would save me some trouble," he shot over his shoulder before vanishing around the corner.

Pam gaped at her, speechless for the first time since Rhi met her.

So was she, Rhi decided while trying to catch her breath after her second close call of the day. The worst part hadn't been the reappearance of her guy, but the eerie laughter in the air as she was hauled out of danger.

"Did you hear someone laughing," she asked Pam, who still gazed in awe at the corner around which the stranger had disappeared.

"Was that guy hot or is it just me? Did you see the testosterone oozing out of his body? I wonder if he thinks he has too much – because I could volunteer to lick it off."

Rhi shrugged. She refused to put the word 'licking' and the image of Jack Blackthorne together in her mind. It had been too long since she had gotten laid and her head might explode. But Pam - someone should get something out of all of this. She eyeballed her friend, who held a hand up in denial.

"Don't, I was kidding ... he's too pretty for me. And if you didn't make men feel like they opened up an industrial-sized freezer when you meet them, you might find something besides your dog to keep you warm – like him."

"You should go get him if you think he's all that," Rhi replied, trying not to stare at the corner longingly as well, hoping he'd reappear and carry her away.

"He's too young for me." Her face was serious.

Rhi snorted. "I'm pretty sure he's at least ten years older than you."

"I figure all men are twenty to thirty years younger mind wise than their bodies are. So he's just past puberty."

"So you need a fifty year old man."

Pam cackled. "Lord no! I'd kill the poor guy, being at my sexual peak and all."

The bruises on Rhi's neck emitted a quick, throbbing pain, reminding her of the episode in the casino.

She snapped her fingers in front of her friend's face. "Let's get back to the

subject at hand. Someone's trying to kill me. Or freak me out. And Testosterone Guy has mistaken me for someone else because I've never seen him before in my life and have done nothing to make him act like such a jerk."

"Are you sure there's no drunken one night stand you want to tell me about from your days of dealing blackjack and poker on the mighty Mississippi? Maybe you went out on your weenie husband? That'd bump you up a few notches on my wild child scale."

"Believe me, if I'd ever met *that* guy, I'd remember. And you're right – he's hot. But he also gives me the willies, Pam. Your 'hot guy' has made two appearances just in time to see me almost begin the trip to meet my Maker. He's got a bad habit of being around for these little accidents."

Pam sobered and wrapped an arm around Rhi's shoulders, heading for the bar. "There's more to this than is dreamt of in my philosophy, Horatio my friend. We should do the sensible thing: drink heavily and discuss the invisible men attacking you while someone giggles in the background and the incredibly hot one saves you."

"Honestly Pam, did you and your ex have sex? Because you act like you haven't ever gotten any. What am I going to do?"

They stood before the battered pine door of the bar and Pam turned. "My ex? It wasn't quantity, but the quality I found lacking, sweetie. And what are we going to do? I don't think the cops have a form for 'attack of snickering entities' in their files. We need to talk to the freaky people in town. And most of them are in this bar."

Chapter Nine

The interior of the *Dancing Elk* was a cliché

Rocky Mountain drinking hole, with walls clad in pine paneling and tables fashioned from battered old whiskey barrels. Mismatched chairs and stools stood scattered about the cavernous space, some occupied and some holding beers while the occupant took a turn at a pool table. The place was hopping for a weeknight but Monday and Tuesday substituted for weekends in the gaming world, since most casino employees worked during the actual weekend.

An abundance of cowboy hats, flannel, well-worn ski gear and the obligatory Colorado hippies were in view, as well as a few gold miners just off second shift at one of the corporate gold mining operations still in business in the nearby town of Victor. All of the patrons offended by cigarette smoke stayed bundled in their parkas on the back patio beside the dubious warmth of the outdoor fireplace. The brick hearth held the equivalent of a bonfire but still couldn't cut the cold more than three feet out.

The smoke of a thousand bundles of tobacco combined with the odor of beer and several gallons of Kentucky bourbon and cactus juice to make the air inside the bar thick and almost visible. Most of the pollution seemed to originate from the tables towards the back wall, which Pam made her way towards, dragging Rhi behind her. The women passed two large men, dressed in the western-themed uniforms of one of the *Pearl's* competitors. The men were embroiled in a heated argument.

"I told you - gremlins! Little bastards stalked me for two miles through the woods until I got to my truck. They were popping in and out of nowhere. I think they were playing with me! Think they're some kind of experiment loose from Fort Carson?"

The other man glanced around. "Clay. I think this is one you might want to keep to yourself."

Pam turned to wiggle her eyebrows at her friend. Ignoring the danger of secondhand smoke and spontaneous combustion from the alcohol fumes, she plunked herself down in a scarred wooden chair next to a worn man of middling age, his thinning blonde hair covered with a battered black Stetson. His face showed evidence of once being brash and handsome. But the blue eyes were faded with memory, the arrogance of youth replaced with cynical amusement.

Waving Rhi to the chair beside her, Pam ordered two *Fat Tire* beers from the waitress and turned to face the older man, who observed her and Rhi with an amused expression on his weathered features.

"Miss Brennan, Miss Douglas. What's up, ladies?" He then addressed Rhi, "And how did the wild child of Horse Thief Gulch get you out and about this evening, princess? You're a bit more conservative than your friend. I see her every week. *You* I see every other week, which is downright prudish in this town."

"Now, Houston, don't call the girl a prude. You'll ruin her reputation. She can't help it if she has developed the unfortunate habit of sticking her nose in a book or practicing Kung Fu moves on her deck." Pam lowered her voice, trying to sound

mysterious. "It's probably safer. She's being stalked by something weird."

Houston's caterpillar eyebrows rose a few millimeters but he gave no other sign of interest other than to cross his arms across his faded plaid shirt and nod, signaling Pam to proceed.

Rhi sucked her beer down in a few gulps as Pam related the tale. Houston listened, not blinking or voicing any kind of disbelief. After waving to the harried waitress for another round, Rhi warily examined the other patrons lining the graffiti covered pine walls of the bar. Nobody seemed threatening. The crowd was, for the most part, inebriated. And a bit smelly. There were no period costumes, something she was profoundly grateful for at the moment. She figured she might have to approach each costumed figure in town and poke them with a stick to see if they were real if things kept up at the rate they were going.

"Gremlins," she muttered into her drink. Then Rhi remembered the loud knocks beneath her truck on the drive home the night before. Should she have gotten out and checked to see what made the noise? For a moment she envisioned something green and covered with scales hanging off of the undercarriage of her SUV. A chill ran down her back.

She placed her hand on her neck where her shirt hid bruises from the attack at the casino and then glanced down at the dirt on her jeans from being dragged out of the street by - Blackthorne? What kind of name was Blackthorne? It did ring a bell, however. The rich yuppie living in the place called the Castle everyone gossiped about was named Black.

"Rhi! Quit checking out the guys and talk to us!" Pam's voice invaded her thoughts with its usual potency, resembling a railroad spike being driven into her temple.

Houston didn't seem surprised at all by the tale Pam had related. And Rhi wasn't sure if his reaction was a good or bad thing.

She'd met Houston twice and had the impression the man functioned as the unofficial guru of Cripple Creek. Retired from the Air Force, he puttered around his cabin outside of town, reading and writing an occasional article for the Cripple Creek Crusher. He knew everybody and saw everything. There was very little he didn't know about the town's history.

"I'm sorry I didn't answer, Pam, but I was asking for more booze and checking out the room for *assassins* ... or anyone who's having a good chuckle. Do I just have bad luck? And if this is bad mojo, how come some guy I've never met before has shown up to rescue me twice? And how about those ghosts in the street? Do they rock or what?" Rhi's voice shook as she spoke, teetering on the verge of hysteria.

The older man spoke up and the crowd's feet surrounding his eyes deepened. "In this part of the Rockies don't let anything surprise you, young lady. The Indians held this land as holy - they don't see any place as special unless the town *is* special. And Manitou Springs, just down Ute Pass, has been considered a special place since recorded memory. Cripple Creek, sitting smack in the middle of an extinct volcano, was something else entirely. The gates of Hell are supposed to be here somewhere. The unexplained in Teller County isn't an occasional visitor. It's a local drunk who won't leave. We've gotten a little jaded about this kind of thing. But since whatever is floating around town *this* time is trying to hurt someone, it might need looking into. Along with a few other things I'm checking on."

“Like what?” Pam inquired matter-of-factly as she peeled at the label of her beer bottle with a polish chipped nail.

At the same moment Rhi demanded, “This time? What do you mean this time?”

“If I were a Jedi Knight, I would say there has been a disturbance in the Force. But since we are small town schmucks ...” Houston broke off to examine the crowd gathered along the walls around the pool tables of the *Dancing Elk*. “... we’ll just say that something stinks.”

Rhi turned to Houston. “*What* stinks?”

He studied his beer. “The rash of rabid animals attacking and people possessed by invisible, choking hands is a repeat of something that’s happened in this town before. Let’s be honest. Animals don’t become rabid in zero degree weather. And the possession?”

Rhi felt a chill in her spine. “Happened in this town before? When?”

“A hundred plus years ago,” he replied. “By the way, Rhi, what’s your name short for?”

Her face colored. This was one of her least favorite subjects. She would never understand what possessed her conservative father and mother to give her such an odd name. She couldn’t ask them, since they had died in an automobile accident when she was seventeen, leaving her sufficiently naïve and with enough money to attract the likes of her ex-husband.

“It’s short for Rhiannon. And yes, I know she was a famous witch, so you don’t have to tell me her history.”

“Now isn’t *this* interesting. And the name Brennan is a Celtic name meaning raven.” The older man glanced around the bar, appearing uncomfortable for the first time. “Let’s meet someplace a little quieter tomorrow for dinner and I’ll tell you more.”

Rhi and Pam both opened their mouths to protest but Houston halted them.

“That’ll give me time to check into a few things and to ask a few questions. In the meantime it’s time for you girls to get home safe. Stay here, I’m going to arrange an escort to your trucks.” Houston gave the girls a stern look, obviously accustomed to having his orders followed. “You both go straight home and follow each other. Don’t stop. Don’t go out once you get home. Period.”

He rose from the table to speak with some large, flannel-covered gold miners.

Pam rubbed a hand down her leather pants and sighed.

“I can’t believe I’m even thinking about obeying that guy.” She drained her beer. “He has such a *daddy* vibe for me, though. So much for burning the town down. I need to get some nachos to go before I hit the road.”

“You never know, Pam, you might get a chance to do some burning yet.” Rhi stretched her legs and examined the smoke stained ceiling beams. “Maybe I *should* have a few more weapons about the house,” she mused as she idly picked at the colorful label depicting an antique bicycle on her beer.

“Oh no, you don’t. I can shoot someone and say I’m crazy. Everyone’ll buy that. But you’re one of the sanest people in town.” Pam scribbled her illegible signature on the credit card slip for the nachos in a Styrofoam container on the table. “No one would believe you’re nuts.”

“I certainly wouldn’t,” Houston added as he returned with his large miner friends.

* * * *

Blackthorne monitored the group that left the warmth and light of the *Dancing Elk* from his perch in the darkness on the roof of a casino nearby. Rhi's hair shone in the moonlight against the white of the snow bank surrounding the parking lot. He closed his eyes, feeling the strands of silk fall through his fingers. Then he forced himself to open them again.

She glanced in his direction, the only one who bothered to stare at the roofline. He shrank back into the shadows of the false front of the building. Rhi shook her head and climbed into her SUV to follow her friend home, waving goodbye to the group of men who escorted the women to the parking lot. He watched as the headlights of the two cars as they made their way out of town and up Teller One, fading into the night. Blackthorne's hands clenched, his face inscrutable. He stood, strolled to the edge of the roof and stepped off of the edge of the three-story building, into the night.

* * * *

At the same moment, across Bennett Avenue, Marge Brown waddled purposefully through the parking lot. She ignored the vicious bite of wind whipping through the thin pale pink cotton leggings covering her massive thighs and her several sizes too small satin baseball jacket. The tights, combined with the silver ballet slippers she wore, gave Marge the appearance of a dancing hippo. But no hippo ever possessed Marge's sourdough face and sullen blue eyes.

Marge and Chuck Brown stayed an extra day in Cripple Creek to feed Marge's compulsive need to pump quarters into slot machines while Chuck haunted the blackjack tables.

Like most military retirees from down the mountain in Colorado Springs, the couple didn't have anything else to do. And since Marge hit a jackpot of ten thousand dollars the year before, they'd spent the ten thousand and more trying to replicate the win.

Tapped out, the Browns checked out of the venerable Independence Hotel and headed for the old powder blue Cadillac in the parking lot.

A short, squat man of sixty-something years, with an alcoholic's red nose and weasel eyes set back in a swollen face, Chuck wasn't happy with their losses. He also wasn't sober, having downed a couple of shots of George Dickle bourbon over ice in the bar while waiting for his wife. Marge had been busy losing her last three dollars in the nickel slot machine closest to the door, considered a 'hot' machine by experienced slot players because the slot statistically witnessed the most use, and thus made the most payouts.

He glared at his bloated wife as she puffed on a cigarette, ignoring his struggle with the luggage on the way to the car. "Could you do something besides suck on that menthol? Never mind, maybe it'll hurry up you kicking the bucket and I won't have to see your enormous rear walking through my house in bike shorts any more."

Marge ignored him and opened the passenger door to climb inside, leaving her husband of thirty-five years to put their bags in the trunk. Chuck's verbal abuse ceased to register with the woman in the last few years. Like many women in her position, Marge was dead inside. She felt nothing for her husband and considered Chuck a necessary evil to get enough money to drown her disappointment in life at brightly lit slot machines.

There was always the slim chance she'd win enough money to escape him.

She checked her bright pink lipstick in the mirror and carefully powdered her face. Then she examined the red helmet of hair covering her head and adjusted one of the hairspray-lacquered curls.

Chuck snorted in disgust. "Why do you spend money on hair and makeup? Blow a few bucks on joining the gym and maybe you wouldn't need to color yourself up like a hooker to get attention."

"That's like an elephant giving diet advice to the hippo, Chuck," Marge replied without batting an eye. "Get in the car; I want to get this drive over with tonight."

She referred to the solitary ride down Highway Sixty-seven to Highway Twenty-four to Colorado Springs. Sixty-seven was a winding, two-lane road, edged with steep drop offs and few houses. A post New Year's night drive down the Hill, as everyone called the thoroughfare, would be a solitary one. Inebriated gamblers leaving the mountain town regularly drove straight off a cliff and down into one of the deep ravines between mountains. If they missed knocking out one of the occasional guardrails, it was usually days or even weeks before the car was missed. The drivers would be discovered still strapped in their seats, casino smoke clinging to their clothes.

There were no other cars in sight when the Cadillac made its way around the corner at Gillette Flats. A few lights twinkled in the scattered homes along the way but the black and gray backside of Pike's Peak loomed in front of the car like a dark leviathan topped with a dented crown of white. The gas-guzzling auto carried the couple towards their home, and not a word passed between the pair.

After a few minutes, Chuck heard the first gurgled snore rise from the direction of his wife. Relieved that he didn't have to make conversation, he flicked on the radio and searched for the classic country station from Colorado Springs. Evergreens crowded closer to the car as he fiddled with the knobs on the radio. He glanced down for a second and a shadow darted into the road. The land yacht smashed into the figure straight on, which thumped sickeningly into the grill and rolled onto the hood. The creature raised its head and stared into Chuck's face, smiling. A clawed hand smashed into the windshield.

"Oh, God!"

Chuck lost control of the car and sat back in the pale blue velour of the seat to watch in helpless horror. The vehicle flew gracefully between two guardrails and over the tops of the pines to plummet into the deep cleft between the mountains surrounding Highway Sixty-Seven. He remembered to scream seconds before they hit and his unbelted body flew through the windshield to crunch into the ground.

Marge's rotund form was still belted into the car when she awoke half-frozen, confused and hanging from her seatbelt. Blood streamed from a cut on her head into her eyes. She realized that the car somehow had planted itself, headfirst, into the deep loam and snow of the forest floor. She gazed blearily out the shattered window into the darkness of the woods. The trees moved in the wind as small shapes scurried back and forth in the night. A smell reminiscent of rancid milk poured over a wet dog hit her nose at the same moment she heard a curious sound, like her cat nibbling at a bowl of dry cat food in the middle of the night ... busy little crunching sounds.

"Chuck?" She managed to rasp. She focused on the shattered windshield in front of her. She started to struggle with the seatbelt cutting into the rolls of fat around her midsection. "Chuck? Are you alright?"

Her sight began to clear as she managed to release the latch on the belt. She

lurched, face first, into the dashboard where she struggled for a moment in the cockeyed car until she managed to shove her way through the remains of the windshield. She crashed to the ground and then staggered to her feet in the slush.

The dome light and the rear lights on the car were still lit. She could make out a pool of dark liquid on the ground in front of the car that trailed off into undergrowth surrounding the clearing. Someone had dragged himself off into the bushes.

Hoping against hope that Chuck was dead, Marge painfully followed the trail. She couldn't get lucky enough to become a widow. Chuck would live forever just to aggravate her – there was too much residual alcohol in his system. The bastard was pickled.

Behind the bushes the lights from the car lit the backs of what resembled naked, winged children and a variety of animalistic beings gathered, giggling, around a pile of something.

Marge staggered behind the group, stunned. The ghastly white skin of the tiny bald creatures was wrinkled and covered in oozing pustules. Their ears ended in sharp points and their transparent wings were threaded with bulging veins.

One raised its head and gazed at Marge as she stood nearby, too shocked to run. The thing leered, showing her the bloody, pointed yellow teeth that filled its wide mouth. For a split second a wolf stood in the place of the creature, eyes glowing red. Then the animal became a horrible little monster again, sneering at Marge in her blood-splattered *I Love Vegas* baseball jacket. The monster belched and a needle of flame leaped from its mouth, lighting up its face.

The realization of how the creature's teeth got bloody hit Marge as it spoke.

"Juicy one." A horrible voice rasped through the air and the monster giggled as its fellows lifted their heads from their meal. Small lizards with wings sailed through the air towards where Marge's thickly colored hair gleamed dully in the light of the fiery ruins of the car.

The tall figure of a man appeared from beneath the evergreens, shadowed, a long knife dangling from his hand. "I'll give you this one, friends. She's a bit used, but then, aren't we all?" The shadow approached, and the soft laughter curdled Marge's blood.

Her smoke-stressed vocal cords couldn't work up a proper scream as the stranger approached, surrounded by the creatures. Some crept over the ground, some floated through the air on imperceptible currents, leaving behind a pile of bloody bone and clothing. Their eyes glowed with a red, unholy lust.

In despair, Marge stared down at her silver slippers and realized life had disappointed her for the last time.

Chapter Ten

Rhi obediently drove home behind Pam. Any indignant emotions she might have harbored about being ordered around were washed away by the monstrous fear the night injected into her soul as she drove. Smoke-filled shadows smelling of brimstone swooped through the sky over the two trucks as they barreled through the snowdrifts up to Horse Thief Gulch, unnoticed by the two women except for the chill in their blood and the headache that hit Rhi square between the eyes. The spirits disturbing her soul sped away as if burned when the women made the turn up their hill.

The urge to hurry was overwhelming as she approached the refuge of Horse Thief Gulch. She observed as Pam entered her own house before making her way to her A-frame. The house had once been a haven. But her comfortable home had become a gigantic bull's-eye she was staked out in the center of. Her stomach gave a violent lurch as she pulled up to the house where the silhouette of a tall man holding a rifle in the crook of his arm stood in the pool of light provided by the deck floodlights. Rhi relaxed when she realized her visitor was Bobby Wayne, with the large gold shadow of Ellie Mae at his side.

She clambered out of the vehicle and broke through the crusty snow to approach her new acquaintance on the hill.

"How's my baby?" she called as she approached the deck. "Has she been a good girl?"

"She seems a bit bothered by something," Bobby Wayne replied, watching Rhi as she made her way up the steps. "But then - *I'm* a bit bothered by something. We've been out hunting in the woods. I got the feeling that we weren't alone, until we made our way back up here." He ruffled the giant dog's ears fondly. "Ellie here wants to hunt something. The hair on the back of her neck stood straight up for the whole hike. So did mine. Houston called on my cell and told me to make sure you girls got home safe. I figured it must have been an emergency or he never would have called the cell. You gonna tell me why he wants me on guard duty?"

Rhi grimaced. "You're asking me? If I told you half of what's gone on today, you'd say I needed lithium. And of course you aren't alone - these woods are filled with warm and fuzzy critters."

Bobby Wayne hitched his gun up to examine an imaginary dust speck on the barrel. "You stay indoors tonight, Rhi, and lock the doors and windows up tight. I spotted some tracks I don't know what to make of and I don't believe that they were made by anything warm and fuzzy. I'm gonna head down to Pam's and make sure she's tucked in, then I'm giving Houston a call. I've got the feeling our government has been up to something nasty - at least, I hope it's *our* government."

Rhi would have snickered about the paranoia of her neighbor at one time. But after the earlier events of the evening, she felt a strange kinship with the man Pam claimed owned enough explosives to mount an offensive on Little Round Top.

After shutting herself in the house, Rhi sat in the dark with Ellie Mae at her side,

gazing out at the darkness. The woods across the little valley seemed to breathe with evil. She absently massaged her neck with one hand and rubbed Ellie Mae's satiny fur with the other. She noticed the dog sat at attention, as alert as when they first entered the house.

Whatever lurked outside, hovering on the edges of Rhi's mind, obviously troubled Ellie Mae's thoughts as well. Rhi's eyes felt heavy enough to add a few pounds to her body mass and she fought the waves of sleep washing through her. The moment she surrendered to sleep, she knew she would be another person in another time.

* * * *

The pines in the yard swayed and the wind howled as Rhi tossed in her bed. She jolted awake from the beginnings of a dark dream and resolved to not sleep for the rest of the night. Instead she sat and stared down the drive, waiting for him to come.

The fact that she had gotten no sleep at all didn't matter. Every molecule of her being called to him, some parts of her being more than others. And the sinister presence on the edge of her mind added even more darkness to the mix. Or was the presence Blackthorne himself?

At 5:00 a.m., in the dark of the morning, she gave up and crawled out of bed to make coffee. She paused to poke at Ellie Mae, sprawled on the foot of the bed.

"Wake up, lazy animal!"

Ellie Mae rolled over, falling off the bed into the floor. With a very human sounding groan, the dog climbed to her feet and padded over to the bank of windows on the far end of the room to flatten her large nose against the window to observe the black, white and gray landscape.

After filling the morning hours with exercise, news, breakfast and a substantial amount of coffee, Rhi answered a knock on her door at 8:30 a.m.

Bobby Wayne stood on the porch, ramrod straight and dressed in a parka and hunting clothes, gun in hand.

"Everything alright in there this morning?"

Relieved to see another human, any human, Rhi grinned wearily at her guest.

She held the door open with one hand and Ellie Mae's collar with the other as the dog strained to get close enough to their guest to slobber on him. "'I think we pulled through okay, Bobby Wayne. Come on in, I'll make fresh coffee."

"Thank you ma'am, but I just stopped by to see if you'd like me to take Miss Ellie Mae out for her morning constitutional?" He crouched to scratch Ellie Mae's ears, making the dog quiver with happiness.

Rhi let go of the dog's collar. To her amazement, the animal tiptoed onto the porch to stand expectantly next to Bobby Wayne. "She's ready to go, isn't she?"

The dog sat on her haunches and thumped the boards of the deck with her tail.

"I've owned hunting dogs for years, Rhi," Bobby Wayne told her. "I'm between pets right now because I haven't had the heart to replace old Elwood. This little lady and I get along just fine."

After a brief discussion, the hunters left, the dog bounding happily through the snow ahead of the trudging form of Bobby Wayne. Rhi managed a weak grin, happy in the knowledge that at least Ellie Mae would have a fun day as she watched the pair make their way into the woods.

"Don't haul home anything you guys catch!" she yelled as they faded from sight.

Indoors, she set the teapot to boil and got out her black wool pantsuit to steam for Marie's funeral the next day. She needed to get back in bed but settled for a restful cup of Earl Grey.

Later in the afternoon, Rhi completed her list of chores for the day, surprised at how easily she buried her mind in mundane cleaning and unpacking chores. Done with her work, the stack of books in the box and the papers on her makeshift desk called. Her addiction to the history of her adopted mountain town would be a welcome diversion.

She sat in the still beauty of the day, reading history and sipping a chocolate soda as a soft Jazz standard played in the background. Rhi examined the second book that had caught her eye in the bookstore. The first book in the pile, the Bible with the skull inside the cover, she had squirreled away earlier by stowing the offending volume in a gallon freezer bag and duct taping the package inside the safest place in her home. The same something that told her the Bible should make her uncomfortable also advised her that the tome should be hidden and forgotten.

Colorado Treasure, a detailed history of the lost treasures of the state, lay in her lap. The book listed legends about buried treasure in every town and hamlet in the Rocky Mountains. A heading on page 120 noting that the next chapter was titled *The Gates of Hell* made the hair on the back of her neck rise as she studied the pages in fascination. The tale was familiar and had a realistic tone, unlike the rest of the cliché treasure tales that filled the book.

"...During the 1560's a group of Spanish soldier explorers wandered the Southern Rockies, searching for the Spanish narcotic, gold, to mine, smelt, and ship home to Spain to finance the country's exploitation of the New World and various wars in Europe.

In the Pikes Peak region (not confirmed), the group stumbled upon a well-hidden ancient complex of caves. And much to the explorers' surprise - the labyrinth appeared to be man-made. Against the advice of their Indian guide, who claimed the caves were cursed ...

"Aren't *all* mysterious treasure caves cursed?" Rhi muttered as she turned the page.

... They searched the caves, keeping to the foolish belief of all Spaniard explorers that every member of the indigenous peoples of the New World did nothing but dig up and play with gold. The Spaniards wandered in circles for days, in and out of the complex. Finally, they decided the caves held nothing of value.

The group had begun the trip back to the surface when several soldiers managed to shift aside the large stone towards the back of the tunnel. A cavern that contained a massive golden gate was revealed, the gate inlaid with ebony and rubies assembled into a pattern resembling monstrous flames. Human bones and weapons littered the floor of the cave surrounding the gate. The artifacts scattered among the rubble had been a part of a great battle.

The Spaniards became wild with joy at the sight of the discovery. They were busy counting their plunder and discussing how to pry the jewels out of the portal or remove the gates completely to carry off when a stranger approached, rising out of the darkness surrounding their campfires at the front of the cave.

A European, possibly English, the man dressed in the fashion of the Knights of the Crusades - a conflict that had ended two hundred years before. Oddly, the Spaniards

didn't kill him on sight for the sin of being not Spaniard.

Ignoring the advice of their terrified Indian guides, they allowed the man to approach and invited him to break his fast with them. After the meal, he told the group a strange tale, reproduced here in modern form, taken from the journal of one of the priests who accompanied the Spaniards:

"... As the Indians whispered among themselves about a 'ghost walker' who fed on the spirits of men and animals, the stranger transfixed us with his beautiful eyes and told the story of the gates below. We didn't think to ask how he came by these words, although I did feel my heart become heavy as he spoke.

The knight spoke about a once mighty people, lost in the mists of time, who conquered the world by the might of their warriors and by the knowledge and power of their magicians and men of learning. An age of glory overtook the Earth on the heels of this conquest- the height of civilization. The people of this kingdom knew no illness or poverty and lived great life spans dwarfing the lives of those they conquered.

I believed the man mad or of sinister purpose but I couldn't speak. My tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth as if fastened by nails.

He spoke of the arrogance of this people and how they lusted for power and godhood, searching far and wide for clues to the location of sinews of power that bound the world together. Then one day, some of the great minds of the kingdom discovered a means to control the doors of Hell itself, commanding the demon hordes to labor for them as Solomon did in later years to build his great temple.

I couldn't help but wonder if the Hebrew king had a similar gate at his disposal. Control of the gates and the demons was accomplished by means of great crystal skulls the people crafted and enchanted over many decades. And the kingdom used the fell beasts of Hell itself to conquer the known world.

But the greed of the people grew. They had wealth, power and longevity but still were subject to the specter of death. The kingdom, swollen with power, sought to use the skulls to cheat death itself. The powers of Heaven, Earth and Hell itself rose up to punish those who would destroy all by destroying the balance of life and death, good and evil. The powers of Heaven shook the earth and ripped the fabric of the sky.

Then the Lord of Hell stretched forth his sword and sent forth his minions to destroy many of the survivors and the knowledge of the great kingdom. Their cities were drowned and destroyed, the many tributary lands destroyed in the cataclysm. The gates were scattered throughout the globe, hidden from the greed of mankind, as were the indestructible crystal skulls that were the keys to each gate.

Among the survivors, a lord of great valor and wisdom decided, along with his loyal servants and warriors, to set a guard upon Hell's Gates against the day when men would come forth to open the gates again, for their own purposes or for the purposes of the Lord of Hell himself. The lord bound himself and those of his blood to the fate of the gates. The lord's kin and followers were given the secrets of their people, wielding great power against the darkness. They were also given the dark secrets of longevity.

Down through the endless years, the mighty heroes of the world have been recruited into this Brotherhood to safeguard the gates and battle the evils the presence of the gates engenders in the hearts of men. The Brotherhood of the Gate has stood by for millennia to defend the gates until the Last Days when the gates will fly open and the Final Battle begins."

The storyteller's eyes glowed with blue light in the darkness as he told us we stood on the brink of one of the gates of Hell and could not live to tell of the portal. The knight stood and drew forth a mighty sword to slay the men of my company, who stood, transfixed, except for myself.

Like wheat before the scythe they fell beside their booty gathered from the dust before the gate. He wept as he killed, even as he showed no mercy. I fell to my knees and prayed for our deliverance with my eyes shut against the slaughter of my companions. Sudden silence forced my attention and I opened my eyes to see the knight standing before me with his sword lowered.

"You, my brother, I will spare," he told me in his ancient Spanish. "In honor of the service I once gave your church, go forth and tell none where the gate lies."

I fled the field of death, glancing back once at the stricken figure of the lone knight kneeling among the dead, his sword thrust into the ground to form a cross.

I traveled many months, some of them lost to me in my madness, until I was found by another group of my countrymen. From there, I gathered my strength and made my way to the settlements of our people. And although I told the story of the treasure, the gate, and the slaughter, I never revealed the location of the battlefield, claiming madness."

Chapter Eleven

“Lost civilizations, knights – and I thought *I* had lost my mind.” Rhi spoke out loud. She knocked the book in her hand against the chair arm to make a mental image disappear. Blackthorne, arrayed in the robes of a Crusader.

“A knight! He’d be kind of hot in armor. What a shame I gave up on the knight in shining armor fantasy when I was ten.”

To get her mind off of helping Blackthorne out of his armor, Rhi rested her eyes for a moment and imagined what she would do with untold riches. Buy a nice place here in her new homeland as a base with maybe a few horses and a lot of acreage for Ellie Mae to run in. Travel the world. She sighed. The Pikes Peak region was a big area to search for a mythical treasure. She hadn’t had time to explore the mountains outside her front door. The other few thousand bumps in the skin of the world would have to wait.

She picked up another heavy book, a compilation of the *Cripple Creek Crusher*, one of the first newspapers in the town.

She flipped through the pages, grimacing at a front-page article detailing the death of an unfortunate woman from a crib, one of the cell-like rooms that lined the alleys of Meyers Avenue’s Red Light district. According to the report, the victim was a nineteen-year-old girl and used up by the men of Cripple Creek. The girl had been reduced to selling her body for less than the price of a shot of whiskey.

“The poor thing probably had no choice,” Rhi mused. When she got to the description of the girl’s death, the color drained from her face.

“... A lovely lass until drink and circumstance exiled her to the cribs of Meyers. The girl who used to drink and dance and make merry in the brightest dance halls on the avenue, was butchered by an unknown fiend, the same monster who has killed five other unfortunate women of our fair city. A monster that ripped the beating hearts from these young girls as a butcher would filet a steer. A phantom that walks among us as a man by day is hunting our women like a beast by the light of the moon.”

Her heart beat faster than a drum solo from a heavy metal concert. Rhi searched the book in earnest - scribbling frantic notes on a nearby legal pad.

After fifteen minutes, she sat back in amazement. A total of twelve prostitutes had been murdered in the same manner as Marie Collier in 1894, 1895, and 1896. Law enforcement hadn’t taken much notice of the murders, according to the wealth of accompanying articles on the subject. The authorities were busy with an epidemic of rabid animal attacks and freak weather. When the hunt began for the murderer, it sounded incompetent and disastrous. Search party members disappeared. Entire elements of the population of the town were excluded from the list of suspects because of social standing.

In exasperation, the prostitutes’ advocate, a prominent local madam named Pearl DeVere, hired outside investigators to find ‘The Phantom.’ When the investigation went nowhere, DeVere further horrified the townsfolk by bringing in one of the witches of Manitou Springs to consult about the identity of the murderer. With the great fire of

1896, the murders ended and locals assumed that the killer had died in the conflagration.

“Manitou Springs and witches?” Rhi stared at the golden light of the afternoon streaming through the windows and then at the book in her lap. She began to look forward to meeting with Houston and Pam after work.

“Work!”

She glanced at the silver watch on her wrist. Almost three o’ clock. Time to don the tuxedo shirt and mentally gird her loins for work.

Rhi dumped the book in the pile by her desk and headed for the bathroom, her legs numb from sitting so long. In route, she stopped at the closet and got a shoebox down from the top shelf after moving several other boxes out of the way. Pam was right. It was time to get out the heavy artillery. Her father’s P89 Ruger and a few clips would be the kind of security blanket she craved.

Although, she reflected upon opening the box, it might be a good idea to make inquiries about getting a license to carry the thing. Handguns made her twitchy – they were made specifically to use on other human beings and that bothered her. Flipping open the gun pouch, she examined the weapon and sighed. If someone in Cripple Creek intended her harm, after the episode in the casino, she doubted a gun would be very useful. But the illusion of safety the thing presented would be some comfort.

She left the gun on the counter, making a mental note to herself to get Bobby Wayne to accompany her to fire a few practice shots the next day and headed for the comfort of hot water, steam and fluffy towels.

* * * *

The gray stones of the house on the cliff were cold. An appalling cold clung to Troy’s bones as he made his way down to the dining room where his master sat, savoring various delicacies they had picked up in Denver and watching one of his favorite television shows on the plasma screen mounted on the far wall. *Angel* was an ironic choice, the assistant thought. But he had to admit the story lines were amusing.

The champagne flute in front of Manius Black held champagne. A beautiful presentation of Oysters Rockefeller sat untouched to one side. Troy reflected that his master probably had enough of regular food and needed something more *soul satisfying*, as he often said. The man who mentally referred to himself as Manius’ ‘bitch’ examined his own appearance in a nearby mirror before approaching his master. The wool slacks and tasseled loafers he wore were immaculate. His oxford shirt and silk tie spotless, his hands scrubbed clean and nails manicured. If slutty little Cassie could see him now. But then, she couldn’t see anything anymore, could she?

“Troy, it’s not nice to think about poor little Cassie that way,” his master said aloud, not bothering to glance behind his chair. “She served a purpose.”

After five years, it still spooked Troy how well his master could sometimes read his mind, even though he was well aware that the immortal’s powers could be awe inspiring. Manius knew Troy’s every desire, jealousy, and perversion and seemed amused by his perversions. He completely controlled Troy, and never let his servant forget that he could squash him like a bug any moment.

But the rewards Manius promised took Troy’s breath away. He didn’t know where the man got the gold, but the vampire was never without a large amount of the local metal in the form of battered bars, inscribed with Spanish words and Roman numerals. When they made one of their frequent treks down to Colorado Springs or to

Denver, Manius always stopped by a seedy pawnshop specializing in such items.

The walking dead man sucked up modern society and its conveniences like a starving man might inhale a hamburger. He was mesmerized by television for weeks on end. He read every book and magazine Troy could find while hiding out in an empty Cripple Creek vacation home before entering the brave new world, where he appropriated every possible comfort and luxury for himself.

Clothes, furniture for the new homes they bought and refurbished, delicacies and wines, art, everything Troy could imagine wanting. The pair traveled the world, indulging every vice and causing as much chaos, mischief and death as possible while waiting for something. But what *something* was Troy wasn't sure of.

Troy knew his master fed off of the pain and fear of others. Manius became positively jolly when they were near a war zone. The more vicious the conflict, the happier he was.

Troy spent nights gazing at the plastered ceiling in the suite Manius provided to him, dreaming of what he would do once his master unleashed his will on the world. The new 4x4 he spotted the other day at the Land Rover lot in Colorado Springs would be good. He had seen some of the world at his master's side and could imagine a bit more than a 4x4 truck. If he had sold his soul, he would make the sale worthwhile.

Upon their return from abroad to the mountain town, Manius anxiously spent months searching for signs of something. He scoured the town at night after meditating for hours, invading the minds of the more susceptible citizens and the secluded homes of the less alert who made the mistake of inviting him in. With some kind of deadline looming, Manius sent Troy to Denver to snatch teenaged girls to hold prisoner at the Castle to sacrifice for power and knowledge. The vampire wasn't ready to hunt openly.

The butchering of chunky young prostitutes on a convenient block of granite in the secluded garden didn't bother Troy any more than the other kidnappings and slayings of hookers they committed throughout the larger cities they had inhabited over the years.

Manius, if he were feeling magnanimous, would allow Troy to play with the sacrificial victims first. The girls wept, begging for mercy and would do anything. The power of those moments intoxicated Troy. But he lost his taste for watching the actual killing after a few months. Like watching the fifth installment of the latest slasher movie franchise, after a while, the scenes were just gore.

A recent sacrifice spewed the information Manius searched for in a disembodied voice that sounded like it had risen from the lowest pit of Hell. Fate worked her spell and Rhiannon Brennan moved to Cripple Creek. It would only be a matter of time until the world that had spurned Troy as a gawky teenager bowed down to his master.

Upon the news, Manius told his disciple that he would be bringing aboard some other *friends* and the castle was immediately infested with what Manius called demons. Troy recognized the creatures from the gold mining legends. The monsters crawling and creeping through every crevice of the house were Tommy Knockers, demons that haunted the deepest shafts of mines that had been dug too deep and too greedily. Legend described the monsters as beings that knocked on the wood beams of the old mines to either warn of impending cave-ins or to cause them. After seeing the bloated, twisted creatures of all sizes and shapes, rancid-smelling and filthy - Troy couldn't imagine them warning anyone of anything.

Now, as he stood behind the mahogany captain's chair of the 1800's era dining

suite they had purchased in a Denver antique shop, he examined the beautiful silverware in the hands of his master and mentally added some to his pay off list. He might get Manius to throw in one or two demons as well. They had their uses.

“Should I get the car out for the evening, sir?” he asked Manius in a modulated tone. He had not used the word ‘sir’ for most of his life up to this point, but after the pointed example Manius made of Cassie, Troy found he didn’t mind using the word at all.

Manius Black leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, savoring the last golden drop of champagne in his glass before answering.

“Of course we’re going out tonight. Friends I haven’t talked to in *years* have arrived in town. It could be an exciting evening, Troy. Be sure to dress accordingly. And afterwards, maybe we can stop off for a bite?”

Troy turned to leave and prepare the car for the evening, feeling the weight of his master’s gaze following his skinny form out of the room. He heard rather than saw the demons scurry from underneath the table to gather around Manius, little damnations whispering and caressing him. Their unimaginable dirty white skin revealed in the light of the Swarovski chandelier, the ink black shadows of the creatures swallowing whatever light touched them. Troy didn’t turn back, not wanting to see the expression of satisfaction on the demon lord’s face as his adoring ‘subjects’ worshiped him.

Chapter Twelve

The casino had exactly five customers, all playing nickel slots. The pit boss stood behind Rhi as she guarded her vacant blackjack table. Her face was expressionless but her mind flew in every direction, trying to absorb what she had witnessed and read in the last couple of days.

She had spent most of the shift eyeing the large front doors, waiting for the mysterious Jack Blackthorne to glide in like a big graceful panther on the hunt.

“Don’t those fabulous legs get cold in a mini skirt at this altitude?” Stephen queried, breaking her train of thought. He grinned as he took in the expanse of leg showing beneath her table. “Do those pantyhose have any value in regards to warmth?”

“What? You’ve *never* worn pantyhose? Trust me, they aren’t warm but money is. I’m hoping to make some tips and showing a little leg never hurts. But these tuxedo shirts and vests are about as sexy as my third grade Sunday school teacher, Miss Frazier.” Rhi did a little dance to better showcase her assets.

The dark-haired man leaned over the felt table top to examine the six decks of cards fanned on display by their dealer. “All I have to say is your Sunday school teacher must have been a hottie, because you do strange things to me when you show up in a starched white blouse and gold stitched vest. And *I’m* gay!”

Rhi burst out laughing, well aware of the dapper man’s status on the dating scene.

He continued, “It’s ten, why don’t we close this table down and let you get out of here? The Winter Fest is coming up, and neither of us will get out of here early during that mess. Unless the murder keeps everyone away.”

They both were silent for a moment at the mention of the murder. The loss of Marie had opened up raw wounds for the casino’s employees, and they dealt with the murder the only way they could – silence.

Stephen broke the uncomfortable moment. “So – got a hot date?”

Rhi pasted on a bright smile. “Dinner and drinks with Pam and Houston at Casa De Oro. If I wear this outfit, can I get some per diem money for advertising this hole-in-the-wall casino?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t turn in a receipt to Max for per diem money! He thinks per diem is French for strip bar!”

Both weakly laughed at the mental picture of the casino’s manager, a local ‘mountain’ man who crammed his lumberjack physique into a suit for sixty hours a week to run their place of employment, and his definition of ‘per diem’.

They began to close down the table, counting down the cheques and sorting cards when Pam sauntered through the doorway. The wind blowing off of Pikes Peak made for a wind chill of minus ten but Rhi’s neighbor wore a red mini skirt and tights with a clinging black v-neck sweater in spite of the cold, topped by an ankle-length white coat made out of quilted goose down.

Stephen gave the newest arrival the once over and whistled. Pam strutted a bit and then glared at the pit boss as he headed to the podium to lock up the cards.

"I have razors in my shower older than you, little boy. And straighter." Pam looked amazingly spunky for a woman who held down two jobs at two different casinos, clocking 60 hours on her feet in a blackjack pit some weeks. Her daughter's financial future and her own was close to being secured by her hard work and careful business acumen. When the mortgage on the properties at Horse Thief Gulch was paid in full, Pam planned to cut back to 35 hours a week - the minimum needed to continue benefits and devote her life to her daughter. Men need not apply to enter the world the woman had built for herself. Pam publicly stated on a regular basis that she had donated enough time, energy and cash to the male half of the human race. Now they were for entertainment value only.

Rhi eyeballed her friend as she approached the blackjack pit. "Still trying for the 'burn the town down' effect? You didn't go to the funeral home in that outfit for Marie's viewing, did you?"

"I was one of the better dressed ones. Melon Evans wore his snow mobile gear. And Chief Boyd wore jeans and work boots but was still as cute as a basset hound. Some folks wore their casino uniforms. Anyway, my mother has Katie for the rest of the week, the funeral isn't till tomorrow and I have got to work it while I can." Pam extended a long leg for inspection. "I'm wearing tights. I'm as warm as five-alarm chili. And might I add that you have enough leg showing to shame a Vegas showgirl."

"I plan on changing into a nice pair of cords. But I can't decide on whether I should wear my black leather boots or my running shoes. This hunted feeling keeps interfering with my sense of fashion." Rhi busily sorted the cards into their boxes, not glancing up at the plate glass doors. She had managed to not stare at the casino entrance for almost five minutes.

Pam surveyed the almost empty casino, obviously looking for anything suspicious.

"No one has strangled me today, visible or invisible," Rhi noted dryly. "By the way, I think your other tenant is trying to steal my dog."

Pam grinned. "Having Bobby Wayne keep an eye on your house was a good idea. He entertains your dog and will shoot anything or anyone funny looking. Bobby's becoming useful. I can even stand to hang around him for more than a few minutes, although if he starts making sense, send for a straightjacket."

"The only thing I'm worried about is the possibility that he might shoot some poor, unsuspecting goober."

"Oh don't be silly, Bobby Wayne would never shoot someone who didn't deserve it! Now let's get you off this table and dressed - we're going out to chat with Houston, but I'm hoping for a good sloshing too," Pam told her. "I'm attending a funeral tomorrow, I'll be miserable anyway. Might as well be hung over."

"You know, I haven't been sloshed since right after my divorce. Mildly inebriated once or twice with you as the instigator, but not sloshed." She groaned inwardly at the memory of the aftermath of a good sloshing.

"No booze! No sex! No use and no lubrication, a girl could rust!"

After a quick stop at the locker room to allow Rhi to freshen up and change clothes, they headed out the service entrance into the night air for the short hike to the *Casa de Oro*, the newest Mexican restaurant in town.

Shadows trailed them, hidden from the pools of light cast by the gaslight lamps

that lined the brick sidewalk. Few gamblers were on the street and both women kept up a hurried pace. Banners advertising the upcoming Winter Festival snapped in the winter wind.

A scurrying sound, like giant rodents slithering in the darkness between the buildings, made both women skid to a stop. Pam reached into her carryall and drew out a bigger version of what Rhi had put in the glove compartment of her SUV earlier in the day. Rhi felt a surge of weapon envy.

Rhi examined the gigantic chunk of destruction in her friend's hand. "A gun? You strolled into the casino with a gun? Or is that a cannon?"

Pam checked the gun and clicked off the safety. "What Stephen, your girly pit boss, doesn't know won't make me hurt him," she muttered and did a 360-degree turn with the gun up and cocked before facing Rhi again.

"What are your feelings on gun control?"

The taller woman brandished the weapon, oblivious to the fact they were standing on a public street. "Sure I believe in gun control. She who has the gun has the control."

"Mine's in the truck," Rhi admitted.

Pam looked shocked. "You have a gun? In your truck? Do you have a gun license?"

"No, the gun was my dad's but I'll get one and yes," she replied. "I do know how to use it."

"Well, the thing will do a fat lot of good locked in your glove compartment, girlfriend. Maybe we can get the bad guys to chase us in that direction and wait while you unlock the truck, get the gun out, and see if it's loaded. You *did* load it didn't you?"

"Uh ... I don't remember. Okay, you do the shooting and I'll do the sweet-talking. Deal?"

A voice from the shadows of the alley near the restaurant almost made Rhi's heart stop. Pam reacted, pointing the gun at the dark center of the form that arose before them.

"Girls with guns. Notify the town fathers we can all sleep in peace tonight."

Blackthorne stepped forward into the light, as irritable as ever. He was dressed for the darkness in black jeans, black cashmere turtleneck, and a heavy black leather blazer. If the man turned sideways, he would disappear completely into the shadows.

In spite of the Goth wardrobe, Rhi decided, her happy parts had begun to melt when he appeared. No man should look so first-rate in a pair of jeans.

She brushed past him. "Why would there be a problem sleeping tonight? Do you know something that we don't?"

A large hand fell on her arm to stop her and then slid down to wrap itself around her wrist. He fell into step with her as she tried to break away from his grip. Pam stalked behind the pair, stuffing her weapon back into the purse.

The shadows whispered again before he answered her question, their voices sibilant in her mind, calling. His eyebrow raised a notch and his hold tightened. He could hear them too.

"My, this is so sudden, Mr. Blackthorne. Do you think I could have my arm back?" She gave the limb a little shake. "I mean, I don't even know you."

"You know more than you want to admit," he replied, not releasing her arm as they approached the lighted doorway of the cantina. There was an odd comfort in his touch instead of the impulse she should be having, which was to run shrieking into the

street.

A white sign taped to the door of the restaurant announced in black Gothic script that the night's Alien Abductees Club meeting would be held in the back room of the *Casa de Oro*. Pam rolled her eyes at her companions and stepped through the door Blackthorne held. "I don't want to know who belongs to *that* club."

Rhi examined the sign, still ignoring Blackthorne, who released her. He seemed determined to crash the party and somehow she didn't think he would pay attention if she told him to buzz off. "I read that they think Pike's Peak is some kind of beacon for aliens – that explains the number of sightings in this area," she pointed out.

Pam wiggled her eyebrows and grinned at Blackthorne. "Trust Rhi to have an explanation. I don't think it's the Peak. I think it's the amount of booze and the variety of pharmaceuticals ingested at high altitude by the aliens' victims."

"This area attracts a lot of things not explained by books," the big man noted.

The deep tones of her stalker rang through Rhi's head and the fine hairs on her neck rustled. Panic swirled in her stomach. She wanted him. Bad. Darn it, she had kind of hoped that particular body part was permanently numb. Shaken, she regained her composure by searching the cantina for Houston. The little man was enthroned alone, as was his habit, in the back of the room at a large table.

Casa de Oro had few dinner patrons but the bar crowd was lively. Through a wide doorway, Rhi could see the filled-to-capacity back room. The Alien Abductees Club meeting was in full swing, the crowd proof that a large number of the population of Cripple Creek believed little green men took them at some point to the great beyond.

The group shut the doors upon the arrival of the strange little woman known locally as Batty Betty. The newest arrival wore a buckskin ensemble, complete with a beaded eagle on the front of an honest-to-God Indian princess, calfskin dress. She looked like an eighty-year-old Pocahontas dressed in cheap Indian chic. Before Betty passed through the doors to the meeting she paused beside Rhi and Blackthorne.

"Hang on to her tight, Blackie. He's closer than you think!" she rasped at Blackthorne before turning to flounce towards her meeting, leaving both Rhi and Blackthorne gaping.

"Met Betty, have you, Blackthorne? Bit of a trip, isn't she?" Pam shot back as she made her way in front of them, obviously assuming that Blackthorne was now a part of the group. Rhi gritted her teeth and followed with the big man in tow. If she didn't stop gritting her teeth soon, they would be worn down to the gum with frustration. The adobe walls of *Casa de Oro*, along with the required roaring fireplace, darkened pine furniture and overhead beams, gave the restaurant the feel of a pueblo out of the 1600's. The only thing the room needed for true authenticity was an Indian attack.

Blackthorne moved to hold her chair as she slid into it. His hand brushed her arm as she sat, making her shiver, and he took a seat next to her. He was irritating, arrogant, and touchy-feely. The biggest problem was, however, that Rhi wanted his touch more than chocolate. Or designer luggage.

Houston grinned at everyone over a micro-brewed beer and soggy nachos. He hefted an untidy stack of papers and photos out of his lap onto the table. "Howdy, Mr. Blackthorne. I figured you might accompany the ladies this evening," he said, greeting and accepting the stranger.

Rhi grimaced, wondering how the man already knew about her stalker.

Blackthorne nodded and studied the parrot plumage colored menu.

“How do ya’ all know each other, Houston?” Rhi asked as she removed her coat and reached for the El Patron margarita placed in front of her.

“Mr. Blackthorne spoke with me last night after you girls left and voiced an interest in the goings-on our little group will be discussing this evening. In spite of my suspicions involving his origins, I had a good feeling about him so I agreed to let him attend our summit.” Houston spoke around the edges of the giant nacho chip encrusted with jalapenos he was stuffing in his mouth.

Pam and Rhi eyeballed each other at the mention of Blackthorne’s relatives. Houston ignored them and plowed along.

“Besides, it’s time you climbed out of the hole you’ve dug yourself into up on Pam’s mountain, young lady. Someone as pretty as you shouldn’t be alone.”

Face flaming, Rhi hid behind her menu.

“I told her it was gonna rust shut,” Pam announced.

Blackthorne made choking sounds behind his menu as Rhi almost snorted half her drink up her nose. She glared at her friend and, helpless against this onslaught, she laughed along with the table, relieved that the intimidating man had a sense of humor. His eyes twinkled at her and the crinkles appearing at the corners when he laughed made him more handsome than ever.

Don’t want him. Don’t want him. Don’t want him. She silently repeated. *Maybe I should take Pam’s advice and buy some, ahem, machinery to get rid of my urges. Who am I kidding ... there is no machine with hands or a butt like him! Argh!*

Blackthorne laughed harder than ever.

The waiter arrived to take their orders and Blackthorne ordered an enchilada plate and a beer, like a normal human being. She had a sneaking suspicion that he was not quite normal but his preference for hot enchiladas and cold beer gave her some reassurance. She resolved to be civil to him - if she could quit thinking of him with his shirt off.

After the waiter left, Pam plowed into her food and into the conversation, addressing Houston with her mouth full to the brim. “I’ve waited all day and we can safely say I’m not the most patient of souls. *What* has happened in Cripple Creek before and why is a ghost trying to strangle Rhi?”

“Why do you guys talk of ghosts in this town in the same tone you would use to discuss the weather?” Rhi asked as she carefully sipped at the cereal bowl-sized glass.

Houston took a swig of beer, his gaze not meeting Rhi’s. Instead he glanced at Blackthorne, who sat in a relaxed pose and sipped on his own beer. “Well, you can’t swing a dead cat by the tail in this town and not hit a ghost sometimes. Hell, I can’t go into my bathroom without finding that Mary, my poltergeist, has turned all of the shampoo and medicine bottles upside down and balanced them along the edge of the bathtub. I think she’s showing off. But there are some presences in this town that are not as benevolent as my Irish lass. This area was holy ground to the Indians. The gold rush hit and the miners founded Cripple Creek. The settlement became one of the wildest, most violent towns in the country. The rich folks lived in Colorado Springs and spent the gold from the mines. Manitou Springs, on the way up the Ute Pass, was a spa town for people suffering from tuberculosis. The high mortality rate of the citizens of Manitou Springs made the spirituality movement of the 1800’s pretty popular there and the town

attracted mystics and witches of all shapes and sizes and still does today ...”

“But what does this have to do with us right now, here in Cripple Creek?” Rhi interrupted, breaking his spell.

“I’ll get to it, give a man a second. In 1896, Cripple Creek had a run of bad luck. Rabid animals were all over the place and it wasn’t the right time of the year. Plus rabies burns itself out, but the animals weren’t dying off. They attacked livestock and people everywhere. Then the Old Testament stuff started. The weather went nuts. A hailstorm mixed up with a meteor shower showed up, balls of flame mixed with hail. Some people showed signs of demon possession, which was explained away as epileptic fits. But after reading about it and hearing about Rhi at work, I tend to think something else was going on, especially in so many people. Folks said that the miners had dug too deep, that they woke up the Tommy Knockers. Then they found the first girl.”

Chapter Thirteen

Controlling her urge to stare at the man beside her, Rhi concentrated on her food and the conversation. Her skin prickled at Houston's statement. "The first girl?" She asked.

Houston looked grim. "Understand that in those days they didn't *have* serial killers. People weren't used to the idea like we are. That's the reason people were so fascinated by Jack the Ripper back then. That kind of killing was something new. This town had its own Ripper, but they kept the story quiet. A crib girl was one of the most used-up hookers on Myers Avenue. They found the body of one of these creatures with her heart cut out in a ditch on Shelf Road. A few weeks later they found another victim staked out behind the tent that held the offices of *The Daily Miner*, one of the newspapers. The authorities ignored the murders at first, because after all, low rent whores were considered worthless. But after a few more girls, things heated up. The killer liked to leave his victims on display. He could have buried them in the woods – but he wanted everyone to see what he'd done. The local madam, Pearl DeVere, got fed up with the police half-assing the investigation. She hired some psychics (they called them witches in those days) from Manitou Springs to search the void for the answers."

The table had gone silent and not even the sound of chewing interrupted the momentum Houston built. Rhi noticed that Blackthorne wasn't mesmerized by the story. Instead, his blue eyes were focused on her, assessing *her* reactions. She resisted the urge to sneer at him and took a swig of margarita.

"The most powerful of the witches of Manitou was a sickly woman with tuberculosis. But she made the trip up the mountain to Cripple Creek, to stay in the Imperial Hotel for a few days and perform a séance to discover who had committed the murders. That night, before the séance, the witch disappeared from her room. A rumor circulated in the saloons that the millionaire who lived in the Castle at the time was the murderer and held the witch prisoner. Of course, they decided to get up a lynch mob. A good hanging was considered kind of party in those days. Everyone joined in, including Pearl, and the group headed to the Castle looking for an opportunity to hang someone. But when they got to the house, the mansion had been destroyed ... a battleground with no bodies, the floors and walls bloodstained. Pearl and some of her crew showed up back in town with the girl, who was raving about a crystal skull." Houston paused for effect.

Spellbound, Rhi leaned forward to catch every word. A bell went off, and she pictured the page of the tattered Bible and the tale of the Gates. A crystal skull? Was the treasure she had fantasized about nearby? But if the treasure were near, so were the gates of Hell, she thought. Yeek.

Pam was excitedly asking Houston if he was sure the story was about a crystal skull and not a diamond one.

Blackthorne sprawled in his chair next to Rhi with his infuriating 'deeply troubled but still sexy' expression on his face. She repressed an urge to kick him.

Houston, after convincing Pam the skull was rumored to be quartz crystal, not

diamond, continued. “Now we get to the *really* outlandish part of the story. The Castle had an army in residence, hidden in tunnels that honeycombed the mountains and opened into the mines. Local lore also says a horde of demons hid in the tunnels. The true story of the battle in the Castle may never be known because on the same day, the big fire broke out and the town went up in flames like a pile of dried kindling.”

“And what happened to the witch? And Pearl?” Rhi didn’t mention her own suspicions. “Did they live?”

“Well, Pearl died of a laudanum overdose later that year and the witch died a few days after the fire,” Houston replied.

Rhi raised her gaze to meet Blackthorne’s across the salty rim of her glass. A burst of laughter from the back room housing the meeting of Alien Abductees made her hesitate a moment.

“That’s a nice story but doesn’t help me understand what or who throttled me in the Pearl.” She addressed Blackthorne, not Houston. “I read something about the history of this place this morning that might be crazy enough to work as an explanation for all of this or you could just save me the time and tell me.”

Everyone waited in silence for his answer. Blackthorne looked like he was making up a good lie when the doors of the restaurant flew open to admit the prettiest man Rhi had ever seen. He was a Greek statue come to life, who had made a stop at his tailor before joining the town’s nightlife.

A sallow-faced younger man followed, almost as well-dressed as his boss, but not quite, clearly marking him as the other man’s servant.

Blackthorne didn’t turn or make a sound but he stiffened the moment the other men entered the bar. His features were dead, emotionless, but his eyes were alive and filled with fury.

Rhi gasped when she glimpsed a blue spark in their depths.

The evil metro-sexual gracefully stalked toward their table.

“A party! Or is this a PTA meeting? All of you kids look so serious!” The newcomer placed a hand on Blackthorne’s shoulder, who didn’t bother to glance up.

Blackthorne’s eyes sparked blue light again and a muscle in his cheek twitched.

“Is my brother bringing the party down?”

“You!” gasped the newcomer’s flunky, gaping at Blackthorne. A torrent of emotion crossed his face as he stared at Manius, then at Blackthorne, unspoken accusation in his pale gaze.

“I don’t recall inviting you, whoever you are ...” Rhi broke off when the new arrival’s gaze turned on her. His gaze glowed a smoky shade of red in the poorly lit ambiance of the restaurant. He leered, baring sharp fangs lengthening before their eyes. The unbelievable teeth were framed in full red lips.

Rhi swallowed a gulp. “Whoops - I guess I could make an exception ...” Her last word came out as a squeak.

“Such a sweet looking girl,” the newcomer whispered. His voice twisted in the air to caress the side of her face. “I can’t let something like the lack of an invitation keep me from you, princess ... no one has ever been able to keep me from you.” His eyes glowed and the hand on Blackthorne’s shoulder started to smoke a bit. Tendrils of gray smoke drifted into the air of the room and curled around the circumference of the table. The smoke turned into wispy claws that reached for her.

A bead of sweat popped up on Rhi's forehead. "Who are you - *what* are you?"

"My brother should have introduced me, but then he has always been such a barbarian." He indicated Blackthorne with a nod. The smoke continued to pour from his hand and Blackthorne's shirt. "But has it really been that long? We've shared so much, Rhi, I'm disappointed that you have forgotten me so soon. I'm Manius Black, of course."

Blackthorne, oblivious to being on fire, dug his hand into the heavy wood tabletop, but did not flinch. The wood gave way and his fingers sank into the grain as if he were kneading dough. Then his hand broke through the wood with a snap.

Pain ripped through Rhi's head. She had to remember him, from somewhere. Her head began to pound as she desperately searched for his face in her memories.

Pam spoke, breaking the spell of menace the newcomer cast. She held her margarita glass high as she examined the bright yellow liquid inside. "This is some hellacious tequila! If two drinks can make this guy's eyes turn red, God knows what a few shots'll do!" Pam turned towards the bar, turning her back on the dangerous newcomer.

"Greg!" She called to the chubby bartender behind the bar. "Get me a few shots of this stuff!"

Rhi found her wits. Someone was trying to frighten her. And had succeeded until Pam interrupted. She took a deep breath and glanced at her friend, raising an eyebrow. "Maybe if I drink enough of this he'll turn into someone I would actually do with glowing red eyes?"

Pam nodded and sipped her drink with apparent unconcern, her gun hand under the table. Houston's thin body was tensed so tightly, a cord of muscle might snap at any moment. Whatever kind of weapon he wore, Rhi was sure it could be easily reached.

Manius took his hand from his brother's shoulder, smiling, the palm blackened and blistered as if in some kind of terrible fire. The shoulder of Blackthorne's shirt was in tatters and the skin beneath, raw.

As still as a mountain lion before pouncing, Blackthorne's gaze smoldered with vivid blue light. Rhi closed her eyes, seeing black fingerprints burnt into her own skin.

* * * *

Blackthorne had been determined to keep his cool and not spring the reality of the situation on Rhi until absolutely necessary. Mentally, he called upon his God, his discipline and his strength to not attack his brother in public.

Then Manius spoke. "She seems a little frigid, Brother. I could warm her up for you - after all, I've done it before ..."

God, discipline and strength went out the window. With impossible speed, Blackthorne leaped at his brother before the occupants of the table could register his movement. So much for keeping the dubious nature of his humanity under wraps.

* * * *

The assistant moved only to be stopped cold by the gun Pam pointed at the center of his chest.

Then they all leaped out of the way as Blackthorne tackled his brother and the men fell into and splintered the table, locked in vicious combat. The brothers pummeled each other with impossible blurred speed, and Rhi could barely make out their fists. Sparks of blue and red radiated from the struggling men, setting fire to several sections of the restaurant. When the back wall cut the limits of the fight short, the brothers

continued to roll up the barrier in complete defiance of gravity.

Rhi's mouth dropped open as she stared. Her stomach contracted. Pam's eyes were big as Conestoga wheels and her grip on her purse slackened. Then Houston grabbed the women by the arms and gave them a shake. Rhi shook her head hard. Another nightmare had her in its grip, and it was high time that she woke up.

Houston hustled the women and Pam's prisoner to the bar and placed himself between them and the fight.

"It only gets weirder from here, ladies," he told them. "I was afraid of something like this."

He reached behind the bar and grabbed a bottle of tequila, right in front of the bartender, who had frozen in place, fascinated by the unearthly fight. Houston took a large swig and offered the bottle to the speechless and horrified women. "You might want a drink. It's gonna be a long night."

Chapter Fourteen

Rooted to the spot, Rhi watched the men wrestle and pound on each other – on the ceiling. “They can float.”

“No shit.” Pam backed up to the bar, her gun and attention directed at her seething prisoner. She glanced up and let out a shriek. “Oh my God, look at his face!”

Blackthorne’s eyes blazed with neon blue light and his incisors had extended themselves like those of the man he fought. The teeth and the twisted fury in his face combined to make the man Rhi fantasized about earlier into a demonic beast.

“Holy - he’s a vampire like the other guy,” Rhi breathed. “With me they’re jerks, married, gay or vampires!”

Pam grabbed her arm. “Girlfriend, there’s nothing holy about that - except maybe that they both have great butts. But the scooting up the wall thing? That just ain’t right.”

The bartender found his wits and sailed over the bar to hightail towards the bathroom. Rhi prayed he would manage to stuff himself through a window and go for help.

Rhi tried to decide if she should grab a bottle and bash both men’s heads in or run screaming into the night.

Then Pam screeched again. “What is *that*?” She pointed a shaking finger at a broken side window across the room. A slug-colored creature crawled through, resembling a bald, shriveled, naked, little old man with translucent wings.

That alone should have been enough to make Rhi throw up until she spotted the lidless neon red eyes bulging from its swollen face and pointed, bloody teeth showing in the creature’s filthy mouth. The stench of death, decay and, oddly, wet dog hit as they realized that there were several of the hissing creatures behind the first one, jockeying for position to crawl through the window.

The newest arrivals headed straight for the women. Their hands reached towards the bar, displaying retractable claws.

Rhi cursed herself for leaving her gun in the truck and turned to make a flying leap for the barrier of the bar. Pam shoved her prisoner to the floor and jumped after her, exposing a great deal of leg in the process.

They crouched together for a moment.

“I would like to wake up now,” Rhi whispered, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“Stop!” Pam rasped, breathing heavily. “This is not a dream, Rhi, suck it up!”

Rhi balled her shaking hands into fists and nodded at Pam, who glanced grimly upwards. Together, they peeked over the bar to see Houston, armed with the leg of one of the shattered chairs and a hunting knife, swinging at the swarm of demons.

On the ceiling, the brawl continued. Any kind of winner was becoming hard to make out because of the smoke and sparks of flame that shot from both men as they pummeled each other.

Rhi grabbed some bottles to throw, picking the biggest and the heaviest to heave

towards the monsters. Pam raised her head over the bar. "Do you think there'll be any charges if I blast these nasty little buggers? What if they're midgets wearing really good Halloween costumes?"

"If you don't want to do it, give the damned gun to me," Rhi replied, tossing bottles. "I'll take my chances."

"I'm sure I'm the better shot here. Of course we're at point blank range. God, is that a bottle of good scotch you tossed? Oh, the humanity." Pam heaved the gun up on the bar to let it rip.

Certain the first shot had burst her eardrums, Rhi threw another bottle at something nasty coming around the corner of the bar and got up to view the damage Pam had inflicted.

The first victim of Pam's oversized gun stood near the bar staring down at a ragged hole in its chest. The demon looked up at them and giggled, its sharp teeth dripping liquid that sizzled on the wood floor.

She reached down and motioned for Pam to take a look. "I think you're safe from prosecution," she told her. They stared at the creature in growing horror.

What happened next was worse. The wounded beast rose into the air on an unseen current and floated towards them, snarling and not slowed by the gaping hole in its body. The missing parts lay in a smoking pile on the floor. The smoke gave off more of the same stench of death and wet dog, but a hundred times more intense.

"Ewww!"

Several more of the creatures became airborne and floated towards them, flapping their mucous covered wings. Rhi fought the nausea that exploded in her stomach and concentrated on the fight. "If I faint, I'm dead," she muttered and continued to peek over the counter.

"What the hell are we *doing*?" Pam dropped to the floor, grabbing Rhi by the hair to pull along.

"Ouch! That hurt." Rhi protested as she examined the handful of hair her friend pulled out. "I wanted to see if there's anything left of the first guy I've been able to look at twice in years, okay?"

Pam reloaded her gun from a large box of bullets she pulled out of her handbag. "You can sure pick a heck of a time to finally get horny, girl."

With impeccable timing, the Alien Abductees Club members suddenly were framed in the now opened double doors of the back room, staring in awe at the scene. The membership of the club had the same make up as the town of Cripple Creek itself: miners, bikers, hippies, yuppies, and a housewife thrown in for good measure. A large bald man in the front of the group dressed in a biker T-shirt and leather chaps over his jeans let out a war cry before the entire group waded into the fray.

"Aliens! It's an invasion!"

Behind him, Betty took a seat at one of the empty tables, pulled a large wad of knitting out of her purse and began to knit. She kept one eye on the chaos and one on the stitch count, mumbling to herself.

The lunacy raged in full force for ten seconds when a throaty feminine voice rang out. The power of the voice's words overwhelmed the symphony of bedlam and the world froze for everyone in the room. The only exceptions were the men wrestling on the ceiling, Rhi, Pam, Houston, Manius' servant and Betty, who continued knitting and

mumbling.

“Enough.”

Blackthorne and his brother fell to the floor with a crash and started to untangle themselves from each other, the disgust in both men’s faces evident. The rest of the room stayed frozen in time upon the word of the woman standing in the doorway, whose gaze glowed an unearthly shade of blue. Her smile displayed two perfect dimples and a set of extra long and pointy incisors.

Chapter Fifteen

The beautiful newcomer slinked over to the two struggling men and extended a designer boot to administer a swift, unmerciful kick to separate them. All the fires in the room extinguished themselves at the wave of her hand.

Houston stood nearby, motionless. His mouth hung open as he stared at the auburn haired woman, raw shock scarring his face. He obviously recognized her.

Pam whispered in Rhi's ear. "You know, I've seen that chick before - and where I think I've seen her is giving me a worse case of the willies than the thing with the hole in its stomach."

Manius got to his feet first with the help of his assistant and - with a wave of his own hand, not nearly as elegant a movement as the woman's - the small demons vanished. He looked ruefully at the woman standing before him. "They can't help it, you know. They come when I'm threatened."

"We both know you're not going to hurt the girl and that you aren't ready for this, Manius. So why don't you stop playing games, go home to that tacky mausoleum and sleep this off?" The woman examined her left boot for damage as she spoke. Dressed in black, like Blackthorne, the woman's designer slacks, cashmere sweater, and knee-length fur jacket oozed feminine sophistication.

Manius smirked as blood from his pulped nose ran down his chin. He ran an abnormally long tongue through the liquid and slurped. His expression should have melted the woman's bones but she stood firm, unshaken, a chic blade of steel. "Maybe I'll take the girl and put her on ice until I need her. What do you think, Pearl?"

Behind him, Blackthorne got to his feet, his bloody hands clenching and unclenching.

Pearl pulled an ornate cross from an inner pocket and waved the artifact at Manius, whose eyes glowed red at the sight of the religious symbol. She dropped the long, slender package she held in the other hand throughout this conversation and kicked it over to Blackthorne.

He crouched to retrieve what turned out to be a broadsword, complete with ornate sheath and belt, buckling it around his waist with the ease that comes from years of practice.

"I'm *so* taking up the Goth look when this evening is over," Pam whispered to Rhi, still trapped behind her.

"Ditto." Rhi wondered where the nearest department store stocking silver crosses was located. "Do you mind moving? I'm too short to see anything!"

"Oops, sorry." Pam scooted over and shoved a case of beer over with a foot for Rhi to stand on. Not too proud to be nosy, Rhi jumped on the box to see what had happened.

"Manius, darling, this so tacky. Next you'll have me lugging around holy water. By the way your skin is fabulous! What did you do to amuse yourself in your coffin all of those years, sugar? Could you move? What a shame you didn't have an itty-bitty

reading lamp. Just think! You could have read the classics!" The newcomer cocked her head at the seething man, who emanated evil in a cloud, mixed with expensive men's cologne.

Rhi raised an eyebrow at Pam. "Holy water and coffins?"

Pam didn't answer but her expression became a bit wild as she watched the drama unfold.

Pearl stalked the floor of the restaurant, now her stage. She nodded towards the sword Blackthorne fastened around his waist. "I don't know why you didn't wear your sword tonight, Blackie - he was kidding about the 'Highlander' thing. So keep wearing your long jacket, there's a good boy."

Manius managed to smolder and roll his eyes at the same time.

"We won't allow you to take her and you know it," Pearl continued softly. "Or you would've taken her weeks ago. So we can confront each other now and invite the National Guard in to pick up the pieces of what's left of the town. Or we can wait until there's a chance of getting what we each want. You want your precious skull to do the 'world domination' thing and we want ... well you know what we want." Pearl held out one slender hand. "May the best person win. And quit screwing with the girl - I mean it."

Manius took the offered hand, careful to maintain his distance from the cross. Pearl raised an eyebrow, her expression one of annoyance, as if he had offered her impertinence at a cocktail party.

"Oh, I don't want the world, just a good chunk of the globe to amuse myself with. I definitely want Manhattan, L.A. and Western Europe. I would rather not have the Arabian Peninsula, Israel, most of Russia, Mississippi or Utah. Too much work and body odor." Manius took the handkerchief his assistant offered and pressed the fabric to his bloody face.

"Why not Mississippi? There are some fabulous restaurants in Biloxi, you know," Pearl pointed out, openly rubbing the palm of her hand on her pant leg.

"I'll endeavor to sample them as soon as I'm done here, Pearl. Things are a bit busy at the moment," Manius told her and bowed. "Until we meet again, lady."

He turned to leave the devastated bar, the patrons still frozen in time. He paused in the doorway to examine the group. "Pearl, you still look delicious. Maybe after the war, we can hook up again ... well, you know how much I like the women of your family."

A spasm of fury rippled across Pearl's face, extinguished immediately. She wrinkled her pert nose in distaste. "That was *business*. Besides, Manius, honestly - you weren't very good. It's called *foreplay*, sugar."

For a moment, the battered man looked a bit taken aback. Then, with a sideways smirk in Rhi's direction, he silently left the bar with his lackey in tow. Rhi pushed past Pam's extended arm to tumble over the bar and arrived at Blackthorne's side while the room returned to life. He pushed her helping hand back and stood, his face streaming blood. Sirens howled on the street and the unfrozen patrons of the restaurant stumbled around in bewilderment.

Pearl grabbed Houston by the arm, who stared at her in stunned fascination, and ran for the back. Blackthorne followed on her heels, dragging Rhi and Pam brought up the rear, waving her gun in the air. No one but Betty, who glanced up from her work to

smile and wave, witnessed the group's exit. Not the biker/alien abductee who struggled to rise from the floor, not the policeman who stood in the alleyway outside of the back door, whom they hurried directly past.

Rhi could see Nicholas Boyd, the chief, alighting from his vehicle and trudging through the snowdrift to the restaurant, mumbling about "damned alien freaks" and "... she better not be involved in this, damned woman" under his breath. The chief didn't look up as he stomped past. She wanted to call out for help or scream vampires were kidnapping her but she couldn't make her vocal cords work. There wasn't time to dwell on this problem as she was stuffed into a sleek black SUV.

When Blackthorne took her hand to guide her into the vehicle she suppressed the urge to strike out. The last thing she wanted to see was the blue flash in his eyes.

Once seated, Pam reached for her seatbelt but then thought better of the move. "I guess this is kind of a moot point now, huh?"

Concentrating on the man in the passenger seat, who maneuvered the broadsword to avoid banging his legs on the ornate scabbard, Rhi did not reply. It would be interesting to see how he would manage to draw the weapon if they were attacked on the way to wherever they were being taken. Blackthorne caught her gaze and shook his head as she lowered a trembling hand to try the door handle.

"What were those *things* in there? Where the hell did they come from?" She shuddered at the mental picture of the fiendish creatures.

"Usually they're harmless. A piece of spite, a shadow spotted out of the corner of the eye in a dark room, a bit of bad luck knocking in the night and you explain away as 'the house settling'." His face grew grim. "They're Tommy Knockers. Gremlins. Demons. Take your pick"

"Tommy Knockers?" Rhi and Pam exchanged glances. They knew about the tales of the small demons of the mines.

"Here the demons have always been stronger because they're closer to their true home, Hell. And they've been freed from the constraints the local witches put on them a long time ago. Manius is building an army." His voice was velvety and gruff. He turned away from her to stare ahead.

Rhi stared out of the window at the night, now filled with a thousand hidden red eyes.

Pam leaned over to whisper in her ear. "At least he's in touch with his feminine side. He is, after all, letting the girl drive." She straightened up with a yowl of pain as Houston dug an elbow into her side. "Ow!"

"Would you please shut up and not piss the scary immortals off?" Houston flinched as Pearl glanced into the rearview mirror and winked.

The truck's interior was silent as the vehicle pulled away from the curb and up the street, towards the dark backstreets.

The turn on Bennett revealed the same misty couple in Victorian garb Rhi spotted earlier standing beneath one of the lampposts. The young woman raised a lace-gloved hand as they drove past. Rhi gasped when she realized that the couple was transparent. The mottled green of the lamppost showed clearly through their ethereal bodies. Her gaze met Pam's from across the seat, who shook her head. Ghosts were no biggie, not after the scene at the restaurant. Rhi tried not to swallow her tongue as she kept the scream trapped in the pit of her stomach. The gaslights of downtown faded away.

The SUV glided down several back streets to arrive in front of one of the more ornate and well-preserved Victorian mansions in town. The magnificent three-story Vernacular Queen Anne had been painted in varying pastel shades of lilac and towered over the other houses on the street. The well-kept yard, ornamental garden and small pines were garnished with snow. The wrought iron fence was a bit tall. The iron tip of each fence bar appeared to be dangerously sharp to Rhi's eye. She caught sight of blue sparks dancing along the top of the barrier and shook her head. Why was she surprised?

They pulled through a mechanized gate and into the estate's carriage house.

Houston crushed his Stetson in his hands as he stared out the window. "You would live in *this* house. After all, you were a good friend of the original owner, Charles Tutt. Or did he build the place for you in the first place?"

The SUV rolled to a stop in the modernized garage/carriage house, as both women stared at their friend. Pearl turned to examine the wiry little ex-pilot.

"Charlie liked to be tied up, after I dressed him in a corset and some rouge. And you are a little too well informed, Mr. Houston. Maybe *you* should be tied up - but I'd let you leave off the dress."

Houston betrayed no surprise at the mention of their driver's sexual habits.

"There's not much that shocks me anymore, ma'am. Seeing and meeting you is worth it, even if you decide to kill me."

Her violet gaze glowed with electric light. "*I* don't randomly kill people, sweetie. I prefer to pick and choose. I think you already know that, though, or you wouldn't be bold enough to dredge the subject up."

Pam elbowed Houston - hard. "Are you going to let us in on who your girlfriend is? I've got a feeling that I don't want to know but ... well, you know me."

Houston wiped a few tiny beads of sweat off his forehead, watching Pam open the truck door before answering. He glanced at Pearl, who had exited the vehicle and stood waiting for them in the door to the dogtrot leading to the house as they lingered.

She nodded, giving him permission to speak, like a queen granting a boon.

Blackthorne took Rhi's arm as she stepped out onto the running board of the SUV and remained beside her, his large hand wrapped around her arm. The heat of his hand through her coat made her break out in a sweat. Would his hands smoke when he touched her? Which brother had put the burns on her skin in her dreams?

Houston sighed. "Her name is Pearl DeVere and she's got to be about one hundred and thirty years old."

Chapter Sixteen

"I spent the morning staring at old photos of her," Houston told them as he finally climbed out of the truck. "Along with photos of a girl who could be Rhi's twin sister. The witch from Manitou Springs: Raven Blackthorne."

Blackthorne. Rhi's mind numbed Houston's words. She twisted her hands together and concentrated about things that made her happy. Hot coca, flannel sheets on a snowy night, the softness of Ellie Mae's fur, good books, Jack Blackthorne's gaze with the little crinkles in the corner that were deeper when he smiled at her – now where had that idea come from?

"I'm one hundred and twenty-*nine*, flyboy," Pearl corrected. She tossed her curtain of auburn hair over one shoulder - a motion that had probably taken decades to perfect. "I've been in and out of this town forever and no one but a few well-chosen friends had the slightest clue who I am - until now."

Houston looked abashed for a moment. "And I would have thought that you just had a stunning resemblance to Pearl DeVere, but the pointy teeth are a dead giveaway. I can't figure out one thing, though. If you're a vampire, how can you hold a cross?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because I'm one of the good undead, sweetie. Things that maim the bad guys only annoy me. And, of course, I wore gloves. I also get chilly, so can we go inside before my undead toes fall off?"

"Shouldn't we be worried about those beasties showing up?" Pam nodded towards the quiet street.

Pearl looked offended. "Of course I've taken certain safeguards for my home, for goodness sake! Besides, Manius is done playing for the night. At least, he's done playing with *us*."

"Well that's good to know," Pam muttered and made a face at Pearl's retreating back.

The group filed after the vampire woman except for Rhi and Blackthorne. Pam glanced over her shoulder at the couple, grinned and shook her head at Houston. His expression said plainly that he was mentally debating about his chances if he tried to retrieve Rhi from Blackthorne's clutches.

Traitor, does she want to see my sucked dry carcass?

"You aren't a modern day descendent of the knight I read about, are you?" Rhi asked Blackthorne the question in what she hoped were steady tones, staring at the large hand that held her arm in an unbreakable grip.

He moved close and she could feel the heat of his body. In the dimly lit garage, he was a predator towering above her, waiting for her to fall. "No."

"Are you going to eat me? I drink a lot of tequila and chocolate soda. I'll bet I taste awful."

He reached for her, pulling her body against his. Why was he so warm? If he were a vampire, shouldn't he be cold?

Leaning towards her face, Blackthorne hesitated and then kissed her, crushing her

mouth with his lips. His hands spanned the arch of her back, pulling her close.

Rhi couldn't breathe or think. Her body moved on its own against the length of him, starting another fire. There were no thoughts of self-preservation or fear of the future. One other person in the world existed at that moment. An indescribable need forced its way through her veins.

A voice shrieked in the back of her brain to break free and run for the door. The voice got louder when she realized she could feel his sharper-than-a-human's incisors rub her mouth every other movement. She tasted the blood on his lips from the earlier battle. The only reason she hadn't tumbled to the floor was his arm holding her up.

He suddenly broke off the kiss and shoved her away. Rhi flopped to the concrete floor beside the truck to sit for a moment, stunned and gasping.

"You taste okay to me." Blackthorne yanked her up to hustle her towards the house, which was more brilliantly lighted than Rhi's own mountain retreat. She put a hand to her swollen lips and wiped the single tear rolling down her cheek.

Then she got angry. "Yeah? Well, the next time you might think about retracting those fangs first." She glared at him. "If I want to kiss an animal, I have a hundred and ten pound bloodhound at home that worships me." She eyed the front of his jeans. Nope, he was too tall for her to get a good kick into his crotch. Her legs would have to be four feet long.

A moment later, she faced the glass-paneled front door with both a sense of wonder and fear. The ornate stained glass formed a large, stylized 'P' in each panel. A holly wreath entwined with grapevine encircled the initials. A quick glance told her every visible window on the house was still garlanded with holly and pine even though Christmas was well over. A deterrent? Maybe a visit to the local florist was in order.

A big hand reached around her to open the door and shoved her into the inner sanctum of the 130-year-old most famous madam west of the Mississippi. Rhi managed another glance back as Blackthorne pushed her in, picturing Ellie Mae's anxious face waiting for her in her little fortress. For a split second, she gave up a silent prayer that Bobby Wayne would take care of her dog if she didn't get home. Then Blackthorne shut the door behind them, closing out the night.

The group in the magnificent foyer stood silently as Rhi joined them. Pam's face was as white as snow and her cheerful expression replaced with something resembling awe.

Rhi glanced about to see what had dismayed her friend. A huge portrait of a gold rush era couple dominated the wall beside the polished staircase. She registered the white wedding gown of the thin girl who stood proudly by the Victorian wing chair where her groom had been seated. Rhi squinted for a moment, her sight adjusting to the subdued lighting of the period Tiffany chandelier hanging near Blackthorne's head. His handsome features looked even better as the painter had portrayed them in his nearby wedding portrait. The Blackthorne in the outsized picture wore a black suit of a bygone era, smiling beside the tiny bride who wore Rhi's face, eyes and hair. Rhi managed a fleeting thought before the visions took over: *The next person who shows up in this town with supernatural powers is gonna get their ass kicked.*

And then her sight was filled with blood, fountains of blood in the snow and the reek of a charnel house mixed with the scents of pine and gasoline. Shrieks of agony that held notes of death and damnation, sounded in the forest.

Rhi hit the floor with a thud, where she lay listening to her own babbling voice. “Dying, they’re dying in the woods, all of them are dying.” Blackthorne’s hands cradled her head and she could hear Pam’s frantic voice, then she saw nothing but blissful darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

Melon Evans pulled his beat up truck up behind the several other vehicles in an open area off of Four Mile Road. He maneuvered the snowmobile trailer attached to the hitch to an advantageous spot, where he unloaded his sparkling new toy. The top of the line snowmobile was his pride and joy - for the moment.

The party had begun without him since a small crowd stood off in the clearing near a roaring bonfire, passing around several bottles of generic peppermint schnapps. The growl of several snowmobiles could be heard in the background, the clearing crisscrossed with the track marks of some of the most righteous sleds in the Pikes Peak region.

After unloading the sleek black sled, he sauntered to the group near the fire, adjusting the various mismatched layers of fleece and down adorning his lanky body. He tucked a flask of bourbon into one of the pockets on his heavy camouflage pants, the makeshift snow gear sprayed with a fresh coat of waterproofing earlier in the day, pulled on over two pairs of thermal long johns. Melon was nothing if not innovative.

The visitation at the funeral home to pay his respects to Marie had been a spirit killer. But a few drinks and a spin on the fastest ride in town would put his soul to rights.

Dan Brown raised his chin at Melon's approach in both challenge and greeting. Melon smirked and pulled out his flask for a swig. Dan ate his own liver in jealousy every night over the new sled parked behind them. "So, Dan - ready for a little action?"

Dan handed the bottle of bourbon he'd been sipping on to his girlfriend, Kim, and stalked towards his machine. As he walked, he pulled on the expensive gloves that coordinated with his black ski ensemble. Better suited for the slopes of Vail, his outfit did not fit into the scene of the backwoods of Teller County. "Let's go, redneck," he shot back over his shoulder. "Let's see if you can do anything with that machine besides keep the thing clean and shiny. It's a shame you couldn't make the same effort with your clothes."

Melon ignored the jibe meant to showcase Dan's sophistication and winked at one of the better-looking girls in the group as he followed. She had some definite possibilities for the evening, if her skintight black ski pants told the right story. The pants weren't heavy enough to keep the night air from making the girl's legs numb. She'd need someone to warm those lean thighs up later.

The rest of the group busied themselves calling out encouragement and advice, plus two or three of them were making bets on the outcome of the race. Two others headed for their machines to take part in the race.

Melon mounted up, buttoning and fastening his clothing as tightly as possible against the cold. "We'll go out to the five mile marker and back, Dan. Good enough for you?"

Dan grunted and gunned the two-cycle engine of his machine in reply. The only starting signal was the crunch of the endless treads into the snow and the flicker of the bonfire as they sped past the partying group, into the curtain of darkness running down

the trail into the woods.

Melon felt the bite of the air around the edges of his goggles and strained to see outside the edges of the light cast onto the path by the headlights of the snowmobile. The trail was well-packed and the white glow of the snow in between the trees gave the landscape an eerie blue glow in the light of the stars. He zipped around the first of several sharp turns with Dan trying to take him on the inside and the others bringing up the rear. The adrenaline sang in his blood as Melon took the trail not by nibbles but by gulps. He flew but remained earthbound, leaning into the snowmobile, keeping his weight as low as possible for top speed, concentrating on the trail.

He didn't notice the snow showed the outlines of moving forms, darting from bush to tree.

Large, bulging eyes glowing with red fire observed the lights of the retreating snowmobiles and turned towards the light of the bonfire and the shadows surrounding the clearing. Oversized nostrils took a brief sniff of the pungent scent of peppermint schnapps mixed with pot that floated in the air along with the sound of laughter.

* * * *

Back at the fire, Kim turned her back towards the heat and glanced out at the surrounding trees, brush and stones of the land. She gave her eyes a moment to adjust from the light of the fire to the glow of the snow. The shadowy form of a tall man stood in the snow watching her.

The long overcoat and turtleneck he wore marked him as an outsider. She caught the scent of expensive cologne the same moment she saw the flash of his white teeth against the backdrop of the night forest. He emanated an intense sexual vibe that sent chills down her back until she caught the first whiff of death in the air. *Damn it! Someone interesting shows up and something stinks around here!*

Then she saw the first demon. The thing stood on a large, flat boulder beside the newcomer, outside of the circle of light. Long knifelike claws dangled from the smaller creature's impossibly jointed hands. She froze as she questioned her sanity and wondered what kind of extras were added to the drugs and drink of the evening. The glowing red eyes of the naked winged creature stared back. Then it rose into the air beside its master, whose eyes now also glowed with blood red light. The demon floated towards her, suspended by its membranous wings and some unseen wind. The man started to laugh.

Trapped in a stupor of alcohol and smoke, Kim stood on the edge of the light and stared at the apparition as it approached. The creature's slash of a mouth stretched into a grotesque grin, exposing huge pointed and stained teeth. One of the other women strolled out to where she stood to take up a place beside her.

"What are you staring at so hard out there? Bigfoot?" Cathy stared over Kim's shoulder into the woods. "Is that an escaped pit boss out there in the snow? Where did he come from? And what ..."

Kim gave a short bark of hysterical laughter. "What I think is what I'm hallucinating is too little for Bigfoot. What did those freaks put in the pot?"

Cathy's eyes adjusted enough for her to focus on what Kim stared at so intently. She managed a shrill squeak when the demon closed in and swung its claws at both women. Both headless bodies thudded to the ground with a wet crunch of snow. One of the heads, trailing long blonde hair, rolled into the larger group near the fire.

The snowmobiler closest to the head leaned down to examine the sodden lump. The sightless gaze and the scarlet stain in the snow told him too much and he leaped to his feet. A nightscape of glowing eyes surrounded them. Yells and shrieks filled the clearing when the eyes moved into the light. The bonfire grew to massive proportions and the screams for mercy rang out unanswered.

Behind the chaos in a quiet pocket of snow, the man in the coat hunkered down over the first headless body. He yanked the corpse upright and buried his face in the fountain spurting from the girl's headless torso to gulp at the fresh blood. His body moved rhythmically against the girl's until he was filled and he groaned with release.

Manius Black stood to rip the clothes from his body and stand naked in the snow. The beautiful features his older brother pummeled earlier were a mask of blood and his gaze emitted visible red sparks as he bounded with a howl of glee into the now visible maelstrom of feeding demons to join them.

Troy stood apart from the madness, a dispassionate observer, waiting for Manius to deplete his unspent fury. He held a change of clothes for his master and a garbage bag for the soiled ones. The cloud of fear from the victims of the feast would reenergize Manius and engorge his demons with a staggering amount of power. The clean up would have been a pain in the ass but the vampire had recently acquired a servant capable of reducing the entire clearing to ash in seconds. Troy toyed with the idea of asking for one of those as well. The figure of the fallen knight made his way back to his servant as he scrubbed the blood from his skin with snow. A blanket of darkness blotted out the dim night sky over the clearing as the biggest monster of all arrived.

* * * *

Dan could see the figure of Melon bobbing in front of him on the trail. The idiot drove faster than Dan would ever dare on this terrain, eighty miles an hour at least. He tried not to let it bother him that the other two racers were hot on his heels, one behind the other, inches apart. Something flew out of one of the trees they ran near and smashed into the windshield of his snowmobile. As he fought for control, the thing on his windshield, still alive, crawled up over the shattered safety glass and attached itself to his head, ripping off his goggles with one sweep of a claw. His machine plowed to an abrupt stop, forcing the other two racers to slam into him at top speed. For Dan, there was the adrenalin of speed and the race and then a deranged blackness drew him down from the world of the living.

* * * *

Two miles away, Melon hit a good long stretch with his sled, the skis meeting with little resistance as he ran flat out, leaving his pursuers behind. He let out a laugh at the thought of the expression on Dan's face upon being whipped by a mountain 'redneck' and poured on another burst of speed before coming to the open space in the forest at the turn around point. He noticed a problem when he came around because there were no lights behind him. Dan's sled was slower, but not *that* slow. "Crap, the moron's taken himself and everyone else out," he muttered and kicked off back into the woods with a grim look on his normally relaxed features.

A wreck could be a nasty thing at almost eighty miles an hour on a snowmobile. A rider could find himself skidding over snow with nothing to protect the body but coveralls, which would be shredded into coleslaw by the snow.

Melon slowed and searched for the track marks of the others. He hadn't noticed

losing the other racers – he'd been too intent on victory. They'd been gone for a good distance. He'd heard nothing, though. The sound of the wind screaming past his head had blocked all other sound.

He came upon the wreck and the sight jerked him up short. The three snowmobiles of his pursuers were piled up on top of each other as if a giant tossed them. The bodies of the men were scattered throughout the embankments on either side of the trail.

Melon sat on his sled for a moment, waiting for one of the dumb-asses to get up and walk over to him looking sheepish, but no one moved. The metallic scent of blood hit his nostrils as he got off and made his way to the first body lying in the light of his lamps. It was facedown and clothed in expensive black ski gear. Removing a glove, he reached down to check for a pulse and felt a wet substance touch his hand. He hesitated and then rolled Dan over in the snow to examine his adversary's face. But there was no face, just a mask of blood. Something had chewed on the imperious features of Dan Brown.

"Holy shit!" Melon fell back in the snow and crawled towards his snowmobile, idling five feet away. Then he spotted the eyes in the inky darkness stretching between the evergreens. First one pair of red and pus yellow glowing orbs, next the same eyes multiplied over and over. There were hundreds of eyes with the black space in between periodically punctured by darts of flame.

He scrambled aboard the machine and whipped forward, managing to run several of the things down as he barreled his way through back to the bonfire. His gloveless hand froze on the handlebar as his stomach tried to convince him that he needed to retch.

"OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGod," Melon whispered, a rare prayer on his part. He wondered what the hell he would do if he made it back to the trucks.

It felt like hours before he saw the light of the fire. A landscape of carnage greeted him. He stopped for a moment to stare at the scene in shocked silence. The bodies of his friends were scattered like the spokes of a wheel around the fire with *things* bent over them, eating their prey. At least, what was left of their prey. They were finishing up.

Then a hurricane-strength shriek almost burst Melon's eardrums. A silent shadow the size of an F-16 passed within several feet of his head. He didn't bother to glance up. Ignoring the possible damage to his beloved machine, he jumped the snowmobile onto the ice-covered road to head for the hills. For all he knew, the hounds of hell were lapping at the tread marks he left behind. A few minutes down the road, a series of thunderclap explosions out of the area he had fled jarred the landscape, but he dared not go back and poured on the juice before the owners of those red eyes caught up with him to punish him for what he had lived to tell.

Chapter Eighteen

"I saw blood," Rhi said aloud. With an effort, she kept her eyes tightly shut where she lay. "And fire and death. People are dying in town tonight."

"I know," replied Blackthorne. Weariness colored his words.

"Then why are you here and not stopping him?"

"Because it isn't time. I'm not ready and he could possibly destroy me if I go after him. Some of my brothers will leave their responsibilities when it's time to fight at my side as they did before but not until it's *time*. They have as much or more to worry about than I do. I went dangerously close to the edge fighting him already tonight." A chair creaked somewhere, an antique straining under the weight of a warrior.

A field of white lace met Rhi's gaze when she opened them. An old-fashioned canopy hung over the bed she sprawled on in what was apparently one of Pearl's guestrooms. Who visited an ancient madam and slept in the same house as her? Marilyn Manson?

She took a deep breath, immediately assaulted by the scent of *him*. Panicked, she grabbed at her throat and body. No bites, clothes still on, shoes and coat missing. A turtleneck was a great thing.

"No, I didn't bite you or molest you while you were out." The sardonic tone of his voice had an edge.

She slowly sat up and turned to face him where he sat in the chair by the bed, his long legs stretched out and propped up on the edge of the bed, his sock feet crossed. The evidence of his earlier fight was gone from his face. There were no visible cuts or bruises. *He's a vampire. They're supposed to heal fast.* "Vampires aren't supposed to take their shoes off." Numb, she looked around for his boots. It made her uncomfortable that he could be so homey around her. And if he could take off his shoes - would he take off anything else she asked him to? She truly needed to get laid if she were desperate enough to want this guy.

He put a hand over his mouth, hiding a grin. He couldn't hear her thoughts, could he? Of course not, that was silly.

"Vampires don't run around in their sock feet."

"Oh, really? Who made a rule up about socks? It doesn't matter because I'm not a vampire - I'm a Changeling. I have to drink human blood, a lot of it, before I become a true vampire and can - no longer take my shoes off in your presence."

"Where are *my* shoes?"

"On the floor."

"How did I get here?"

"I carried you."

She rolled off of the other side of the bed to snatch up her boots and moved to a nearby chair to strap them back on. "Did you enjoy that?"

"Enjoy what?" Blackthorne hadn't moved from his spot but his stare followed her every movement.

“Carrying me. Freaking me out with Pearl’s damned picture?”

“I avoid the front hallway myself when I’m in town and use the kitchen door. I thought that it might be enlightening for you to see the portrait. Pearl refuses to take it down. She always liked you, you see.”

“And you don’t?”

After a silent moment, he rose to stalk around the bed and tower above her, Rhi face to face with his chest. “Pearl’s waiting downstairs with your friends. If we can get Pam to shut up for two minutes, your questions might be answered,” he told her.

“Good luck, Bubba. If you duct taped that woman’s mouth shut, her tongue would still be flapping so much it would beat her brains out.” Rhi stalked to the door and pulled at the antique Victorian glass doorknob. Locked. “God, does anybody decorate by just going to the mall in this place?”

Blackthorne flicked his hand at the door, which swung open by itself.

“Showoff.”

* * * *

They arrived in the kitchen moments later where Houston sat at the kitchen table observing Pearl as she assembled snacks and drinks on a silver tray. Pam perched on the counter chattering as at Rhi’s house for movie night instead of having been abducted by mythical, magical beings.

“Oh, my God! Rhi - how does it feel to be walking proof of reincarnation?” she asked, swinging her legs to and fro.

“What? No ‘How are you, Rhi?’ or ‘Been drained of all of your blood, Rhi?’” She a bit annoyed that she’d been left alone with a *vampire*. A vampire who stood behind her with his hand on the small of her back like his skin belonged in contact with her. *Then maybe, after seeing our portrait, his hand does belong there.* She shrugged away from him.

Houston looked apologetic. “He wouldn’t let us near you. And not to sound like a chicken, but I was a bit intimidated. Does he have his *shoes* off?”

“See, I told you!” Rhi crowed triumphantly.

Pearl interrupted what was about to become a full discussion of the ‘rules’ of being an immortal. “To the den, boys and girls. I can never keep this room warm enough and the place has been remodeled fifteen times.”

“Try the mall.” Blackthorne told her and gave Rhi a little smirk as he stepped around her.

Somehow she couldn’t see Pearl talking to a guy in an orange apron about bath fixtures and proper installation of garage door openers.

“Pearl DeVere! She’s always been my hero ... you know she once owned every man in this town!” Pam informed Rhi as she hopped down from her perch.

“Men are easily led around by the nose, darling, but it works better if you have a hold of something more substantial.” Pearl seated her guests in a thoroughly modern den. The huge room had been outfitted with wall-to-wall shelves filled to bursting with leather bound books. Nearby sat a huge mahogany credenza desk, topped by a sleek black computer. Overstuffed, distressed leather chairs and couches completed the room; a place a book lover could die happy in, redolent of clean burning wood fires and rich leather. The hostess left to fetch what she jokingly called ‘immortal caffeine’ while the rest of the group seated themselves in front of the warmth of the fireplace to pepper

Blackthorne with questions.

“So, how old are you, Blackthorne? Don’t you think you’re robbing the cradle a bit?” Pam asked, referring to Rhi.

Rhi sat near the much larger ‘being’, as she now liked to think of him, on Pearl’s designer couch. She tried not to slide involuntarily down the leather cushion towards him.

Her captor didn’t glance at her as he answered Pam. “I’m over 800 years old. And Rhi’s older than you think she is.”

Rhi rolled her head back on the couch and moaned. “Great. I’m already sliding downhill towards my thirties and you tell me I’m older than I think? This day sucks.” She looked at Blackthorne’s mouth off to the side of her, the extra pointy teeth tucked out of sight. “Forget my last statement - okay?”

Pam sprawled in a nearby armchair. Her bright gaze greedily took in the room, especially Blackthorne. “So if you aren’t going to eat us, can we chat? And by the way, I’d find all of this a lot more believable if you could do a magic trick or something?”

“Maybe I could glow for you?”

“Yeah, glowing is good. But a macho color - not pink or yellow. You’ll look like a daisy.”

Houston, scandalized by this conversation, got up to stand by the fire. He acted no different than he did at the restaurant, his poker face in place - crawling bits of horror probably came through broken windows at him on a daily basis, Rhi decided. But he’d lived in these mountains for a while. And maybe he really had seen these bits of nightmare before. “Rhi, I believe you were about to tell us something you’d read earlier today before our little fracas?”

Rhi tried to appear as relaxed as Pam but slumping on the couch made her slide closer. She sat up, trying to maintain her dignity and lose the appearance of cuddling with a vampire. “Haven’t you read *Colorado Treasures*, Houston? You haven’t heard the one about the crystal skull?”

Houston looked disgusted. “Do you know how many of those damned books have been written? If that much treasure was lost in this state, I couldn’t dig in my flower beds without hitting a conquistador helmet, the jewel encrusted statue of a saint and a bar of Aztec gold.”

Rhi related the entire tale to her friends, stealing glances at Blackthorne to gauge his reactions. She told her friends in detail about the slaughter he committed single-handedly several hundred years ago, and the story didn’t seem to faze the man she suspected was an honest-to-God knight of the Crusades. Pearl entered as Rhi spoke and put down a tray filled with steaming mugs and human-looking sticky buns.

Rhi paused to glance at the mass murderer who sat at ease nearby. She knew exactly who the remorseful knight in the story was. “You didn’t have to kill them, you know.”

“Yes, I did. The only one in the whole gang who would keep his word and never tell or return was the priest. And it sounds like even *he* told. The rest of them would never give up that kind of treasure. Or the possibility of the kind of power the Gate held. The place reeks of power and they would have sooner or later figured out the power could be harnessed. The greed of the Spaniards was unbelievable,” replied Blackthorne as he took a steaming mug from the proffered tray.

The human occupants of the room peeked at each other and shuddered. The chances of getting out of there alive were getting iffy. Hopefully, Pearl didn't have some kind of fetish about feeding her potential victims chocolate and coffee before disemboweling them.

Taking a deep breath, Rhi plunged ahead. "Is this real? And if it is - I think you and Pearl have some more to add to it. You must want something from us or we wouldn't be here." There was a nasty certainty she wouldn't like the answer.

Pearl posed in the light of the fireplace - her hourglass figure framed by the flames. "Come on Rhi, if you've gotten this far I think you could guess some of the rest."

Shifting in her seat, Pam glared at Pearl. "We're not guessing at this, guys. I have a little girl and would like to know if she'll have a world to wake up to tomorrow - so start talking or let us go home. I have cats to feed and Rhi has a goofy dog waiting at home."

"Rhi is the reincarnation of Raven, of course, and lived a life in the gold rush era of Colorado. She suffered from tuberculosis and lived with her mother in Manitou Springs down Ute Pass. Manitou was a Mecca for TB patients back then ..."

"We know the history of the area, lady, stop treating us like greenhorns," Pam noted coolly. "How is Rhi involved now?" The glow of the fire threw outlines of her frizzy locks onto the wall behind her, giving her the appearance of being seated in the wriggling arms of a beast.

Pearl's glance flicked for an instant towards Blackthorne and then back to Pam, who met her stare head on. "She started this by catching the eye and then the heart of an almost immortal knight sworn to protect one of the Gates of Hell. The Brotherhood of the Gate had some archaic rules back then, including no women and a vow of chastity. Not to mention the nasty rule about not bathing - ugh. The knight - already a vow breaker because he liked soap and water - broke his vows to be with Raven, whom he met on one of his many trips to Colorado to check on the status of his assigned gate ..."

"You mean he didn't have to stand next to it at attention for eternity?"

"No. The Brotherhood has other means to transport themselves," Pearl replied, ignoring the sarcasm in Rhi's voice. "They're powerful sorcerers who can appear where and when they are needed, but the act drains them. They are sworn to guard the gates and mankind against the day of the last battle, which must come in its own time. Jack left the order, giving up his place to wed. He handed his duties over to his brother, Manius, another knight recruited into the brotherhood. What he didn't know was that Manius located one of the lost Keys of the Gates, a crystal skull that would unlock the very gate Jack handed over to him to guard. The long life of the Brotherhood jaded Manius and he wearied of his duties. The secret pursuits he took up to amuse himself would not have amused his brother or the leaders of his order who gave Jack their permission to leave. Their permission to live a normal human life and die with his wife."

Wife. Rhi gulped.

"Another ex-husband," said Pam dryly. "That's all you needed, girl."

Chapter Nineteen

Rhi gaped at her husband from an earlier life. Nausea welled up in her stomach as her mind made another connection. Manius Black said in the bar he'd *had* her before.

"Manius wanted to harness the power of the skull to destroy the brotherhood," Pearl continued, not seeing Rhi's horrified face. "But he couldn't figure out how to use it. And his brother married one of the greatest witches of the era, who could look back into the depths of time for the instruction manual. He kidnapped Raven and tortured her for the information. She held out till we got there but died soon after we escaped. She wouldn't take the blood Jack offered her."

Rhi objected. "I thought he gave everything up to live and die with, er, her!"

"He couldn't give up his powers to wed. Once a Changeling, always a Changeling. But we do sometimes weary of unending life and 'retire'. He chose to be with Raven and would have willed himself to die to join her in the hereafter when she died. But Raven knew her body was too weak, even if Jack gave her the gift of demon blood. She cursed him and made him swear to keep watch for the day his brother returned to try to open the gate."

Rhi slid away from Blackthorne to the other end of the couch. "Where's the skull been all of these years?"

"The Brotherhood of the Gate's high council decided to imprison Manius in a grave instead of killing him when he was captured. There's a prophecy he will have something to do with destroying one of the gates. But someone dug him up a few years ago and released him - the idiot's gotten addicted to television and led Jack around the world on several wild goose chases. Raven ..." here Pearl paused again, took a breath and continued. "Raven hid the skull and didn't live long enough to tell us where she hid it ... or maybe she didn't trust us. Manius wants you, Rhi, because you are part of this prophesy, fated to reveal the skull."

I've seen it. The thought scurried like a rodent through her mind and a small, commanding voice broke into her mind. *Don't shout your thoughts - they can hear them when you do that!* Rhi suppressed the image of the skull, stuffing it into a metaphysical drawer. She didn't know for sure what side these people were on and now she heard a voice in her head. What side was it on?

"I don't know where my spare car keys are," she protested aloud. "How am I supposed to remember something from another life that I'm not sure is mine? Did you say a gate to Hell? Is there more than one?"

Blackthorne made a motion for Pearl to let him speak. "The skull will come to you by the appointed time," he said. "Midnight, three nights from now. You will either be the instrument of destruction for the Cripple Creek Gate or the one who reopens a Pandora's Box that has destroyed several civilizations. I didn't understand at first. I thought your spirit would return somehow to reveal the skull. But you were reborn."

"Manius will never let the skull go," said Pearl. "If he can't have this one, he'll search for another. He is corrupted, with a thirst for blood beyond what the blood

pollution of a demon can give. He thinks he will command the forces of Hell to do his bidding like Solomon did when he built his temple. Manius has forgotten what lives on the other side of those gates and he was never the most skillful necromancer. Also, there are many Gates and each has a different aspect. Open this one and you might open all of them - we don't know."

"Not to sound like a newbie at this, but if the Gate's so hard to open, why do you guys bother to guard them at all? It seems to be a little idiotic," Pam asked.

"If you owned a nuclear bomb you were fairly sure couldn't be tampered with or set off, would you feel comfortable allowing anyone to play with the thing? No. You'd hide it and guard it," Blackthorne replied. "The world was chaotic when the Brotherhood formed to guard the gates and a lot of knowledge has been lost or hidden. There could be other ways to open them and use them. We don't know."

Pam stared back at him, uncertain. "You mean to say someone could get the idea to, say, scribble graffiti on the gate and it *might* open?"

"That's what I'm saying. The greatest monuments of the ancient world were built by the labor of demons brought through the gates by the ancients, who felt that they had power over the forces of Heaven, Earth and Hell. And being men, they got greedy."

"But the gate must already be opened - we were just in a bar filled with creepy crawlies," Rhi pointed out.

"The gate isn't open," he replied. "Manius raised his demons the hard way, out of one of the Hell Cracks that pop up around Cripple Creek every so often. It takes a great deal of power to control so many demons. Manius feeds his power by drinking blood and the fear he generates. He drinks human fear like we drink essence."

Pam broke in. "What's 'demon blood'? Is that how you all got this way?"

"It's sometimes called the Curse of the Wandering Jew but is much older than Christ." Pearl restlessly stood, absently rubbing her neck. "There are several ways to become a vampire. The legends have it screwed up. You can become a vampire by the taking and giving of demon blood. The blood of demons corrupts all of the Brotherhood, although these days all you've got to do to become a Changeling is talk someone like me into giving the gift of my blood and survive the change. We are Changelings."

Rhi stared at Pearl, aghast. "You drank demon blood?"

"No. I was bitten by one of the Princes of Hell, a big freaking demon, during the great fire. The poisoned bite was slowly killing me. I begged Jack for some of his blood to Change - I had a score to settle. We only feed off the life force of humans that surrounds their beings but we don't drink blood. Our victims don't miss it and regenerate it quickly," Pearl explained.

"We need human food and drink as well, some of us more than others."

Blackthorne stared pointedly at the cup in Pearl's hand from which the aroma of bourbon mixed with coffee rose. "We can live without it but suffer terribly."

Pearl winked at Houston as she took a gulp from her mug. "Manius embraced the demon blood in full, feeding on human blood and fear."

Rhi gave Pearl a wry grin. "Well, you have a much better eye color than the bad guys do."

Pearl smiled. "Yes, there is that. It's just as well because I look terrible in red. Manius always looks like he's been on a bender."

"What kind of score do you have to settle?"

An era of sadness passed through the woman's violet gaze. "Some of the girls he took to play his horrible games with during the gold rush were my friends, my sisters. In some ways, they were so innocent and I protected them. The police were useless. They hushed up the murders because they wanted Cripple Creek to be declared the new capitol of Colorado. A scandal was *not* what they needed. After all, the victims were just whores. I decided to go to you for help, Rhi, when you were Raven. There were mystics falling out of trees in those days, a few of them fakes. But you were the real thing. All of the witches of Manitou Springs deferred to your mother because of you. The top banana spiritualist in the world, Madame Blavatsky, was terrified of you.

"I'm not this person you think I am," Rhi protested. "I'm a blackjack dealer - nothing special."

The madam rose and stepped over to an ornate chest sitting nearby on a mahogany console. The heavy hinges on the box gave out a creak of protest upon being opened. She pulled out an old photo and stared at it for a moment. "If your dreams and the portrait don't prove it to you, maybe this will." She came to where Rhi sat, handing her the picture.

Rhi forced herself to look down at a sepia toned wedding photo of - herself. The original of the painting in the hall, the bride was dressed in full Victorian wedding finery, her dark hair gathered on her head in a precise imitation of the Gibson girls of the era. She stood proudly, one thin hand on the shoulder of the man sitting in the ornate chair beside her - a smiling and ever handsome Blackthorne in an era appropriate suit. Rhi felt the sudden urge to vomit. *Darned sticky buns.*

Pearl sighed and turned to face the portrait of a young girl hanging over the fireplace. "All auguries said that you and Manius would have something to do with the destruction of the gate. I shudder to think of how many pieces of chicken guts, bowls of water, piles of bones and tarot cards were looked into to come up with that brilliant idea. We stuck Manius in the Mt. Pisgah graveyard and all settled down to await Raven's return, in one form or another. Somewhere in your mind, you know how to find the skull and erase *this* Gate of Hell from the Earth. The skull will turn up like a bad penny at any time. Fate is having its way with us."

"Having its way with us, hell. Fate has risen up and bitten us on the ass," Pam noted from the depths of her chair between dainty sips of hot chocolate.

Blackthorne stood to his full height, bones popping. "Perhaps you'll trust me enough this time to at least let me know when the skull pops up before my brother takes you," he told Rhi before stalking out of the room.

Pam came to Rhi's rescue. "So all we have to do is live long enough to find the skull first and get Rhi to remember how to destroy it and the gate. Great. I hope whoever they get to play me in the movie has big boobs."

The others gaped. She grinned. "I've always wanted big boobs - but I'm too chicken to get a boob job. I don't get the whole 'beauty is pain' thing."

As Pearl moved about the room, refilling coffee and cocoa mugs, Rhi realized with a start the drinks could be tainted. *Too late now.*

"I'd like you all to stay here tonight," Pearl said. "This place is protected and Manius seems to be in a mood."

"I have to get home to Ellie Mae. She'll worry."

Pam added, "I have my menagerie to feed. No one's bothered us at home so far."

Their hostess nodded. "That's because as soon as I realized who Rhi was, I took measures. The parts of the mountain and your homes are warded, but getting there might be a problem."

Rhi stood to stretch, trying to make herself look as tall as possible. "I'm going home to my dog and sleep in my own bed. Period."

Silent up to this point, Houston finally spoke up. "Miss Pearl, I think these ladies have dealt with enough for the evening. *I* have had enough for one evening myself and I'm the one who used to fly over the Iraqi Guard and flip them off for kicks on a regular basis. We're going home."

Pearl nodded. "I'll take you back to your cars, but don't stop for *anything* on the way home. If something throws itself out into the middle of the road, run over it." She addressed Rhi. "You have a role to play in this whether you want to or not ... we will need to talk again."

"If you talk to her, you talk to us all – *Pearl*." Pam avoided any kind of title for the changeling as she loped over to stand beside her small friend. Rhi wondered how she ever could have thought of Pam as wishy-washy. "We can talk after the funeral we have to attend tomorrow. A funeral that wouldn't be happening if you bothered to warn someone this was coming."

"After several decades of fighting for Right, I've come to the realization I cannot save everyone. What was I supposed to do - run through the streets screaming out that an ancient knight has come to destroy us all with his minions? And by the way, I'm an undead madam from the gold rush who pops into town every fifty years or so to live for few years until people notice that I don't get older? But, just so you know, there are folks in this town who've been warned and are preparing."

"No one's ever recognized you or realized what you are?" Houston asked in amazement as he helped Rhi on with her coat.

"Of course people have recognized me, Houston. But the locals I have been in contact with are nothing if not discreet or stark raving mad so no one takes them seriously anyway," Pearl broke off as Blackthorne reentered the room, pulling on a fresh sheepskin coat, the other having been left on the floor of the bar after the fight. Rhi felt a stab of jealousy as she realized that he was staying at the madam's house and considered it home.

"Are we ready for a road trip, people?" Blackthorne asked, his composure regained and the cold mask back in place over his well-cut features.

He didn't bother to try to get us to stay, Rhi thought bitterly. Pearl *was* exquisite and appealing in spite of her checkered past.

"I think the girls and I can handle it, Mr. Blackthorne." Houston had made his way into the hall, his cowboy hat in hand. His reverence for Pearl was on the verge of making Rhi sick. "I'm going to bunk on Pam's couch and I'm going to try to get Miss Rhi to go fetch her dog and come back to Pam's for the night."

"No, Houston," Rhi protested. "Whatever is going on, it's after me, not you guys. You'll be safer if I'm at my house and you're as far away from me as you can get. Pam should be going to her mother's to stay with Katie and not risking herself over me."

Pam heaved her purse over her shoulder and pulled out her pistol to casually check the chamber. The colorful bag had never been far from her side for the entire conversation. "Rhi, if there's a battle over the fate of the world - I want to be there to

fight instead of sitting back on my rear waiting for the end. I wouldn't trust anyone else to do it right, plus who else will believe enough of this to back you up? Fate is the true goddess of this town and she picked me to play a part." Pam's face turned hard for a moment. "And the next time a boogie man tries to climb in a window and take a swipe at me, I'll be ready."

Houston nodded. "Well said, Marine."

Blackthorne again towered over Rhi, who tried to slide past him. "Rhi can go to her house and care for her pet, Pam. Because I'm going go with her. And I am going to *stay* with her." His tone brooked no argument, although Rhi spent several moments imitating a beached carp, opening and shutting her mouth to protest, but no words could squeak their way out. She squashed down the impulse to flip him off.

Pam lit up like the neon billboard on a new casino property and gave Rhi a thumbs-up sign. Rhi sighed. Trust Pam to be thrilled about the possibility of sex even though Rhi's potential partner could see her as a midnight snack. It hadn't occurred to her friend they might not make it home through the black-veiled back roads to their homes alive and uneaten. The feeding on *aura* story might be a load of fertilizer.

Chapter Twenty

The trip back to their parked vehicles almost disappointed the passengers of Pearl De Vere's shiny black SUV. Nothing burst out of the bushes at the vehicle that trundled through the streets, and no hideous, slug-white beings peeped over the snowy hedges that lined the brick paved sidewalks of Cripple Creek.

The dark expression on Blackthorne's face kept Rhi from protesting about his presence. As much as she hated to admit it, the thought of him in her house overnight made her bones melt.

Pam called to Rhi to follow her and Huston in the battered green pickup closely. Wary to the bone, Rhi nodded in reply as she broke her way through the crusted snow to the SUV, Blackthorne following behind. She glared at him when he veered off towards the driver's side door. For a spilt second she glimpsed a twinkle of amusement on his face before he veered back to the passenger side and waited patiently for her to unlock the door.

They sat in silence in the truck, giving it a few moments to warm up. She took a second to worry about Ellie Mae and to wonder if the protections Pearl placed on the mountain included the dog's kennel.

The wail of sirens startled her as she guided the truck over the washboard gravel of a side road to gain access to Teller 1. Pam slid her truck to a stop in front of them to allow every fire truck and emergency vehicle in Cripple Creek fly by at top speed. They were going in the opposite direction, leading out the other end of town, towards Gillette Flats.

"I would've thought they would have left some people at the disaster we snuck out of at the restaurant," she mused. "What could be bad enough for them to drop that mess and run off?"

Blackthorne lounged in the passenger seat, sans seatbelt, taking in the details of her clean but cluttered vehicle. The fading sirens did not change his expression. "I'm not sure we *want* to know at this point. Let's get you home. Pearl will find out what else Manius has been up to."

Rhi noticed he had brought his sword with him. The weapon lay in the floor of the backseat, the hilt within hand's reach. "Why aren't you out beating the bushes for the skull? Why such patience?"

Still scanning the road, he frowned. "The spell I suspect Raven used to hide the skull is the spell of Speldin's Tower. A Bible holding the original spell Raven used to force the spirit of the skull to remain in bondage has been concealed somewhere. I suspected several times my baby brother figured out a way to break the spell in the last few years, but Pearl kept telling me he was screwing with us. It's one of her favorite expressions. But she was right - you've been bound to it. For a hundred years we have waited for the skull to pop back up, but it will come to you and no other."

"Then why hasn't your brother taken me and waited for the skull to show?"

"It doesn't work that way - fate will bring the thing to you. If you're in a cell,

chance could be cut out of the equation. Manius will move to take it and you after he knows you have the skull in hand. He wasn't trying to kill you, you know. He likes to mess with me – it's all a game to him. How long were you married?"

Rhi almost slid the vehicle off the road upon the sudden drastic change of subject. She took a gulp, knowing she discussed her marriage with a man who loved her in another life. She answered with as little emotion as possible. "Seven years. I was young and stupid. I stayed with him long enough for him to spend most of the money my parents left me. It seems I have a knack for marrying the wrong man."

"I'll say," he replied, with enough grace to sound rueful.

They drove along in silence for a few moments until Rhi glanced upward and flinched. A shadow obscured the moon, a monstrous ebony wing outlined in the silver orb. The wing ended in a reptilian head the size of a snowplow. Red, glowing garbage-can-lid sized eyes could be made out as the creature raced through the air.

Reacting more to the appearance of Pam's brake lights than to the horror in the sky, Rhi slammed on her brakes to avoid running into her friend's truck. Her SUV skidded sideways on the slick road and Rhi compensated by cranking the steering wheel in the other direction and pumping the brake pedal. They slid to a stop, inches from Pam's bumper.

Houston, already out of the passenger side of the pickup, held one of the rifles from the window rack.

Rhi began to open her door but Blackthorne grabbed her arm at the last moment. She was getting thoroughly sick of being grabbed by the arm.

"Stay in the truck!" he commanded and jumped out with his sword in hand.

Pam got out of her truck and scanned the sky with her gun aimed upwards. Rhi wondered if Pam was aware of how many people died in Cripple Creek's heyday as a result of being hit by falling bullets during celebrations. Then she realized that she was being ordered around again and alighted from the truck. The others had gathered in the trail of light put out by her headlights as Blackthorne spoke. He sounded disgusted.

"Now *that's* just silly. What a jackass." He waved off Houston and the rifle. "Don't shoot at it - I don't know if that'll make it explode or what. They're volatile creatures. I haven't seen one in a few hundred years."

"I have news for you, oh ancient one. I live in Cripple Creek, Colorado, and I know my jackasses. *That* is *not* a donkey - shouldn't we be running right about now?" Houston broke off as Rhi approached, her face pale but determined.

"What do you mean, showing off?" she asked as she neared, staring at the sky. Her angry gaze forestalled any arguments. The distinct smell of sulfur had replaced the fresh scent of snow filled forest.

Blackthorne looked up at the sky as he answered. "A dragon. He called up a dragon. What an idiot. To think that I trained him. He knows better."

Rhi's mouth hung open for a moment as Pam excitedly scanned the skies.

"God - the *one* night I don't have my camera in the truck!" Pam exclaimed, still holding tightly to her gun.

Rhi started to babble but the sight of Blackthorne floating up into the air to stand in the crown of a tree near the road made her stop. He scanned the area from his perch for the offending magical reptile.

"He can fly, Pam. He's floating for you. Now if he would glow a little."

Pam didn't bother to appear startled. "He's a good vampire - of course he can fly. He danced on the ceiling earlier with his brother - why are you surprised? I wonder if he's like a fairy?"

Houston wore an expression of wonder on his face. "Fairy?"

"Yeah. Can we hold him upside down and sprinkle his dust on us and we can fly too? That would be *so cool*."

A dragon is swooping around town and Pam wants some fairy dust, Rhi thought. I wonder where I can get a bottle of tequila at this time of the night? I think I'm out. She addressed her friend. "Do you think we can turn a guy who weighs a solid 210 upside down and sprinkle him on someone?"

Blackthorne landed beside her. Hearing her words, he looked baffled. "Sprinkle? Never mind - I don't want to know. It's gone to hide in whatever cave or mine shaft Manius has found for the thing. My brother is trying to freak you out, Rhi."

"He's succeeding. Where'd he get a dragon?"

Blackthorne shrugged. "He raised it from one of the planes of Hell, I'm sure. The ones in this dimension don't like to show themselves to modern man - too many weapons can kill them easier now than in the old days. They sleep the eons away in a cave on top of their treasure. And besides, it didn't look like a *good* dragon. Damn it! The evil ones are the hardest to control. The only good part of this is that Manius might not have meant for us to see it. Let's get to your homes - now."

"Good dragons?" Pam called as he led Rhi back to the truck. "There are good ones? Can I get one?"

"Does anything intimidate her?" he muttered under his breath.

"No. When she dies her headstone will read: *She had a damned good time*. How many people will be able to say the same thing? Can you?"

He didn't reply - instead he just reached to help her into a running vehicle for the third time that night.

The caravan headed out once more, this time with Blackthorne and Houston driving. Pam hung out the opened passenger side window, trying to get another glimpse of the dragon. Rhi had enough of being tough for the evening. She didn't want to crawl into Blackthorne's arms and cry - she wanted to curl up in a fetal position and suck her thumb. He could fly. Before the dragon, she could cling to the hope that the events of the evening and the past few days were a hallucination brought on by the residual effects of altitude and second-hand smoke. That explanation was gone. She was stone cold sober and he could fly.

The road to Horse Thief Gulch stretched too far and Rhi glimpsed so many shadows in the air and in the skeletal winter woods her hands shook again. Finally, in self defense, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"Tired?"

She snorted and pulled the hood of her coat over her head. "Tired? No. Losing my grip on my sanity? Hell yeah."

Chapter Twenty-One

Chief Boyd stood on the edge of a clearing off of Four Mile Road, his hand on his gun even though he was surrounded by three fourths of the Cripple Creek Police Force, all available state troopers, the fire department and every EMT who could be gathered up on short notice.

The smell of fire, gasoline, and unspeakable burnt meat permeated the air and gagged him. He controlled the urge to add to the chaos by throwing up and mentally girded himself to look around. The chief stood in the middle of a battlefield or a terrible accident and until he knew which one it was, he was keeping one hand on his gun. Of course it was connected to *her*. That much he was sure of. His gun might be useless.

Four-wheel-drives, bits of snowmobiles and body parts littered the area, pieces of each even hanging in the snow filled evergreens in a bizarre parody of holiday decorations. A crater the size of a Mac truck dominated the remains of a bonfire party. Snowmobile tracks crisscrossed the site. He pointed his flashlight down, revealing the broken top of a bottle of whiskey lying at his feet. One of his younger deputies approached the chief, carefully stepping around patches of something the chief made a point of not looking at too closely. The kid couldn't have looked more shell shocked if he were on cleanup duty on the beaches of Normandy after D-Day.

"Sir, it looks like they got a hold of some dynamite - maybe some of the old, unstable stuff people find sometimes cached on some of the smaller old claims."

The chief shook his head in disbelief. Damage control would be a bastard on this one. "They would have had to have found a crate of the stuff to make a hole this big. Did someone dump it on the fire thinking it would act like fireworks? Stupid rednecks. The stuff would be sweating nitro if it were really old. It should have blown up when they carried it here. And what about the wreck on the trail?" He didn't want to think about what really had happened and no one would believe him anyway. How could he protect his town from something no one would believe and he can't explain anyway?

The deputy tried to answer over his gag reflex. "There's blood, sir, but no bodies. It's going to take forever to sort everyone out and account for everybody. The footprints are a mess. Half covered with snow already and it's started snowing again. We have a team coming up from Colorado Springs to help out."

Boyd strode over to examine the ruins of Melon's Scout. "I know this one - the brain dead kid from the gym - Melon. Let's find out what happened here, guys. First, there's the Alien Club mess downtown, which no one can seem to remember much of. And we can't find the gun that went off in the middle of a restaurant. Now this."

This was all too familiar. The fireside tales of his grandfather danced through his head for days as he made his preparations. How could any of this insanity have happened before and then the tale just be forgotten? He filed these thoughts in the back of his mind for later. The police chief of Cripple Creek climbed into his warm truck to make a call. She told him she would try to keep it from escalating ... if this was her version of damage control, God help them. It had turned into a hell of a night in the Centennial

State.

* * * *

Manius stalked from one end of his oversized living room to the other, holding an ice pack over one eye. Just because he was immortal didn't mean he couldn't be pounded into chopped steak. It took him less time to heal than a mortal but it still hurt.

His brother's loss of control wasn't a bother. It amused him to rattle his brother - the presence of Rhi took all of Jack's reason. But the mess at the scene of the massacre of the snow mobile party put the lord of the castle in a fury. According to the police channels he monitored on the ride home, there were bodies in the woods that hadn't been turned into chunks of flesh and charcoal like the rest of the victims.

Several small, nervous-looking demons hovered near the blazing hearth. One of them squeaked in terror as Manius approached them. The broken blood vessels in the vampire's eye were overwhelmed by his glowing fury. "You were supposed to have the Great Beast burn all of the meat, my friends! The food must not look *chewed*. You'd been fed - do you want to be seen enough for someone to realize that you are real? Their disbelief is our weapon! You left some of the dead you fed on in the woods!"

"We hungry - save for later," the leader spat out, drops of spittle falling from his bulbous lips to the parquet floor to sizzle on the tile. "Dragon cover most of mess - burnt food no good. There plenty fresh food there ..."

Manius resisted the urge to blast them all back to Hell, which would then entail him spending more power he did not have to spare to raise more demons. And he would have to go out into the middle of the woods to do it. He changed tack. "Well, you'll have to eat the food that I bring you for a while. When I have the power of the skull, there will be plenty of food for all who are loyal to me, little one."

He petted the first one on its' bald scalp, running his hands over the points of the ears. "And those who are not loyal to me - or half-ass a direct order..." he picked up the demon he had been petting and tossed it into the fireplace. The flames burned higher for a moment as the demon sat directly in the fire, looking confused. Manius waved a hand at the creature and it popped like a giant kernel of popcorn, disappearing in a puff of smelly smoke. The others skittered away. Making an example of one was a better use of his resources.

"Troy!" he barked.

His assistant stepped up to his master, ignoring the fleeing demons.

"Yes sir?"

"Go fetch some air freshener for this room - it stinks. Maybe some fresh breeze scent," Manius ordered and left for the comfort of his suite. He strode down the thick carpets covering the floors of the hall, still clutching his ice pack. His head was killing him - not only from the fight but also the effort to control the demons.

Controlling the Dragon was taking its toll on him as well. The effort it took to force the huge spirit of the night to return to the old mining shaft Manius picked out to hide it in almost made him black out. The life forces he had bloated himself with at the massacre were precious. He didn't mind a mass murder here and there or a jaunt in the night air for the creatures, but he had given his servants strict instructions to cover up the mess they left. The demons could appear to only the few who wouldn't be believed.

He thought earlier about sending the Dragon to turn loop de loops over Rhi's house before he had become so exhausted. But there was no use in rubbing it in. The

recent events he created would feed upon themselves and generate plenty of fear in town. He'd have ample time to repay his brother and terrify the girl later. Everything would be perfect this turn. Now, he needed a hot bath and maybe a sitcom rerun to calm him down.

There were enough spies watching the town and the girl. He would know the moment she touched the skull. There was no use in getting worked up about it. Jack was worked up enough for all of them.

Manius took off his clothes and folded them before laying them on an embroidered armchair. He dressed himself in his silk pajamas and a new smoking jacket he picked up in Denver. The shopping had improved in the city since the 1800's.

It was time to toy with the light snack Troy brought up from the cellar earlier, even though he wasn't hungry. He opened the door to his bathroom and admired the teenaged girl, hogtied and gagged, lying in the middle of the tiled floor. Her fishnet stockings were ripped in several places - the little black silk bustier that barely covered her small breasts was torn open. Troy had been amusing himself. The little hookers from Denver were so plentiful and cheap Manius couldn't resist bringing several up at a time to reside in the cells hidden behind his wine cellar. Troy kept them half drugged and went down to play with them sometimes. Cripple Creek was so small; the disappearance of a girl every other day would have been a problem in the last few weeks. But soon it wouldn't matter.

Manius had snacked on this one before ... her acne-scarred face, filled with terror, showed that she was well aware of what he needed from her. He sat beside her and took her head in his lap, crooning, calming her, slowing her blood. The girl had shiny, long black hair and Manius placed a mental picture of Rhi over her face as he leaned over to lick her breasts. His tongue had taken on some aspects of his demon contamination and was as rough as 12 grit sandpaper. Blood ran from the raw patch of skin he created on her chest. The girl's whimpers of terror he heard in his mind as Rhi's husky tones. His eyes burned with red light. He would play with her soon.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The hills surrounding Rhi's home loomed, sleeping giants against the night. Rhi leaned back in her seat and turned her head to stare.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Dead guy. Driving her truck. Hot dead guy driving her truck. Hot dead guy driving her truck who she married in a past life. The added element of being the world's great hope in a climatic battle between good and evil made her head ache. A stiff dose of raw cookie dough with whipped cream was in order.

"Does your heart beat?" she asked.

"Of course my heart beats," Blackthorne replied.

Rhi straightened. "But I thought you were a vampire?"

"There are a variety of vampiric creatures in the world, Rhi," he told her in a brusque tone.

"And which category do you fit into?"

"The good category."

"Sez you."

The interior of the truck fell silent for the remainder of the trip as Rhi leaned back again to pretend to nap, hoping she would wake up soon from this final, bizarre nightmare.

Blackthorne stopped the SUV for a moment at Pam's house to watch the little green truck make its way into the drive. Then he drove up the winding road to Rhi's driveway. As usual every light blazed and Ellie Mae stood in the middle of her kennel, baying for all she was worth.

"Thank God she's okay," Rhi breathed as they skidded to a stop. She jumped from the vehicle without a backwards glance.

Blackthorne swore and reached for his sword, unsheathing it as he climbed out while Rhi ran across the open ground to the kennel to release the dog.

He caught up to her as she knelt to lavish affectionate hugs and kisses on the dog, both completely ignoring their surroundings. Grimly, he turned on his heel to survey the house, porch and woods. Luckily, his brother had not sent the dragon to lay in wait.

"Why don't you let the dog stay in the house all day?" Blackthorne grumbled. "Accidents?"

"No, she'd make it," Rhi replied blithely, ignoring his irritation. She rubbed the big dog's ears so hard they flapped. Ellie Mae groaned and lay down in the snow to roll over and expose her tummy for a rub. Rhi obliged immediately. "But Ellie's a bloodhound. She's miserable inside. She wants to smell the wind and watch the woods. When I first moved here, she almost went through the bay window trying to get a look at a raccoon. And any dog in this area has to be kept in a covered kennel when it is outside alone because of the mountain lions."

He rolled his eyes. "And the heated doghouse? For some reason I doubt the first

homesteaders up here offered their hunting dogs this kind of luxury.”

Rhi rubbed noses with the dog. “Nothing’s too good for my girl, is it, baby? Who’s the prettiest bloodhound? Who’s a pretty girl?”

The dog, seeming to understand the compliment, hopped up and jumped in happy circles around the girl.

Rhi stood and stretched. “Time to get inside before we get ... er, you know. Will going inside help?”

“It will help,” Blackthorne replied, staring at the contours of her face in the light of the house’s exterior floodlights. “Pearl is rather good at setting wards. Nothing small can get in and I will know if something big knocks on the door.” He hesitated. “You do know you need to invite me in to get me past Pearl’s wards or this spot is as far as I can go, don’t you?” he asked, a little anxiously. “You’ve brought me this far - you have to invite me the rest of the way.”

“You mean I can make you stand here in the snow all night if I don’t invite you in?”

Blackthorne grinned, a surprise in the darkness. If Rhi hadn’t known he was centuries old, she would have thought of him as boyish at that moment. “Yes. I’ll have to stand here until I’m a mound of snow - and it *is* going to snow more tonight.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Rhi grabbed the still wriggling dog by the collar to lead it inside. She paused. “You aren’t *thirsty*, are you? How often do you need to...? Oh crap. I hereby invite you into my home. Please accept my hospitality without drinking my blood - or my dog.”

“For the last time - I *don’t* drink blood!” He finally approached with his sword in one hand. The other was held out for Ellie Mae’s inspection. Blackthorne was invading the animal’s territory. A formal introduction was important.

Ellie Mae’s sensitive nose bowed over the offered hand for a moment and hesitated. A long tongue lapped at his hand and her tail wagged so hard the dog almost lost her balance and fell over in the snow.

He straightened and Ellie Mae leaned against his leg, begging for more attention. “The first one of you women to get me.”

Rhi stared at him, white lacy bits of the falling snowflakes entangling themselves in his dark hair. Blackthorne raised the hand her dog licked and almost touched her face. She had a strong sense of *déjà vu* and knew the gesture was one he had performed often in the distant past.

“You’re beautiful, Rhi.”

She stepped back. “Let’s get inside before I change my mind and let you become an undead Popsicle lawn jockey.”

He fell in behind her as she marched towards the house, continuing his careful survey of the surrounding forest. As Rhi opened the door, Ellie Mae slid around her to search the house, inspecting every corner. The dog returned to his side to watch Blackthorne secure the door with the deadbolt and various movements and mutterings.

“Are you magiking everything?” Rhi asked, taking off her coat. She wanted to ask him if he liked her house - or if he wanted to snuggle. Did knights snuggle?

“Yes - as a matter of fact, I am. No insult to your large furry friend, but I’ll rest easier this way. We did see a dragon tonight.”

“Don’t disrespect the Lady Ellie Mae - Sir or Lord Whatever. Her liking you is a

sure sign you are *not* damned in my book. She's been my best friend for a long time." She leaned on the counter to check the answering machine before remembering that she had turned it off to avoid calls while she read - in a morning now years away.

She stood for a moment in the kitchen, absorbing the familiar things of her everyday life. The bread maker, useless at this altitude, sat on the counter along with her lifeline - the 12-cup coffee maker. A shaky looking potholder made for her by Pam's daughter hung from a hook near the stove. All of these bits of life were now meaningless because of one man - who might have made her life both meaningful and meaningless in another time.

The shadows outside the kitchen curtains startled her for a second. She shook her head and sighed. Any monster from the depths of her worst nightmares could be sizing up her house at that moment.

* * * *

Blackthorne stood in the light of the television she snapped on for the dog. He removed his coat and, after leaning the sword against the couch, sank into the recliner to look her house over. It had the comfortable feel of a library. Rhi had resisted the temptation most newcomers to Colorado succumbed to: decorating with mass-produced western décor more suited to an apartment in Cleveland than a true mountain home.

The only homage to her Colorado address was a black and white nature photo of the front-range on the wall and a few well-chosen pieces of pottery. A large stack of books about Cripple Creek lay in a haphazard pile beside the chair partially hidden underneath a flannel blanket. He picked one up to browse through. The dog ignored both of them and climbed on the couch to lie at her full length along it. The animal gave a deep sigh of contentment.

"Pardon a stupid question - but do you sleep? I don't have a silk-lined coffin handy," Rhi called as she rummaged through the house, banging objects and stomping on the hardwood floors.

He kicked back in the chair and flipped up the footrest. "Yes, I sleep. And I do *not* need a coffin."

A sleeping bag hit him in the chest, followed by a fluffy pillow that smacked him in the face with undue force.

"Then there's your spot, because Ellie has the couch and I don't have a spare bed," she said, standing at the top of the staircase against the wall.

He suppressed a smile. She'd dressed for bed in a knee length t-shirt announcing the Cripple Creek Donkey Derby Days festival, her bare feet white against the wood floor.

"This has been the weirdest, longest day of my life. Uh - *this* life, anyway."

"This chair will be lovely, thank you, ma'am."

She sat down on the staircase, pulling the shirt down over her knees and examining him. Ellie Mae rumbled and rose from the couch to totter past, up the stairs to lie at the top of the landing behind her mistress. The hound's ears flowed over the first step. Rhi ran her hands down Ellie Mae's soft ears, a habitual gesture.

"What does a crusader and a madam do to entertain themselves for decades on end while waiting for the proverbial crap to hit the fan? Play poker? Pearl would win."

Blackthorne leaned back in the chair, his joints popping with the stretch.

"Members of the Brotherhood are problem solvers in our spare time. The gates have a

tendency to influence events, cause problems, and we have to solve them while safeguarding the very things influencing the bad guys in the first place. We have fun sometimes - go out to dinner, vacations, and yes, play poker. Constant war would drive us mad after a few decades.”

“And how do you ‘solve’ big problems?”

“We’re knights, Rhi, we live by the sword ... you figure it out.”

* * * *

His voice was cold. There was no mistaking this man. He took lives regularly and would not hesitate to do so again. But if he was doing the cold macho man for her benefit, he was wasting oxygen, Rhi decided. “What about Pearl? She seems quite content.”

“Pearl lives near her assigned gate in the Far East and has a bitter hatred for the child slavers who prostitute children near her home. She has a nasty habit of hunting them down and killing the slavers. Negotiating isn’t her specialty.”

“No surprise there. What about the gates? Aren’t you responsible for this one?”

“When the gate’s being messed with - I know. And I can be here in seconds. They aren’t easy to open.” He shifted in the chair. “Do you think I could have the remote?”

The very normal male question startled her for a moment. She pointed to the remote sitting on the arm of the chair. “If this is real - you should make me a member of your club *now* so I can have a fighting chance. I know it gives you extra abilities. Like your flying tonight.”

“Absolutely not. It isn’t like in the movies. Becoming a Changeling is painful. And our needs can be ... disturbing. You know what I did before I met you this evening? I stopped at one of the casinos and charmed one of those mean-as-a-snake, blousy old ladies from the Springs to walk outside with me for enough of a moment to take a pinch of her aura.” He flipped through one of her books as he spoke. He could have been discussing the weather. “I sent her back in with no memory of me but a wobble in her knees and the implanted knowledge to not talk to strangers. Our priests claim we’re not damned for using demon blood as we do, but I’m not so sure.”

The man looked almost normal except for talking about a little theft of soul. Then there were the extra long incisors that showed every time he opened his mouth a bit too much. He could become a blood drinker if he wanted to. Did he think about what it would be like, to not drink the aura but instead the actual essence of life?

Continuing to pet Ellie Mae, Rhi concealed a flinch. Rubbing the bruises on her arm where he’d clutched her earlier, she rose to go to bed. “Well, goodnight.”

His face inscrutable, he flipped through the channel, not glancing up.

“Goodnight, Rhiannon.”

Finally snug in her bed, she felt surprisingly sleepy and fell asleep almost at once. And the dreams followed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In the living room, Blackthorne stared at the television screen, seeing nothing but the laughing face of a girl with waist length, blue-black hair and dancing green gaze that never left his face.

In Manitou, they walked together in the kitchen garden under the watchful eye of Raven's mother.

The older woman, who was dressed in full mystic regalia, stood at attention by the kitchen window looking like a black widow spider on the verge of descending upon him any moment. Blackthorne was careful to keep his expressions neutral when calling upon Mrs. Brennan's magical daughter. It wouldn't do to have the mother of the girl who entranced him so see the hint of fangs mixed in among his otherwise normal white teeth. The woman was, after all, one of the most powerful witches he'd ever met except for her daughter.

The morning dew lingered in the cobwebs among the herbs and tomato plants. Shy with him even though she was aware of some of his deepest secrets, Raven strolled silently beside him, dwarfed by his height. Every few moments she would make a valiant effort to suppress a cough rising from her diseased lungs.

With a quick glance at the window where her mother stood - she wrapped her tiny fingers around the smallest finger on his hand. Her shyness enchanted him and her illness broke his heart. Then there were those marvelous flashes of spirit and mischievousness Raven showed such as when she told her mother the tall well-dressed man at the door was calling on her, not her healthy, blonde older sister. Jack Blackthorne never believed he was capable of falling in love. The war of good verses evil was his calling, not the soft attentions of a woman. But he had been doomed to love Raven from the moment he first saw her in the meadow at a society picnic, a pale-faced flower in a sea of blankets and skirts, looking forlorn and lonely.

"Raven," he whispered aloud.

* * * *

The various law enforcement branches of the Pike's Peak region were winding it up when the first fireball rolled through the sky. A brilliant white ball of flame wound its way through the heavens to explode in the middle of an empty cruiser sitting off to one side of the icy gravel road.

The chief had been reviewing paperwork in his truck, trying to ignore the work of his men as they painstakingly picked up pieces of people.

The flare of the first meteor to hit gave him some warning and he glanced up in time to see the other meteors streaking through the sky. Some headed towards the lights of town, some hit in the forest, setting snow-covered trees aflame. He paused for a second to digest this newest shock and hit the siren. The Baptist fundamentalists who protested gambling in the mountains were proven right. Hell had finally made its way to town. He reached for the phone again.

* * * *

Rhi writhed in her sleep as her fear, anger and newly awakened powers fueling the flame storm in the sky. She couldn't wake up. She was chained to the nightmare.

The drip of the condensation on the walls of the cellar was almost a homey sound. The thirst for the one little drop of water sliding down the wall where she could see it out of the corner of her eye was agony.

She prayed for death. God wasn't listening to her today. Death should be easier, she thought, if one was already so far along the road. Her body, mind and soul were a pile of rubble her husband's brother tore his way through looking for answers to his questions.

She faded in and out until small filthy hands held her down on the cold stone and a metal cup was pressed to her lips. Why they felt she needed held down was beyond her. Raven Blackthorne could barely lift her head, let alone rise to smite her captors. She fought to keep from swallowing, but a larger hand held her mouth shut and the hideous red liquid made a burning path down her throat. Enough to keep her alive for a little while longer. The thinned demon's blood they fed her was not strong enough to provoke the change. The noxious stuff just kept her breathing.

Her husband's brother stood nearby. The lust on his face made her want to retch but there was nothing in her stomach to bring up. How many times could he take her unwilling body before he tired of her pain? She wanted to scour herself until her skin bled because of Manius' touch but she knew she would never truly be clean.

The crystal skull sat on a pedestal in a wall niche behind her tormentors. The torchlight of the stone dungeon lit the quartz crystal to an unholy green sprinkled with a purplish red. A flare of hope sparked in the one eye she could still open. She extinguished the thought before Manius noticed.

A small dragon fluttered nearby and Raven called to her captor's creature silently. After days of forced trances, she knew what the skull was capable of and, unfortunately for the most part, so did Manius. But he kept pushing, demanding more information. She managed to hide in her heart one vital fact: the only person in the huge house capable of opening the gate was Raven herself. She doubted Manius could find anyone else with the special attributes needed to open and close the gate. She wondered for a moment who Solomon used to open and close his gate and what he did with the demons he freed to build the temple in Jerusalem. Killed them? Sent them to his mines in Africa and worked to death as they dug for treasure?

As her bloodied mouth babbled obscure bits of arcane knowledge, her mind wove the spell. As she watched, the small dragon flew unnoticed to the skull and lifted the relic in its claws. The creature fluttered up a nearby staircase. She placed a picture in the mind of the dragon and a command. As she lost consciousness, the sounds of shouting and clashing swords rang in her ears. Her husband had come.

She awoke in a white room, lying in an old iron bedstead. The large Bible she had begged for in an earlier moment of lucidity lay nearby on the night table, its cover marked by droplets of her blood. It seemed that blood was everywhere. The final coughing fits of her life were leaving their mark. Her lungs had very little left to give.

Jack knelt beside her, holding her hand in a tight grip. Pearl sat in a nearby chair, clad in a demure gray wool dress. Her neck was heavily bandaged and her arm was in a sling. The madam's ravaged face was paler than usual and her vivid eyes filled with tears.

“Raven, God forgive me.” Jack clutched her hand as he rocked back and forth. For the first time since she had met him, he looked helpless and lost. “Take the blood, darling, it’s the only way.”

“No.” Something in the darkness of her mind spoke sharply, demanding something terrible and unfair. She ran her tongue over her blistered lips. “Jack. You can’t follow me into death. You have to stay.”

He shook his head violently, almost crushing the bones of her hand in his grip. “No, if you won’t take the blood - I’m going to die with you.”

Raven hardened what was left of her heart. “I can’t take the blood, you know it. I’m too weak. But by my blood, I curse you. You can’t choose death until you make this right, Jack. This is not over.” Her command held a gossamer strand of iron. “It’s not fair but God doesn’t have to be fair, does He?”

“I love you, Raven,” he protested in a whisper.

She wanted to die so badly. “Love isn’t enough, Jack. There must be honor. Swear.” Raven’s free hand clutched at the coarse white sheets provided by the Sisters of Mercy.

He hesitated.

“Jack, I need to hear you swear.”

He stared back at her angrily. “How can you ask this?”

“Swear, Jack ...”

He dropped her hand and turned away. “I swear.” Then Jack Blackthorne got up and stalked out of the room, past a shocked Pearl and away from his wife.

Raven heard him swear and groped about on the sheet, searching for his hand. She needed him to understand. She found Pearl’s slim, smooth hand instead and held on, trying to speak.

“He’s gone, Raven,” the madam told her. “But he loves you ...”

Pearl’s voice was getting further away.

Then Raven passed from her body, upward, the tendrils of her sorrow clinging to her spirit like cobwebs of light.

* * * *

As Rhi slept, tears ran down her face. Outside, the skies opened, pouring more snow onto the little mountain town, following the meteor shower so closely that people who witnessed it later said that the snow was on fire.

Rhi finally awoke with a start as two large, scarred hands shook her silly. Caught in the nightmare, she gasped for air – a few rusty squawks came out of her throat.

Slapping at Blackthorne’s hands, she scuttled to the other end of the bed where Ellie Mae stood at attention. The hair on the dog’s neck was on end but she hadn’t interfered.

Rhi clung to the dog’s huge neck, finally getting enough air in her lungs to sob. The clean smell of linen and warm hound filled her head, replacing the sulfur stench of the dream. But the metallic taste of her own blood lingered in her mouth. She couldn’t bear the thought of the man who sat by her bed staring up at her, his face grim.

Stumbling out of bed, she padded down to the kitchen, ignoring Blackthorne.

The dog observed Rhi’s departure guardedly from her perch atop several snowy white pillows, the folds of Ellie Mae’s face more wrinkled than usual.

Water would wash away the taste of blood. Rhi’s hands shook as she clutched the

glass and opened the tap. Blackthorne appeared beside her to reach for the glass as his other bare arm steadied her body. She purposefully dropped the glass and lunged at him.

A satisfying yelp escaped Blackthorne as her hands tore at his face. He struggled with her as she spit and snarled at him, catching her before she could do too much damage. He carried her, struggling, to the opposite counter, away from the pile of glass.

Ellie Mae pounded down the steps of the loft to stand in the entry to the kitchen. The dog's body tensed, the fur on her neck standing on end. A low growl issued from her throat but she didn't attack Blackthorne. Instead she gave the couple a look, walked into the living room and turned around three times to lie facing the other direction.

"Damn it, Rhi ... stop it! God's ears, what the Hell is wrong with you!" Blackthorne shouted, holding her arms against her sides as she tried to kick her way free.

"I hate your brother for raping me - I hate your brothers for letting him live and I hate you for bringing me into this again, you bastard!" She kept fighting, almost dislocating an arm trying to pry free.

His face whitened. "You don't think I've spent the last hundred years thinking about what he did to you?"

"If you hadn't broken your oath, none of this would have happened! Tell me, did you tell innocent little Raven what you were? Did you tell her, *me*, whatever, what you were? God, men are all alike even hundreds of years apart!"

Panting, she finally stopped her struggle. Blackthorne let her go and backed off with his hands in the air, palms towards her. Non-threatening? *This* guy was trying to appear non-threatening?

"Get out," she hissed.

"No."

"Get out or I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"I'll be with you when the skull surfaces, Rhi, whether you like it or not. Unlike you, I'm tired of this world and am ready to seek another."

She pulled a hand back to strike. He caught the arm and wrenched it behind her back, forcing her against him.

Her soul blazed as she stared up at the familiar lines of his face. He said nothing but the look of fury he gave her made her think suddenly that this was a good time to consider running.

Blackthorne lowered his mouth to hers as she struggled in his arms. "A hundred years of needing you, Rhi." Then he kissed her and she felt like he was inhaling her into himself. Half hating herself, she closed her bruised lips against him. He paused and pushed her away. "Go to bed Rhi. You'll have a long day tomorrow, whether you want to or not."

"We'll both have a busy day, Blackthorne," she replied, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand as he stalked away to clean up the mess. "The skull is close. I dreamed of it and I don't think it will stay hidden long. The skull is calling me - I can hear it. And the damned thing wouldn't know my soul if not for you."

The skull was closer than he could ever imagine, trapped in a Bible Rhi bought in a junk store on a whim two days before. She banished the thought before he could pick up on it. The thing might as well be in Timbuktu since she had no idea how to release it. And she had no reason to trust *either* of the Blackthorne brothers.

She stood in the kitchen staring at the wall for ten minutes as she sipped a new

glass of water. Finally, she felt her emotions become cool to the touch, the fire in her belly sparked by his kiss burning down to a pile of embers. She'd go to bed, go to sleep, wake up and this would be some kind of nightmare brought on by too many books full of tales from the 1800s.

He didn't say a word as she crept past where he stood at the living room window, staring out at the night. Blackthorne had taken his sweater off and wore only jeans. His chest glistened in the dim light of the room. Rhi could smell the scent of him, clean sweat and mossy woods. A surge of heat rose again as she examined him, imagining his hands on her body.

So much for that fire going out, she thought ruefully. If it weren't for the nightmares, she could have walked away. She needed his touch to wipe the memory of the dream away. She stepped towards him and stopped.

"What the hell am I doing?" she whispered.

He turned to face her in time to see the tension lighting her frame.

"Make up your mind, Rhiannon. I can't take this, I've waited too long." His raw voice forced her a step closer.

"I just need tonight, Blackthorne. No more." She broke off when he stepped across the room in one stride and crushed her against him. Heat flowed and when he kissed her again, the world stopped. It wasn't a soft kiss ... it was hard and feral. She clutched at his arms as superheated blood raced through every vein in her body. She squeaked in terror when he pulled her head back to expose her neck.

"Rhi, damn it, I'm not going to drink your blood ... okay?" He groaned and lowered his head to gently nibble, while his hands slid over every available inch of skin the t-shirt left exposed. "I might eat you alive, though," he muttered against her breast before taking a cloth-covered nipple in his mouth.

"Uh ... I'm okay with that," she managed to gasp, lost in a wave of sensation.

"You know, there's too much fabric here." He pushed her against the wall beside the stairs, trapping her against the hard lines of his body. He ripped the shirt away like tissue in a swift movement.

"I *liked* that shirt."

"I'll get you a new one."

Rhi's heart jumped into her throat when she saw his face, inches away in the darkness, almost demonic himself, his lips parted, the tips of his demon blood teeth visible.

The irises of his eyes flamed to blue and the light spread over the pair as their lips met again.

Rhi shivered. It was so easy to forget what he was when he held her like this until he lost control. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck to bury her fingers in the softness of his hair.

Nuzzling her neck and breasts until every hair on her body stood on end, he pulled her to the floor with him to cradle her smaller body in his big arms.

Something cut loose inside of her. Outside of the cabin streaks of blue light marked the sky, flashing past the windows at increasing speeds. They lay quietly for a moment in each others arms before he raised his head to examine her face. "Rhi, do you truly want this? Here and now?"

"I *need* this, Jack." Her voice was muffled, her face hidden behind a curtain of

black hair.

“So do I, baby, so do I.”

He got to his feet, leaned down to scoop her up into his arms, and easily carried her to the loft bedroom.

In the darkness of her room, he looked frightening again, his lips slightly parted, the tips of his demon blood teeth showing over the edge. He did not bother to conceal his true self from her.

He carefully lowered her to the bed and stood back to remove what remained of his clothes.

“Not to ruin the moment but do 800 year old ‘changelings’ need to use condoms?”

She could see his teeth flash in the darkness as he gave her one of her rare smiles.

“We’re not susceptible to human disease, if that’s what you’re asking,” he replied as he pulled his jeans off and threw them in a corner.

“So if I want to have condom free sex, all I have to do is go hunt down one of you guys?”

His glowing outline stalked towards the bed, as predatory as a mountain lion and probably at least twice as dangerous. The darned-near-close-to-immortal knight lowered himself to the bed, moving close, placing his lips against her ear.

“I’m not giving you *time* to hunt one of us ‘guys’ down,” he hissed, sending a thrill of fear down her spine. His mouth traveled to her breasts, his teeth raking the throbbing skin, sending another flicker of fire through her body to pool between her legs. Then he closed his mouth over an aching nipple, drawing deeply as his battered hands slid into her hair to grab double handfuls of silk.

She ran her hands over the strangely familiar planes and contours of his body. There were many scars, some she somehow remembered and many that were obviously new. The puckered scars showed a decided lack of association with the neater skills of the present day providers of medicine.

When a big hand finally slid down to her thigh, she was afraid that she would cry out with relief. He yanked at the wet scrap of silk panties, which ripped apart as easily as her t-shirt earlier. When he ran a finger over her sex, she flinched. “You’ve waited a hundred years and now you’re gonna tease me?” she gasped, straining against him. She could feel his cock brush her thigh, thick and hard.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m *gonna* do,” he whispered and glided his finger into her wet entrance.

After a few moments of making her writhe in his hands, he slowly moved down her body, his mouth nuzzling every curve. Rhi experienced a brief moment of panic. “What are you doing?”

“Eating you alive,” he replied as he settled between her thighs.

A strangled gasp was all she could work up for a moment when he lowered his head for the first lick. She made an effort to wriggle free without thinking but an iron grip pinned her arms to the mattress.

“Blackthorne ... I don’t think I can take this.” She strained against him, shuddering with anticipation of the next onslaught of sensation.

He growled and lowered his head again, taking another taste. Then his tongue plunged deeply into the sweet heat of her sex, delving and devouring.

“Please ... Jack,” she pleaded.

He raised his head, the outline of his body glowing in the darkness. “You’ll more than beg, Rhi.” Then his mouth closed over her, suckling hard and after several minutes of exquisite agony, Rhi detonated with a hoarse scream.

Blackthorne released her arms and rolled to her side as she lay sprawled in a pile of pillows and comforters, every pore quivering. He rested his head on one arm, staring down at her.

“Been practicing since 1896?”

“Once or twice.”

She sat up and turned to shove him down against the pillows. She could make out a lazy grin on his face in the darkness as she moved to straddle his waist, scooting her backside downwards.

“What are you doing?”

“Something my past self was probably a bit too repressed to do to you.” Rising to her knees, she reached down to guide him into her body, sinking onto him slowly, impaling herself with him inch by inch.

* * * *

He groaned the moment he entered her body and her silken heat gripped his cock. He threw back his head when she moved, at first in a slow, agonizing movements, then faster, corkscrewing into smaller, quicker spirals. He rose to meet her, his hands encircling her tiny waist, her long black hair whipping his thighs.

“Rhi ...”

Control was lost. He sat up and pulled her legs around his waist as she continued to grind against him. Rhi wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him blind, wrapping her tongue around his as he pushed her down to thrust into her. He braced himself on his forearms as they both coiled together. As her climax drew her body into a bow, she hoarsely called his name as he came with a roar.

* * * *

Rhi felt like she had run a marathon or at least was on the down side of drinking a six pack of cola. They lay in each others arms, silent and still, recovering from a shocking passion. Her heart close to bursting, only one thought ran through her head. One night would never be enough.

“Rhi, I ...” He started to speak but stopped as she placed a finger on his lips.

“I am snuggling here, pretending you are some normal guy I met in a very normal way. Can we just go with that for tonight? Please?”

He tightened his arms around her. “Where did we meet?”

She made a face. “In the produce aisle at the grocery store. You were buying tomatoes and I was buying pineapple when I got a good look at your butt.”

“And we’re *already* sleeping together?”

“It’s a really good butt.”

Later, she lay wide-awake beside her sleeping knight. She placed a hand on his chest to feel his steady heartbeat and listened to the soft intake of his breath. He was alive.

She sighed and drew away from him to curl into a ball on the other side of the bed. Why couldn’t the love of her life have been some average guy her mother wouldn’t have approved of? That kind was so easy to let go in the end, she decided as she

examined the dusty dresser. Her mother would have loved this guy, though. Even if he was a few hundred years old.

* * * *

Across town, Pearl observed the raging sky from her second story bedroom window, her figure framed in the heavy velvet drapes. When the bizarre storms of light subsided and a decidedly golden glow arose in the night from the general area of Horse Thief Gulch, Pearl pulled the velvet drapes together and turned from the window with a sly smile.

The huge storm-gray cat sitting on the bed sat up at the sound of her voice.

"I'm glad *somebody* around here is getting laid, Gandalf," she told the cat. "Maybe I should give Houston a call? No, he's been traumatized enough." On cue, the phone rang. Pearl picked up the receiver and for a few minutes listened to the rants of the lawman on the other end. After a short conversation, she hung up pulled on her boots.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Melon Evans awoke with sunlight on his face, the suffocating scent of straw in his nostrils and a ginger cat the size of a small dog sitting on his chest. Startled, he jolted up to examine his surroundings. The cat leapt backwards to balance perfectly on Melon's blanket-covered legs.

He managed to make it to Pam Douglas' barn on his snowmobile a few hours earlier after taking a torturously long route through the back woods and snowy fields of the Pike's Peak region. Besides several frantic pauses to cut through barbed wire fences, he'd also stopped at a friend's house to steal a can of gas from the shed he'd pay for later. If he managed to live that long.

For the entire trip, Melon could feel the yellow and red eyes watching him from the woods. Why the monsters hadn't come for him was anyone's guess. Maybe they had gotten their fill at the bonfire feast. The sensation of being hunted by a creeping terror departed the moment his snowmobile blazed past the fencepost marking the beginning of Pam Douglas' property.

Melon had figured Pam was the most logical person to run to, mainly because she wouldn't blink an eye when he recounted his story. The woman would give sanctuary to a murderer if she knew the killing was just. Also - between Pam and Bobby Wayne Beaufort - there was enough firepower on the hill above Horse Thief Gulch to force feed peace to the Middle East with the Balkans thrown in for good measure.

"Get off of me, Captain. This is my bed," he told the huge cat, pushing the animal aside.

"You know, Melon, you could've knocked on the door and slept inside," a familiar voice noted. "I know Captain Hook and the Lost Boys are nice to snuggle with but between the cats and the hay, this barn is one big asthma attack. Houston was on the couch but you could've made a pallet for yourself on the floor."

The owner of the barn stood framed in the smaller entrance cut into the larger double doors of the barn. Pam's arms were crossed and one eyebrow rose as she examined the makeshift bed Melon created for himself in a pile of hay. "By the way, you look like crap."

"I *feel* like crap."

"Wanna talk about it?" Pam asked as she pulled the plastic garbage can lid off of the makeshift kitty food bin near the door to scoop out a few scoops.

"Not yet," he replied. He sat up and rubbed at his gummy eyes. It was early and he wasn't sure at the moment whether the happenings the night before were real or some kind of residual effect of the peyote he'd tried the week before. He needed to get his head on straight before trying to tell his story. "Did Houston leave anything to eat in your house?"

Pam busily petted the dozen cats that had emerged to wind around her legs. Melon managed a weak grin as he watched the cats swarm her. Pam Douglas was the patron saint of felines for the Cripple Creek Township. Strays were foisted off on her

constantly since the nearest no-kill shelter was down in Colorado Springs. She got the animals spayed and received discount rates on their shots from the local vet, who was thankful to not have more animals waiting in the pound to be euthanized. Pam managed to adopt a few of the cats out but Captain Hook and the Lost Boys simply traveled back to the barn when sent away to new homes. There were always plenty of warm bodies to snuggle with in the sweet smelling hay of the old barn.

“Biscuits, gravy and fruit on the table inside. You sure you don’t want to talk?”

“When you get back tonight, if it’s okay for me to hang out and wait. I’ll talk to Houston, if he’s still around. But give my regrets at the funeral today, my stomach’s kinda upset.”

The woman nodded to him and turned to leave the barn.

“Pam?” Melon stood up to brush the snow off. “You didn’t make sausage this morning, did you?”

“No, why?”

“I just don’t think I’ll be eating sausage for a while. And be careful, especially on the road when you come home tonight.”

* * * *

Pam turned to examine Melon closely. “You know, kid, I think I’ll make the time for us to talk. I’ve got the strong feeling you’ve had the same kind of night I did. Let’s go talk to Houston.”

The snow crunched underneath her boots as she made her way towards the chalet-style house that resembled like a triangular bump in the snow on the side of the hill.

“It looks like we’ve got another recruit,” she mused as she patted the holster under her jacket.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Manius is watching the town,” Blackthorne told her as he sat on the edge of Rhi’s bed, offering her a mug of coffee.

“There’s no greater treasure than a man who’ll get up to make coffee.” Rhi took the cup with a grin.

She had spent the night entangled in his arms among the down comforters and pillows of her bed. His presence excluded anything resembling sleep for Rhi other than a nap here and there throughout the night. She was going to need to sleep for a week if she got out of this alive.

“He’ll not expect us to go out,” Blackthorne told her. “It should appear that you’re doing your own thing - going to the funeral and socializing afterwards. He’s expecting me to put you in a hole somewhere, instead of you going off to eat finger sandwiches.”

He referred to the luncheon in Marie Collier’s honor at the *Saint Nicholas Hotel* scheduled for later in the afternoon. Blackthorne seemed uneasy at the mention of the hotel when Rhi told him of her plans for the day, his countenance glazing over for a moment and then shaking it off. Rhi pretended not to notice the obvious spasm of memory, telling herself that it was probably a feeling she would have many times around him.

He ran a hand over her bare leg. “I’ll meet you at the hotel; I’ve got messages to send and equipment to move here.”

Curled up on the bed dressed in a t-shirt and clutching her steaming coffee, Rhi wondered if she should tell her protector he assumed an awful lot with the presumption that he was staying in her home.

Who was she kidding? A guardian, and a hot one at that, was a blessing Pam Douglas would beat Rhi soundly for turning down in any form.

“I think Pam’s hoping for Rocky Mountain Oysters today. They’re her favorite.” She referred to the doubtful delicacy of battered and deep fried cattle gonads eaten only by those hardy souls in the mountains who possessed a stomach like a ranch hand.

“You’ve got to admire a woman who enjoys her balls.” He wiggled his dark eyebrows. “Do you enjoy sampling them as well?”

“Cocky.”

Blackthorne shook his head and sprawled onto the bed. “You were a bit of a spitfire a hundred years ago, but underneath you were still a prim Victorian girl. A hundred years can do strange things to the female psyche.”

His words reminded her of what she might face in the coming hours. “I have no idea what to do with the skull once I get my hands on it ... I don’t know *how* to destroy the gate. Let alone when.”

“The ‘when’ is the day after tomorrow, the 10,000-year anniversary of the building of this particular gate, according to the oracle. And the skull will turn up like a bad penny, today or tomorrow and hit one of us in the head. The skull will be here on

time.”

It's already here, she thought, instinctively shielding her thoughts from him. Hey! I shielded my thoughts – now if I could remember how to shoot lightning bolts out of my hands, we'd be cooking with fire. Can I shoot lightning bolts out of my hands?

“Great,” she said aloud in a disgusted tone. “A deadline. Do you realize the day after tomorrow is the opening day of Winterfest? This town'll be full of people.” Rhi rolled her eyes. “And my head doesn't need anything else hitting it, thank you. The imaginary hammer whacking away inside my noggin this morning is more than enough. By the way, don't you need to - *snack* this morning? Do you need a cup of my aura?”

“The after-effects of a feeding are like having the flu - I won't drain you. I'll find a 'snack' later this morning.”

She could not hide the flash of revulsion on her face.

He grimaced and glanced away for a moment. “Are we so terrible? We try to give back to those we drain - taking away bad memories and pains or leaving behind a mental suggestion that sticks.”

“A suggestion? Like *go on a diet, porker?*”

He turned back to her and grinned. “Yes - I'm better than diet pills any day. Pearl likes to drain unhappily married women and tell them to leave the bastards. And since she thinks all men are bastards, the divorce rate goes through the roof everywhere she goes. She tells them to turn their lives around before it's too late, go back to school or some such nonsense.”

“I have quite a bit of empathy with Pearl some days,” Rhi replied. Her voice got smaller. “Does it hurt – being, uh, fed on?”

“No – it's actually a bit pleasurable. Even when being bitten by one like my brother, who has embraced the demon blood wholly, the glamour of the one who feeds makes it feel like ...” he paused, obviously remembering Rhi had been the victim in another life of such a bloodletting.

She sat up. “Like sex? So - how often has Pearl gotten to *drain* you in the last 100 years?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You're jealous.”

“Don't be ridiculous. It would be difficult to be monogamous with a dead woman. And I get the feeling words like *monogamous* and *Pearl* don't belong in the same sentence.”

“Now that sounds catty.” He yelped in mock terror when she pulled him down and straddled his chest to crouch threateningly over him. “She only drained me once, I swear. To go through the Change. She knew you back then, too. I think she lives by some kind of weird code.”

Rhi narrowed her eyes. “Weird is the operative word.” She moved to roll off but he held her fast. “Jack, I have to go to a funeral today. It isn't polite to be all glowy from rambunctious sex when paying one's final respects.”

“That's okay - Pam wanted to see someone glow, didn't she?”

* * * *

Pam's reaction to her appearance was typical when Rhi went to pick up her friend.

“My God! That must have been some kind of 'long lost love' sex! You look awful. I've seen better gin hangovers.”

Rhi wearily opened the door of the truck and almost slid to the ground. She clutched the door to steady herself. "Gee, Pam, don't hold back. Tell me what you really think."

"You're white as a ghost and those circles under your eyes could be used as a stockcar track. As wasted as a ... vampire ... eek." Pam began her onslaught at the usual volume but ended with a squeak when the realization of what might be going on with her friend hit her. She cursed, digging in the large purple purse hanging off her bony shoulder.

"The bastard bit you! I'll cut his balls off, immortal or not - how fun can immortality be with no nuts? Crap, where's my gun?"

"Pam, he didn't bite me. His kind doesn't bite, remember? The long lost love sex and margaritas did me in. Plus, there were a few nightmares thrown in for good measure." Rhi motioned for her friend to get into the vehicle. "I feel like something scraped up by a snowplow and my head hurts. Thus, the scarf and sunglasses. Hope I look European instead of hung over. Where's Houston?"

Pam went to the passenger side of the blue vehicle and opened the door. "He left here with Melon in tow this morning after a pow-wow on possible weapons of mass destruction."

Rhi looked at her friend curiously.

Pam sighed. "I found Melon in my barn this morning, hiding in the hay with the cats. Those critters that came at us in the bar last night went partying in the woods after they were done with us. I didn't ask too much. I don't think Melon was ready or able to talk about it. But I think whatever happened was bad. Real bad. And how your boyfriend got Houston's cell number, I don't know. Aren't these guys supposed to be psychic or something? What are people going to think? Immortals calling up on the phone - it's unnatural!"

"Weapons might come in handy. I feel my spider senses tingling this morning."

Pam gaped at her pale friend. "Tingling? That must have been some kind of whoopee you made last night, girlfriend. Wait, what *about* whoopee? Screw getting bitten, you had testosterone man at your house last night. Spill!"

"Pam. I don't want to speak out of turn but," Rhi paused for dramatic effect. "It was romance novel sex."

"Romance novel sex! With his 'thews of steel' and granite abs! I hate you."

Rhi started the truck and turned down the drive. "What the hell is a 'thew'?"

"I can't believe you got to touch that butt."

"That butt is over 500 years old," she replied as she scanned the woods for the inevitable shadows.

"All I can say is ... like a fine wine, it's gotten better with age." Pam gave her friend a lecherous grin.

Rhi sighed. It was going to be a long day.

* * * *

The Mount Pisgah graveyard was a desolate place, in spite having so many permanent residents. Gravestones of the gold rush dead littered the hillside where Rhi, Pam, and the rest of Marie's funeral procession stood in silent contemplation. Only a few garish mausoleums and skeletal trees broke the monotony of that side of the cemetery.

Looks like everywhere else in this town, Rhi noted. *Frozen.* She tucked her

gloved but still freezing hands into her pockets, listening to the graveside service. Then she felt a jolt at the sight of a solitary figure standing in another section of the graveyard, swathed in an archaic cloak and ebony veils. She caught Pam's eye and lifted an eyebrow. "If we wanted to get noticed today, the veiled woman in the graveyard should do the trick. Funny, I don't think her type to wears many clothes - if you get my drift."

Pam turned. "Yep. And she's standing beside her own tombstone - that's a bit creepy. She's probably the one who kept flowers on the grave for a hundred years."

The standing order local florists had to keep the grave adorned with fresh displays of red silk roses was well known. The arrangement had been taken care of by several different businesses since the madam's death over a hundred years before. The baffling part was that the order was anonymous and seemingly eternal. Payments were made by one of the oldest and most prestigious banks in Denver.

The madam stood beside her equally famous heart-shaped marble headstone. The wind lifted her black veils into octopus-like tendrils to float in the sky behind her. Two perfect silk strands of auburn hair escaped to mingle with the veils. Several items were scattered over the grave: a huge arrangement of red roses, an unopened bottle of champagne, two handmade dolls made up to resemble Pearl in her heyday, and a few letters were stuck in the wooden box provided by the city for missives written in her honor. Fans still visited Pearl and left mementoes, even though she had been presumed dead for a more than a hundred years from an overdose of laudanum at thirty-three.

Rhi, in her headscarf and sunglasses, realized that she probably looked like a child wrapped in her mother's sheets on Halloween compared to Pearl. She wondered how the woman had figured out how to position herself and loosen her scarves for the mystical windblown effect. *Witch*.

"I don't know if she has done it or not, but I can see a man being obsessed enough with her to send flowers forever." Then a horrific idea hit Rhi and she focused on some of the smaller, untended headstones and scattered crypts surrounding the grave of Pearl De Vere. "Dear God, do you realize who else could be buried here - in *this* cemetery?"

The taller woman grimaced and glanced at Rhi suspiciously. Her jaw hung loose for a moment and then firmed up with typical stubbornness. "Rhi - don't ask Pearl where you're buried. You've got enough to freak yourself out with? From the few joyous moments I've shared with her, she'd probably take a perverse delight in showing you how much smaller your tombstone is than hers. Let it go."

Rhi nodded to acknowledge the wisdom of her friend's words. The women turned to follow the rest of the funeral procession towards the parked cars, leaving the hillside and its newest resident in her ebony coffin, waiting for the handlers to add her to the crowded ranks of the dead. Rhi's SUV was parked on the side of a berm near the gravel road. The other mourners reached their cars and were filing out beneath the wrought iron cemetery gate.

While they descended, the cloaked figure of Pearl approached as they descended. The madam's strides were much longer than Rhi would have expected out of such a refined figure.

Pearl pulled back her veil with a flourish to reveal her delicate features.

"I'm here to baby-sit you two and stroll the paths of the Mt Pisgah Cemetery to admire the scenery, wildlife and my own damned tombstone. Any dragons yet?"

Pam examined the woman's ensemble, revealed by the dramatic unveiling. "Not

yet but you're the first in line to fight the darned thing in *that* getup. Hemingway couldn't have dressed you for battle any better. You're lucky you don't wear a sword like Jack does, though, it would ruin the line of your outfit."

Pearl snorted in an unladylike manner. "Do you really think a long jacket hides a five foot broad sword? The only thing the jacket does is make it easier to hide from the general public a big guy wearing several feet of steel strutting down the street. And please don't give Hemingway any credit in the fashion sense. He couldn't accessorize a trip to the bathroom." She smiled, staring past them at some fond memory. After a moment, she straightened and winked at Rhi. Ignoring the cars of the other mourners, Pearl reached behind her neck and pulled out a short, jeweled sword from thin air. There was a decidedly Oriental flavor to the blade's decorations.

"He gave me this as a gift for my wall. I found a much better use for it than as a piece of bric-a-brac."

It was Rhi's turn to snort as she examined the blade with interest. The little sword was razor sharp and appeared to be well-used. "God, who *haven't* you slept with in the past 100 years?" She took the grips of the blade Pearl offered and lifted it in her right hand, feeling the surprising weight of the museum quality artifact. "Nice. I would've figured you for a gunfighter-type revolver. Or maybe one of those prissy little Derringers with the pearl grips. Are demons easier to kill with a sword?"

"Oh, the revolver is at home on my nightstand. It *did* ruin the line of my suit." The madam took the short, curved sword back and with the effortless ease of long practice, slid the length of steel into a scabbard hidden by the curtain of her hair.

Now that Rhi knew that it was there, she was amazed that she hadn't noticed the glittering hilt at the back of the other woman's neck.

"Demons are hard to kill with anything - a gun will work after about thirty shots unless it is specially prepared." Pearl did not mention how to prepare for shooting a demon. "A good slice severing the head from the neck is best, as long as the critter takes a form where it's easy to figure out where the head is."

Rhi shuddered as she examined the small gold insignia on the breast pocket of the black fatigues Pearl wore under her mink trimmed cloak. "Designers make fatigues?"

"Of course. A black outfit for every occasion, darling. Can we go to the *Saint Nicholas* now? I need a cocktail - I drank aura from a construction worker this morning and I feel polluted. I did talk him into going back to college for his doctorate, though."

The other two women had no adequate answer for her, so they headed down the hill to their vehicle.

"There's a picture I didn't need this morning," Rhi whispered to Pam.

"Stay away from my neck, Mistress of the Dark," Pam replied a bit shakily.

"Did you drive here?" She asked Pearl, ignoring Pam's jibe.

With a toss of her head, Pearl loosened another scarf and several more gossamer strands of hair escaped. "No, I flew. But I'll ride with you girls to the hotel, if you don't mind. The wind is mussing my hair."

"It's broad daylight! Didn't anyone see you?"

"Do you realize how few people look up anymore? These people live with one of the most beautiful views of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range available and they're too busy counting how many nickels they've gotten out of the poker machine at the bar to notice."

While the vehicle rattled along, Pam turned to face the creature lounging in the backseat, her sword at her side. Pearl sat at ease on the worn bench seat, not bothering with a seat belt.

"Would you like us to drive you past the 'Old Homestead' for old time's sake?" asked Pam, referring to Pearl's original brothel from which the madam ran her girls in the days of yore. The large building still stood on Myers Avenue - a sturdy old whitewashed storefront festooned with architectural garland and filled with lavish turn of the century European furnishings. The present owners had converted it into a museum.

"Heck, no! I'd get irritated about them not selling me back my Edison phonograph. It was the first thing I bought when I decorated the place. It's bad enough I'm going to the Saint Nicholas. I've avoided the place for decades."

"Why?" Rhi queried.

"The Sisters of Mercy who ran the hospital when the building was the St. Nicholas hospital knew me well. I lost count of the trips there with my clients and girls. Plus, I let my 'dead' body be carted there for pretend embalming." Pearl glanced at Rhi's pale profile. "Does the Saint Nicholas bother *you*, Rhi? Is that why you are so pasty? You need a bronzer. Rough night?"

"What do *you* think? And why would the Saint Nicholas bother me?"

The other woman shook her head knowingly and Pam's eyes widened. "She thinks it would bother you to, Rhi - because you died there. Didn't she?" she asked Pearl.

The madam's expression turned grim. "The place worked up a pretty good body count in those days. You might want keep that in mind, Rhi. This isn't a game of chance."

"I have to disagree. This seems to be one big craps game and I'm the dice," Rhi pointed out, dismissing Pearl's words as they rounded the drive towards the pitched roof of the Victorian hospital turned hotel. "Warning me off is rather stupid, don't you think? After all it's not like I've got any choice in the matter."

She swallowed the urge to stare back at the cemetery behind them and wonder where her past self lay in the ground, cold and rotted under a lichen covered gravestone.

Should she order another spot for herself? Could she get a cut rate since a part of her being was already parked there? Rhi shook her head to dispel this train of thought and swore she would *never* ask where Raven's remains lay.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The whitewashed 2-story front porch of the hotel appeared at the end of the road, framed like a postcard in the pines. A crowd had gathered, waiting to get into the post funeral festivities.

Rhi grimaced. Walking through a crowd was not something she would be comfortable with at the moment.

Pam grinned at her in sympathy in the rearview mirror.

“Hey, we saw a dragon and a hot dude fly last night. Plus, you got laid. The day could be worse.”

Rhi parked and climbed out as Pearl chirped, “She got laid? Well, maybe Jack will be in a better mood now, thank God. Saving the world with a crab-ass is no fun at all. I’ll bet he hasn’t dated since the eighties.”

Rhi looked back at her in surprise.

“What? Do you honestly think a guy like Jack Blackthorne has been celibate for 100 years? But I must admit that the women he’s been involved with over the years have all had one thing in common: dark hair, green eyes and a smart mouth.” Pearl rewrapped her head in her black silk scarves, her gaze coolly observing Rhi’s reaction.

Rhi shrugged, pretending that she was unaffected by the statement. She wasn’t surprised to hear Jack Blackthorne lived his life while she floated around in the afterlife, but that didn’t mean she wanted to hear about it. “That would be ridiculous, expecting a man to be true to a dead woman. No love is that strong.”

“No love except maybe a true one,” Pearl replied with a knowing look.

“True love doesn’t exist, Pearl,” Rhi told her. “Of all of the people I’ve met in my life, I’d figure you would know that.”

“For a girl who has faced demons, vampires, changelings, and dragons – you’re awfully sure of what does and doesn’t exist.” Pearl replaced the expensive sunglasses over her unearthly gaze as she descended from the truck..

Rhi chose not to answer, instead concentrating on the graceful building ahead.

“I just realized something. I thought you couldn’t go out in the daylight,” Pam said.

“I can tolerate the sun, but I don’t like it. I never have. It ages the skin.”

Rhi snickered. She was feeling nasty towards Pearl after finding out for certain her soul mate hadn’t pined after her, celibately, for over a hundred years. “What? You’re 140 years old and worried about sun damage?”

“One hundred and twenty nine,” Pearl replied as she posed for effect near the front of the truck. She tossed a length of scarf over her shoulder and sashayed towards the hotel, leaving the other two women to trail in her wake.

“If I’d known we were escorting the queen, I’d have worn more bling,” Pam muttered, trudging through the slush of the parking lot. “This high drama is getting on my nerves.”

During this exchange, a shadow fell over them and Blackthorne was there, looking every bit the hero. He wore a black leather duster, designed for horseback riding in rough weather and useful to immortal knights who needed to carry a sword in public. Rhi suddenly felt better about Blackthorne's lack of celibacy in her absence.

Houston stood nearby, attired in his best black cowboy hat, a barn jacket and jeans starched so heavily that they could have stood up on their own without the help of the man's spindly legs. He removed his hat and ducked his head at Pearl.

"Ma'am."

Pearl took his arm. "Honestly, cowboy, if you don't stop calling me ma'am, I'm going to feel compelled to suck your blood and I don't do that kind of thing. It makes me feel so ..."

"Old?" Pam supplied helpfully.

"Shut up." Pearl shot back at her as she pulled the hapless man along behind her.

Rhi craned her head up to meet Blackthorne's gaze. He winked and leaned down to cover her mouth with his in a lingering kiss telling everyone within range exactly who belonged with whom.

She grinned and took his hand. "Would Pearl really kill Houston?"

"Only if he stops worshipping her."

Pam fell into step with the pair. "I think they're cute."

"Cute like a piranha eyeballing a catfish," Rhi muttered.

"So does that make him a piranha?" Pam jerked her head towards Blackthorne.

"If he bites me, I'll just drive a stake through his heart."

"Do you two mind?"

They had entered the double doors of the hotel, where Batty Betty, wearing several tie-dye scarves over her coat, stood digging in her purse.

"Gonna kill your husband, girlie?" Betty cackled. "Do it! I killed mine years ago, best thing I ever did for myself." The old lady teetered down the steps towards the parking lot. Her jewelry rattled with each wobbly stride.

Rhi raised a questioning eyebrow. "Is everyone in this town mental? Is this what the prolonged exposure to high altitude does to your brain pan?"

"Oh, that's Betty. She always says that."

"Has Chief Boyd considered checking into her story?"

Pam shrugged. "Naw ... Earl blew himself up trying to get rid of some big stumps on his property with dynamite. Even if she did it – well, Earl *was* kind of a jerk. Can we go make small talk with Marie's family and raid the food table now? Her dad's a rancher and I hear there's fresh meat."

Blackthorne narrowed his eyes. "By the way, I'm hard to kill."

"Don't worry. If I decide to off you, you won't see the stake coming. Besides, we aren't married in *this* life. We're just fooling around." Rhi took his hand. "Now, did someone say fresh meat?"

Inside the hotel, Pearl examined the cheerful sounding gathering in the bar and wrinkled her nose. "Can they not bury *anyone* in this town without throwing a party? Oh, look! Martinis!" Off she went after the waiter.

Pam and Houston excused themselves to express their sympathy to Marie's family, who gathered near the fireplace with their plates and glasses and grief. Rhi stayed in the double doorway turning about to examine the hotel like never before.

Blackthorne hovered nearby, examining the crowd. Satisfied, he turned to watch as she examined every bit of plaster and molding.

The Saint Nicholas Hotel never bothered Rhi – she'd stayed in the establishment during her first days in Cripple Creek while she searched for a rental. But as she stood in the hallway in the afternoon with the comforting rays of the sun shining through the aged glass of the single paned windows, a shiver ran up her spine.

"Are you all right?" Blackthorne took her hand, and she followed him blindly to the crowded bar. The bar patrons parted like the Red Sea for the couple, who took possession of two strangely empty barstools.

"My old friend Jack," a high-pitched, whiny voice caught Rhi's attention. Manius Black's weasel assistant swiveled to face them. He was dressed in pressed khakis, a button down and cashmere sweater but still conveyed a sense of trashiness in the insolent stare he fixed on her body. "Why, I haven't seen you since that night a couple of years ago when you bought me drinks here at this very bar. Remember?"

Blackthorne stared at the interloper as Pam forced her way through the crowd to join the group. A muscle twitched in his cheek and he ground Rhi's fingers in his grip.

"What do you want?" Rhi demanded once she found her breath. "Since I am sure your master is responsible for this shindig in the first place, I think it's wildly inappropriate for you to be here, don't you?"

Troy's lips stretched hideously over his teeth, which were suddenly as sharp and as vicious as a rodent's. "My master? Oh no, sweetie. I think you need to talk to *your* master about the responsibility here. After all, *he's* the one who talked me into digging up the grave. I drank enough vodka to kill Stalin that night and I needed cash, bad. So why not dig up an old grave and steal the dead guy's jewels, your buddy here suggested. He told us where to find just the right one. After all, it's not like the body will sit up in the coffin and ask what you're doing." Horror flashed across the man's face before the rodent took over again. "I lost the best lay I ever had that night. After all, Cassie was yummy. And I lost my soul. Your boyfriend let a monster loose, not me."

His voice lowered to a hiss as Rhi's head began to pound. *No, no, no, no....*

"I've seen things and done things that'll damn me forever, but *who* told me not to take out the stake in Manius' heart, knowing that is the first thing a punk like me would do? Who let *him* out - *who* killed Marie? I went to school with her, you know. A few years ago, I could have cried over her. Now I wonder why all of her meat was wasted to make a public statement - the master's pets would have enjoyed chewing that piece of ass, literally."

Rhi whirled on Blackthorne as Pam, yanked Troy out of his seat and threw him on the floor. She placed a booted foot on his neck.

"You wouldn't tell stories, would you, Troy? God, I didn't even recognize you in the Elk the other night," Pam snarled. "It must be all the Dippity Doo in your hair." Ignoring the crowd, she kicked Troy in the stomach. The crunch of her boot connecting with his ribs was audible, telling observers that she'd probably cracked a few ribs as well as damaged his digestive system. Troy curled up into a ball, moaning and then began a weak effort to crawl away. Watching his face, Pam ground one heel into his calf muscle for a moment before allowing him to slip into the crowd.

Pearl, martini in hand, and Houston joined the crowd, who chattered among themselves, waiting for the next part of the entertainment.

Rhi found her voice. "You let him out."

Blackthorne's face was cold. "Yes."

"And people are dead because you let him out."

"Yes."

She pushed herself up from her barstool. "I'm trying to think of a nice way to tell you to go to Hell, Blackthorne, but I have nothing. So go to Hell, Blackthorne."

"I guess you aren't calling me 'Jack' anymore, huh?"

"No." For the first time in a long time, Rhi called up the dreadful, plastic expression she had worn so often during her marriage. Her nails bit into her palm.

Without another word, Blackthorne turned to thread his way through the crowd. The bar crowd returned to socializing amongst themselves, the weird subject matter of the fight forgotten thanks to Pearl, who performed a mysterious pass with her hand and muttered a few words. None of the general public would remember the argument, Rhi was sure.

Pearl leaned on the worn edge of the bar, drained her glass and nibbled on the olive. "Turning your back on him, Rhi?"

Houston stood nearby, his weathered features running through a variety of emotions.

Rhi slid back into her seat and grabbed the bartender by the hand. "A shot of tequila."

She gulped down the shot the bartender sat in front of her before speaking. She didn't meet Pearl's gaze.

"Did you know?"

The beautiful face of the woman didn't twitch. "No. I was aware that Manius was loose. And these days there are so many monsters loose. I try to focus on the ones nearest to me. There's too much of a past with me and Manius. Those bastards wouldn't let me kill him until they were ready."

"He let him out," Rhi repeated hoarsely. "*They* let him out. That's why Blackthorne was running all over the world cleaning up his brother's messes. He let him out. After what he did to her ... to me ..."

"I wonder how many women he's killed since he got loose, Pearl. Do you care?" Pam towered above Pearl. "Or are all of those years piling up making you numb to the man who killed your sisters?"

Houston edged closer, his hand in his jacket.

Pam's harsh question lit a low flame in the other woman's face.

"Of course I want him dead," snapped Pearl. "I want him to suffer and then burn in Hell. But I didn't know they let him out on purpose. I'm sure there was some kind of bullshit reason why it was done, Rhi. Nothing's black and white or even lavender in this battle. And you're naïve if you believe otherwise."

"I believe standing idle while a vicious bastard like Manius Black runs loose for a few years until time for the Brotherhood to put him to good use – that's a dark thing, Pearl. I guess I *am* a naïve little girl. And you're one of *them*." Rhi hefted the shot glass in her hand to test its weight and eyed Pearl speculatively. Houston hovered behind the madam. *Like I could do anything to the witch, Houston.*

"I'm a woman first," replied Pearl, one eye on the glass. "I'll always be a woman first. That's why they didn't tell me."

The glow of happiness from the night before had faded from Rhi's face faster than a retiree could drop twenty dollars in a dollar slot. Pale and choking back the tide of tears threatening to break free, she grimaced.

"At least the sex was good." She tossed a couple of bills on the bar. "I'm going to go to work. And then I'm going home and packing. I'm dropping out of your game. Make it one big crapshoot. Key West is nice this time of the year."

Pam nodded. "I've always believed working on one's tan is a high priority. We can escort you down the pass in the morning. Hightail it outta here from out on the prairie ... you'll already be halfway to Kansas. Nothing's going to happen without you here to make it happen."

"You can't run from fate, ladies. It will come back on you hard if you run. If you face things head on, at least you can prepare" Pearl still sounded annoyingly calm. But her delicate eyebrows were knitted together and a fine line appeared between her brows.

"You've got a wrinkle between your eyes, Pearl. You ought to get that thing Botoxed." Rhi moved to stand nose to nose with the vampire woman, blatantly invading her space. "Be careful or you might start looking your age."

Houston pushed between the two women and spoke into the hostile silence. "You can't be serious about going to work tonight, Rhi. Let's get you out of here."

"I don't want to drive down Ute Pass in the dark and I don't want to vary from my routine, Houston. I'd also like to say goodbye to Katie. We'll go in the morning and the town will be safe." Rhi rose from her stool. "Manius can wait another hundred years for all I care."

Pearl grabbed her arm. "You don't get it, do you? Your doom *will* find you. You're the one who'll be the first to finally destroy one of the gates but it must be on a certain date and a certain time. The ten thousand-year anniversary of the gate's existence. The day after tomorrow, the opening day of Winterfest. The gate can't be destroyed every day. When the final battle comes, one less doorway for the bad guys to come through is a thing worth dying for."

"You volunteered, Pearl. The people in this town who have died didn't," Rhi replied. Her tears were dangerously near to the surface.

"All of this would have happened whether the Brotherhood let him out or not, Rhi. They just wanted more control over the *when*, I'm sure."

Rhi shook off the gloved hand and headed for the door, her friends in tow except for Pearl, who took Rhi's seat at the bar to nurse the fresh martini the bartender automatically handed to her.

"You, Blackthorne and all of your buddies stay the hell away from me, Pearl," Rhi stated, turning back for one more salvo. "I might decide to see if staking one of you works as well at holding you in place as it did Manius."

"You know where to find me when that doom of yours comes down to bite you in the ass," replied Pearl, not glancing away from the reality television show playing on a nearby screen. "But expect your knight, lady. I'd hazard a guess he might not come running when you call."

"That's just peachy."

Houston nodded apologetically at the madam one last time before passing through the arched entrance behind Rhi and Pam.

Outside, Houston escorted Rhi and Pam to the truck. "I'll come into town to

drive home behind you, Rhi. We'll head down to Pam's mom's place at first light. The faster you're out of town, if that's what you want, the better."

"Am I doing the right thing, Houston?" Rhi asked as Pam dug through her purse for her gun.

He tipped his hat back on his head and squinted at the darkening sky. "Yes. Since we don't know who's on what side or what is whose agenda - I'll feel a lot better with you a long way from the gate, sweetheart. But look on the bright side."

Pam, who had curled her long legs into the passenger side of the vehicle, grimaced. "There's a bright side to this?"

"At least Rhi doesn't already have the skull. That might complicate matters," Houston stated as he turned to trudge through the churned snow towards his own vehicle.

"I agree there," Pam told him fervently.

Silent, Rhi climbed behind the steering column and closed and locked the doors.

"You might have someone come after you now but if you have the skull ..."
Pam's words trailed off when she noticed the expression on her friend's face. "Crap."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Of course I’ve got the skull. The other me seems to have stored it in a nice safe place for myself several decades ago and the thing slithered back just the other day. I’ve had it since you came to breakfast and somebody is in here,” Rhi rapped her knuckles on her forehead, “telling me how to set the thing loose.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re giving yourself instructions from the 1800’s?” The other wiped a speck of non-existent dust from the barrel of her gun.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay as far away from me as you can?” Rhi’s heart and head ached. She was losing everyone in one fell swoop. Blackthorne, found, was lost to her and she would have to leave her new home and friends, including Ellie Mae. She could live with Pam or Bobby Wayne. It would break both of their hearts but Rhi can’t be on the run with a 110-pound bloodhound. The big dog might be a bit conspicuous.

“Tomorrow you’ll be gone, Rhi. I can stay the course until I see this truck headed across Kansas tomorrow.” The sadness in Pam’s face showed for a moment before she sat up to stare out the windshield. “Well, I think I would be two sandwiches short of a picnic at this point if I were in your shoes. Is it somewhere safe?”

“Safest place I could think of,” Rhi replied, weakly grinning at the memory of her hiding place. She slid the vehicle out of the icy parking lot, almost flattening an aspen tree on the way out onto the road.

“I’ll miss your cooking. But I’ll not miss your greenhorn driving skills, girlfriend,” quipped Pam as she was slung around the truck.

Further down the road, Rhi’s already frayed nerves broke a few more strands when she spotted pale figures in the twilight darting through the trees with the speed of small sleek predators. They easily kept up with the speeding SUV. Trust her to dump her protector and then get eaten by the competition immediately afterwards. “It seems like we’ve got admirers this evening, Pam.”

Pam tried to swipe green eye shadow across her lids with the help of the passenger side mirror. She looked over at the darting forms. “Do you think Manius will make any kind of move on you unless he *knows* you have the skull? He’s going to sit up there in his castle, eat pate’ and sip on something or someone expensive. He’s waiting for you to pull the thing out of wherever you stuck it a hundred years ago. Can’t you just forget about it?”

“I don’t think so. The skull has been calling and I think if I don’t answer - it might start calling someone else. And someone else might not be as nice as me. I’m screwed.” Another figure slid through the snow off to the left. Rhi’s fear and heartbreak jelled into fury. She squelched the compulsion to go four wheeling through the snow and squish the lot of them underneath her snow tires. No engineer in the Chevy factory planned for the damage demon blood would do to the truck’s paint.

“Good enough for me. Not to sound mean and it’s not that I won’t miss you, but take the thing as far away as you can, okay?” Pam let out a squeal. “Ooo! There’s big

one in the road! Hit it, Rhi! Hit it!”

A leering figure erupted from the earth in the center of the road. A figure from a hundred legends rose into the air, naked and winged with six-inch long horns on its bare head. The horns dripped nasty looking goo onto the ground where it sizzled in the snow and mud, allowing steam to escape into the air. The thing waggled a forked tongue through dirty, razor-sharp teeth at the oncoming vehicle. Rhi hit the gas and wondered if car wax was all it was advertised to be. Whump! The demon hit the grille, cracking the metal. Blue sparks spurted from the truck, and the body of the vehicle glowed with electric blue light. The big tires passed over the body of the demon, making the truck bounce wildly. Blue sparks spewed from the undercarriage and up the hood and side doors.

“Gosh, do you think someone put a hoodoo on my truck?” Rhi asked, beginning to enjoy herself.

“Duh. You think they did it to my rattletrap too? Let’s plow!” Pam replied, her devil-may-care persona returned to the fore. She glanced back. “Check it out. You lit up that one’s world.”

In the rearview mirror, Rhi could see the demon they plowed over still moved. It rose into the air to raggedly flutter in their wake. One of its wings wasn’t working properly because it was broken and missing chunks of flesh. A little trail of smoke issued from the creature’s body.

“Come on! Do we have time to back up over it?” Pam spread crimson lipstick onto her wide mouth.

“No, we’ll get written up for being late and I have a perfect record. Maybe we can run through here on the way home.” She would worry later about whether she had gotten a bit bloodthirsty. For now, there was one less demon in the world. “Did we check in the storage area before we jumped in the truck?”

Pam wiggled her eyebrows. “Nope. Do you always check in the darkness back there, where axe wielding killers hide ...” Her tone faltered and both women stared at each other.

Rhi slammed on the brakes as Pam hurtled over the seat, gun in hand. Nothing crouched behind the back seat.

“I don’t feel silly at all right now!” Rhi announced as she slipped the truck into gear and headed back towards town, away from the eyes that instantly appeared in the woods when they slid to a stop.

Pam crept back in her seat and fastened the seat belt, her gun in her lap. “Paranoid and proud, girlfriend.”

* * * *

Houston pulled up to the third A-frame on the hill above Horse Thief Gulch. The snow-filled yard was surrounded by a neat barbed wire fence and in the exact center, on a direct line with the front door, a thirty-foot tall flagpole stood proudly decorated with the Stars and Stripes.

“I’d have figured this guy for a Confederate battle flag, not Old Glory,” he remarked as he climbed out of the pickup.

The gray shadows of the night were padding into the woods but the darkness didn’t touch the yard of the survivalist, Bobby Wayne Bedford. Floodlights blazed everywhere, powered by a huge generator located under the shed roof and padlocked into

an iron cage. The yard was as bright as a summer noon and the snow appeared to have been smoothed down. God alone knew what Pam's eccentric tenant wired the yard with.

"It's the wrong day. I fly the Confederate colors every other day," a hoarse voice whispered behind him, bringing Houston the closest he had ever come to having a panic attack.

Bobby Wayne Bedford appeared out of some well-placed bushes near the fence to stand behind Houston, a shotgun in his hands. Carefully, Houston raised his own hands and turned to face the other man, who kept his shotgun trained on Houston's face.

Bobby Wayne stared back at him through haggard, bloodshot eyes ringed with black. The man appeared to have been on patrol for days. This would have to be handled or the survivalist might crumble like an old saltine.

"I'm feeling a little spooked, neighbor, so why don't you hold your hands out where I can see them after you get rid of the gun under your jacket?" Bobby Wayne waved his weapon towards the snow bank. "Toss the weapon over there."

"Now, Bobby Wayne, that'll just get my gun wet," Houston replied in an exasperated tone. "And if those things in the woods come at us right now, I'd think you'd want me to have my gun."

Surprise flashed across the other man's face and he lowered his weapon. "There aren't any of those critters in the woods up here, Houston. They don't like this mountain for some reason. It might be the dog. She hates them and I think they hate her. How about some coffee?"

Like he had never put a gun to Houston's head, Bobby Wayne made a motion towards his house where a distinct, mournful howl arose from inside.

"Stay on the path. I've wired a few things. Really, I have to arm them but accidents can happen."

Houston grinned and shook his head as he followed the survivalist into the fenced yard, careful to stay on the flagstone path.

The large barn behind the house had been remodeled and painted red with white trim, complete with the traditional hex symbols. The barn's doors were closed, Houston hoped, because the Tennessee redneck stored the equipment he needed to battle monsters with in the building. It would save some time if things went badly.

Another deep bark interrupted his train of thought and he glanced up in time to see Rhi's bloodhound standing inside the house on the couch that backed up to the picture window. Ellie Mae bayed at them for all she was worth, her cable tail wagging wildly. Rhi told him earlier in the day Bobby Wayne regularly stopped by her house to help care for her dog and had taken the hound out to wander in the last few days. Her neighbor obviously had a few other reasons for befriending the dog.

Bobby Wayne was dressed in a full set of black, gray and white winter battle fatigues. He stood in the door for a moment before going far enough into his house to allow Houston in behind him. Houston had never seen the other man so rattled. Bobby Wayne obviously had had contact with the demons the dark Blackthorne brother had called up. The kitchen table was loaded down with armaments, including claymore mines, grenades and cold weather gear. An M16 leaned by a cabinet and ammunition boxes were scattered everywhere.

"Looks like you're planning on doing some hunting, Bobby." Houston craned his neck to peer around the taller man's shoulder. A Mark 19 grenade launcher lay on the

spotless kitchen floor next to the table. “What are you trolling for - a Tyrannosaurus Rex?”

Bobby Wayne’s hands tightened on the weapon he still held. “You know what I’m hunting. I’m going to find out what lab these things are escaping from and blow the place to kingdom come.”

Houston put on his wisest expression for the slightly mad man in front of him. “These things aren’t escaping from a government lab, if that’s what you think, Bobby Wayne. But I can tell you about them. We might be able to make this all go away without a shot fired. But, I believe in being prepared and I have some ideas about killing these ‘critters’ out if we need to. And let’s be honest. Only you and I are nutty enough to believe any of this.”

Bobby Wayne considered that for a moment as Ellie Mae made her way around him, a golden shadow, to jump up and place her paws on Houston’s chest to lick his face enthusiastically. “Well, if the dog likes you, I guess I can listen to what you have to say. Tell me what’s going on, Houston, and what it has to do with those girls over the hill.”

Houston surveyed the kitchen, which had been converted into a war room. Topographical maps were tacked onto every open inch of wall space and weapons of all shapes and sizes were scattered on the kitchen counters. The sink had a stinking pile of what looked like dried black elephant droppings in it.

Houston’s eyebrows and opinion of the survivalist went up a notch. Dragon crap? Bobby Wayne might be *very* useful. “One of those little girls has this town’s fate and the world riding on her shoulders. And the Armageddon scenario you’ve been preparing for? It’s here. After we unload some water jugs I picked up, I’ll take that coffee.” Nothing like laying all the cards on the table, he just hoped Bobby Wayne’s mind could take the strain.

After carefully sitting his gun down butt first onto the floor, Bobby Wayne Bedford snapped to attention. He had no questions. That told Houston he was unbalanced for sure.

“Beer’s in the fridge and the coffee pot is full of fresh brew,” Bobby Wayne said. “I’m ready ... uh, why are we unloading water jugs?”

Houston grinned. “Because it is a kind of water that will bring us great comfort in our time of need. I suspect it will have an interesting effect on our ammunition.”

Comprehension fluttered across the other man’s face. “If the water you have in the truck does something nasty to those things down the hill - then they’re not escaped lab experiments, are they?”

“No, Bobby Wayne, I’m afraid they’re not.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lost in dawn's silver mists, Rhi watched the red walls of Ute Pass fly past as she drove. Ellie Mae ignored the scenery. Instead the dog had decided to stand in the back seat and lay her huge skull on Rhi's shoulder as her mistress maneuvered the vehicle back and forth through the pass' twists and hairpin turns.

"Dog, you do know your head weighs about as much as a sack of cement," Rhi told the dog as she shifted out of overdrive into first gear to compensate for the extreme incline of the pass. The dog grumbled and nuzzled her hair. "And now my hair's full of doggie slobber."

"What do you expect? Your dog's nothing more than a pony-sized spit factory." Pam sprawled in the back seat, her body twisted around so she could survey the contents of a large wooden case in the cargo area Bobby Wayne had presented Rhi with before they drove away from Horse Thief Gulch. The rest of the belongings Rhi had managed to scrape together for her escape were in suitcases, tied to the truck's roof rack.

The survivalist and Houston rode behind in Houston's battered crew cab pickup. Melon, still a bit wild-eyed after recounting a shortened version of the events of the snowmobile race, had opted to remain at Pam's house.

Rhi knew Pam had given her a watered down version of Melon's story and was thankful for it. Rhi had enough guilt riding her shoulders to weigh down a barge - she didn't need or want to hear about the slaughter at the snowmobile party. Strangely, the local media had been reticent about the incident, stating an explosion, possibly of unstable dynamite, had claimed the lives of a group of friends out partying at a bonfire. Rhi suspected the hand of Pearl and the Brotherhood guided the thoughts of the more inquisitive reporters to less dangerous matters.

"Look at this stuff! You've got guns, bullets, an adjustable bullet proof vest, grenades of all shapes and sizes, hand-written instructions so even a girlie blackjack dealer can use the stuff - and a genuine Confederate States of America Calvary saber." Pam picked up the scabbard to expose several inches of the blade inside. She tested the edge with one callused thumb. "It's sharp. I wonder where he picked up *this* - it's worth a fortune. Look, the tassels are still on the scabbard."

Rhi sighed. "I told him I couldn't take his sword and he told me that it was okay, he had four others. You might want to reconsider dating Bobby Wayne, Pam. I think he might be stinking rich. I'd mail the sword back to you to give to him at some point but I'm afraid he's right: I might need it. I might need all of this stuff. But you seem a lot happier about using the stuff than I am."

The other woman hefted a clip in one hand to load the nine-millimeter she had freed from its case. "All I know is someone is finally letting me play with explosives and I get to use the phrase 'Holy hand grenade' for real."

"Speaking of holy, how do Houston and Bobby Wayne know sprinkling everything with holy water and mixing it with explosives will give it the extra 'boom' against these things?" Rhi asked. "Father Moore must have been a little put out when

they showed up in the middle of the night with a truckload of weapons and explosives to bless.”

“Naw, this is Cripple Creek. The good Padre probably wondered if he should high tail it last night or this morning. Only an idiot would not know something is going on,” Pam replied. She hefted the gun in one hand. “And we know holy water has a nasty affect on the critters because Houston and Bobby Wayne went down the hill yesterday to test the theory. They blasted a few of the demons popping up at the bottom of the slope, past the barrier. The things fried like a drop of water on a hot griddle. I hope he has a shoulder holster we can size for you in here,” she muttered as she turned to start digging again. “Houston doesn’t seem to think the little buggers are going to quietly go away after you leave and he has extermination in mind.”

Rhi cringed at the word ‘extermination’. Then there was a sudden flash of red in her mind’s eye and she swerved hard before righting the SUV.

“Hey!” protested Pam, who was tossed into Ellie Mae by the movement.

“Sorry,” Rhi muttered and concentrated on the road. The gnawing pain in the back of her head swelled another increment.

The old Bible Rhi had left on the dashboard slid onto the floor. Pam had been amazed when Rhi produced the book and explained the relevance of the picture. She crawled over the console into the passenger seat. “Don’t drop the thing; it might decide to pop out at us. And the back of this truck is filled with *explosives*.” She gingerly picked up the Bible and flipped open the front cover to examine the enchanted picture of the skull and dragon. “Is this thing *humming*?”

“The skull won’t pop out, Pam, I have to let it go,” Rhi said. “And, yes, it’s humming. It also glows from time to time, kind a reminder that it’s in there for me.”

“Weird. How do you let it out?”

“My other self will tell me what to do if I need to, like she sent the book to me in the first place. I don’t plan to let it out. The book cannot be destroyed but maybe I can hide it a long way from here first.”

“Where’d you hide the book at the house? You didn’t seem bothered about someone finding it.”

The headache crawled down the back of her neck, into her back. Ignoring the pain, Rhi worked up a stiff grin. “I put the Bible in a freezer bag and duct taped it to the inside roof of Ellie Mae’s doghouse. Me, myself and I subconsciously decided it was a great idea since Ellie’s breed was bred to hunt demons the opposing side called up to fight in the Crusades. The little bastards are terrified of her.”

Pam stared at her friend in awe. “You know, for such a small individual, there are an awful lot of people in your teeny body. How about instead of channeling all of this mystical stuff from a past life, you channel a nuclear physicist to build a really big bomb for us?”

“Because it would kill everyone but the demons, who would bask in the glow. They are from *Hell*,” she replied bitterly, wincing as Ellie Mae again placed her gigantic head on her left shoulder. “Besides, there’s also the possibility a big conflict might upset the balance between good and evil, bringing on the *final* battle. Armageddon. You know the routine - we show up with troops and big bombs, which gives them an excuse to show up with more troops and bigger bombs. Right now Satan is sitting on the sidelines, watching with interest. If we show up at his doors with a huge force, he might decide to

get into the fray.”

“Whaa?”

Rhi grinned through her pain. “Something my other self whispered in my ear. Don’t think a thing about it. This might be a good time in your life to consider becoming blissfully ignorant of the world around you, like the rest of the general population.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll think myself stupid. I’ll forget your first husband’s merry men are responsible for keeping us teetering on the edge of infinity. Personally, I don’t feel that they’re doing a very bang up job.”

Ellie Mae whined. Her sad expression, the typical hallmark of a bloodhound’s face, was worse than usual. The dog had whined the entire trip, with periodic fits of scratching at the window of the truck, the thick winter coat of fur on her back on end. Maybe Ellie Mae’s head hurt too. “My head is killing me and her head is killing my shoulder.” Blackthorne was nearby. She could feel his presence. And why did she feel such flaming heat?

* * * *

Blackthorne and Pearl observed the two trucks make their way down the giant rift in the Front Range of the Rockies known as Ute Pass. The pair stood on a red sandstone cliff that was dotted with stunted trees and dead grasses. The stone formation jutted into the dark morning sky about eighty feet straight above the road. A wispy fog flowed around them, hiding the warriors from other eyes patrolling the pass.

“I haven’t decided if I need to kill you or not, Jack,” Pearl told him in a conversational tone that was pierced by a graceful drip of fury on the last consonant.

The madam was dressed much as she had been before, in immaculate fatigues and a plethora of cashmere and concealing scarves. The only difference was her short glittering sword, drawn and at her side. An old-fashioned pistol was belted around her waist, contrasting vividly with the submachine gun slung over her shoulder. Pearl’s gaze glittered as she tracked the vehicles’ descent. “It was time to release him? That’s all? You had to let him get out and stretch his legs a bit early?”

Blackthorne wore full battle fatigues and bulletproof vest. He carried his broadsword openly, unconcealed by a coat or glamour. The blade was housed in a surprisingly modern heavy-duty sheath across his back, formed of black molded plastic and leather. The positioning of the sword forced him to reach over his shoulder to draw it, but Blackthorne needed access to the other weapons he carried as well.

“If we had waited, he would have had gathered up a huge reservoir of power. We don’t know how he managed to do it but I could sense the moment he began to pull power into his prison and I knew better than to try to explain everything to you,” Blackthorne replied, his frosted gaze never leaving the SUV. “I’ve learned the hard way to obey my orders, no matter how distasteful. You haven’t learned that. And, being a woman, I doubt you ever will.”

He didn’t give a damn about Pearl’s opinion. Or Rhi now, for that matter. “He would have broken free of his own accord, probably result of the negative energy generated by the gaming in town, and on his own terms if we hadn’t set it up. Look at how many demons he’s raised through the cracks of Hell he has access to - can you imagine what he’ll do with an opened gate? And you know we can’t warn anyone.”

Pearl waved him off. “Yes, I know, knight. In giving mankind knowledge of the gates and the objects and powers of the ancients, we tip the balance between good and

evil.” She recited the rule in a mocking, singsong voice. “I think this is a crock. Practicing diplomatic niceties with the Prince of Darkness.”

“Believe me, I’d love to bring in some troops from Fort Carson,” he replied grimly. “But whatever members of the Brotherhood who are not fighting their own battles and we two are all of the help we’re gonna have. It’s time to move, she’s getting out of sight.”

“There might be more backup in *my* town than you realize, Blackie.”

“Been bending the rules, Pearl?”

Changing the subject, Pearl examined the outline of his face in the dawn light pityingly. “Do you think she’ll be able to get away? Will she be able to run?”

He didn’t bother to answer. They both knew the truth. They could only wait.

* * * *

The headache overwhelmed Rhi like a wave of thick, red tide. They had left the mountains, crossed the labyrinth of streets of the city of Colorado Springs and headed east, towards the prairie, where Pam’s family homestead lay nestled in the rolling hills of dead winter grass and dried cattle droppings.

“It’s going to be cloudy today. We might be in for more snow,” Pam noted. “I hate that I can’t see the sun this morning.”

Another life hit Rhi like a falling boulder. The pain in her head blossomed into fire and blood and a white clapboard farmhouse.

“Dear God!”

Without thinking, she forced the truck off the road, almost landing the truck in a ditch. Ellie Mae and Pam squawked in the backseat after falling together, a mass of long legs, both human and canine. Pam pushed the dog off of her in time to see Rhi fling open the truck door and stagger out to stand in the knee high grass lining the road.

“Rhi!”

Houston managed to whip his pick-up in back of the SUV and scrambled from behind the steering wheel. Both vehicles were stopped on the side of the lonely road winding through the rolling prairie east of Colorado Springs.

Rhi slammed to her knees in the half frozen mud of the ditch and buried her face in her icy palms. A deep, body-wrenching cough welled up and Rhi pulled her hands away from her face to stare at the blood covering her fingers.

Pam and Houston ran to where she knelt in the gravel, snow and road cinders. Bobby Wayne jumped up into the back of the pickup with an M-16 half-heartedly disguised by a black gym bag, on alert.

“Rhi, what? What’s wrong? Do we need to take you home?” Pam’s concerned face hovered overhead as Rhi descended into a pit.

“Baby,” Houston’s voice was soothing. “We’ve to get you out of this open space. It isn’t safe.”

“Blood - mud and gold mixed with blood. It’s like I’m being crushed. I can feel Manius’ hands on me and hear his voice. I can hear him in my head.” Rhi curled into herself and rocked back and forth. “He says I’ll do whatever he says to do, like I did before.” She screamed, tearing at her face and hair, trying to get the voice out of her head and out of her body.

* * * *

“Folks, we need to go!” Bobby Wayne announced as he rotated clockwise in the

truck bed, surveying the empty prairie with a practiced eye. The wind whipped past, stinging skin and the anticipation of something terrible whispered to them all.

Pam grabbed Rhi's hands. She winced as she restrained the smaller woman, who lay on the ground, her eyes rolled back in their sockets, seeing and feeling the enormity of the past.

Then the present hit and Rhi's body stiffened as an electric current of horror and remorse ran through her.

* * * *

Beyond the gathered group, Blackthorne and Pearl stood unnoticed on a nearby hillock. The wind carried each of Rhi's shrieks their way, and Blackthorne's hands twitched.

"Jack, you can't go to her," cautioned Pearl, laying a small, gloved hand on his arm. "This is something to do with the return of the key. Let her call us."

Mutely, the man nodded and turned to the madam, his best friend and confidant for the last 100 years. Any other time he would have laughed at the fierce expression on Pearl's face.

"Knights be damned, sister, I'll take you as a sidekick any day of the week," Blackthorne remarked as he reached back to release his sword. The call would come soon.

Pearl filled her hands with her sword and the familiar shape of her gun. "Screw you, Jack. You can be *my* sidekick, though, if you like."

* * * *

Rhi took deep breaths and concentrated on each spoonful of air until her breathing slowed. She clawed herself into a sitting position, pushing Pam away. Her companions stood frozen to one side of the deserted road, silently watching her struggle.

She rose to her feet, knee-deep in the filthy snow and raised a hand to point at a sliver of smoke rising in the air from behind the barren hills. Her mind reached to find what force formed the ominous black ribbon in the sky.

How could she have not guessed? How could she have been so stupid? She screamed at them to run, blistering her throat with the words. "He's at the ranch, Pam. He's going after Katie!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When the call came, it wasn't what they expected.

"Katie!" Rhi roared from the side of the road where she knelt. Blackthorne and Pearl looked at each other in horror for a moment before taking to the air, discarding the spell concealing them from prying eyes. The pair blazed past the group on the side of the road, straight towards the Douglas Ranch, a mile to the east where Katie Douglas waited for her mother.

* * * *

Pam stood paralyzed in stupefied silence, listening to her daughter's name echo as Rhi pushed herself to her feet.

The vision faded for Rhi. She forced her body to move and dragged Pam up. She wiped the blood off her chin and barked at Houston, who sprinted for his truck. "Get your gear out! They're at the Douglas house."

White-faced with anger, the man jumped in the cab. Bobby Wayne stayed in the truck's bed, frantically digging through packs and boxes.

The vehicles tore down the asphalt road, spaying snow and gravel in their wake. Rhi gritted her teeth and prayed she didn't roll the top-heavy vehicle by running it at more than ninety miles an hour. She managed a quick glance at Pam, who sat in silence, staring at her hands.

Calm. She could speak calmly, even though she was covered in blood and mud after inhaling another life and was burdened with the knowledge that she might have killed her best friend's child. "Pam, get some weapons, everything you can get your hands on that you know how to use, okay?" No time for blame. Only time to gun the engine, chase the horizon and pray they weren't too late.

Dazed, the other woman crawled towards the back seat.

Ellie Mae had been left in the truck during Rhi's roadside outburst, frantically barking and trying to break through the cargo bay window. The animal now stood in the bay by the box, her entire body stiff with adrenaline and her huge eyes focused on the horizon.

"We're going to go get my baby?" Pam's voice was uncharacteristically low and Rhi could barely hear her question.

The tires on the big vehicle squealed in protest as Rhi swung through a curve at high speed in a turn a sports car would have had a hard time cornering.

"Yes." She was going to kill the bastard. Rhi flung the words out of her head into the sky. *Listen to me, jackass. I am going to kill you.*

A familiar voice filled with innuendo entered her mind. *What good's power if it doesn't warn you, Rhiannon? It will be your fault, like my brother. You're a matched set*

...

Pam unpacked weapons and body armor as she mumbled to herself.

Rhi fumbled for the window controls, rolling down all four windows on the truck and the window on the cargo hatch. "Be ready to jump out whenever I stop."

Pam glanced up from her work to meet Rhi's gaze. "I'll kill them all for this, Rhi."

"And I'll hold them down for you, honey. Get ready."

The SUV caught air as the truck flew over the last hill before the ranch. A lazy ribbon of smoke floated on the morning wind above the ancestral home of Pam Douglas's pioneer ancestors. A nightmare scene of flames and scurrying creatures in among the outbuildings, barns, fence and battered main house of the thriving cattle ranch brought another lightning bolt of pain to Rhi. She bit her lip hard, breaking the skin to keep from screaming.

A gigantic black shape was visible on the roof of the main house. The outstretched wings of the dragon stretched 20 feet in either direction. The beast's black scales twinkled in the dim morning light, while the demons in the dust of the yard clung to the shadows of the buildings. Katie's golden ringlets and pink sweater could be clearly seen from several hundred yards away. The child hung limply from the one of the dragon's claws.

Two human figures armed with shotguns shielded themselves beneath an old Farmall tractor, wounding but not managing to kill demons when they scampered by.

In the air above the dragon, small forms glowing with blue light swooped and dived at the creature. Blackthorne and Pearl DeVere slashed at the dragon with their swords and dodged the streams of liquid fire the monster spit at the pair. Then the dragon cradled the tiny girl in his arms like a treasured stuffed animal and took to the sky.

"She's unconscious. Blackthorne will get her back," Rhi muttered to herself as she tried to shove the gas pedal through the floorboard. "Pam! Toss the sword here and brace yourself."

A quick glance in the mirror revealed Pam, now wearing the bulletproof vest and carrying an M-16 rifle. She was loaded down with several other weapons, her face blank. The hilt of the sword appeared on the console next to Rhi and a loaded 9-millimeter landed in the passenger's seat nearby.

"Don't forget to turn off the safety," Pam reminded her gruffly.

Rhi didn't bother to reply as she tore through the closed wrought-iron front gate of the ranch in a shower of sparks.

A burnt out SUV was parked near the front door of the house with what might have been a pile of human remains beside it. The Biblical version of an actual devil stood on the front porch, brandishing a huge sword.

The creature was five times as large as its brethren who scampered about the yard, gorging on cattle released from the pens and pulled down to rip apart in the front yard. The devil stood at least eight feet tall with the shape of a body builder but there all human similarity ended. Two foot-long horns resembling those of a longhorn steer jutted from his forehead and his scarlet skin glistened and smoked. He was naked down to his cloven hooves. The obvious proof of the creature's sex jutted in front of him obscenely.

"Hang on!" Rhi tore a wide swath through the yard, mutilating at least twenty demons with her truck with a shower of blue sparks. Behind her, Houston pulled up to the trapped pair under the tractor and threw open the passenger door to let them crawl in. Bobby Wayne stood in the back of the pickup, strapped to the roll bar and raining bullets upon the demons on the ground. The sound of the concussion grenades he threw

increased Rhi's headache exponentially as she manhandled the truck through the yard.

It was good to know the hoodoo Pearl put on her truck was still effective, Rhi decided as another shower of blue sparks exploded against the SUV where she had crushed one of the larger demons under her wheels.

She swung the vehicle around, slowing up enough for Ellie Mae and Pam to make the leap out of the opened cargo door.

* * * *

Pam hit the ground hard and rolled her lean form into a ball, cradling and protecting her weapon. On her feet in an instant, she instinctively crouched to survey the scene. The bark of the guns Bobby Wayne fired from the back of Houston's pickup popped in her ears and she added the music of her own weapons to the chaos.

The holy water ammunition had a stunning effect on the creatures swarming towards her. The smallest of the white, slug-like demons burst opened like air popped popcorn. The larger ones were alive after she hit them but were horribly mutilated. They kept coming, crawling on the ground towards her, legs missing and intestines spilling out, reaching for her with bloodied claws. She coldly cleaned out a dozen of them, clinically watching the bullets tear through several monsters at once. She yanked out the clip and replaced it, not acknowledging the crowd surging towards her until she looked up to begin firing again.

"Eat this, you little freaks," she screamed. There was nothing she could do about her daughter, who hovered, clutched in the dragon's claws, above her. But she could make Manius Black pay.

"Keep going, baby, I've got your back!" Bobby Wayne called from the bed of Houston's truck. He laid down a line of fire, covering Pam as she rampaged. He punctuated his bursts of bullets with periodic rebel yells.

Houston was busy in the crew cab of the vehicle, tending whomever he had picked up a moment ago. Pam could see him as he periodically paused to shove his pistol into the stomach of a demon that managed to get past Bobby Wayne to climb into the broken window of the truck.

The SUV ran wildly through a crowd of demons swarming on the opposite side of the barn, before bursting through the building in a cascade of splintered wood and straw. The vehicle picked the most destructive path towards the front porch where the gigantic 'head demon' stood, barking out orders to his panicked minions. Pam tensed to make the dangerous run across the open ground to help her friend.

A thin wail broke through her bloodlust. Heart breaking, Pam forced herself to stare up in despair at the tiny pink tennis shoes kicking at the dragon's claws. Her gun empty, she tossed it aside to grab the machete and the pistol, swinging the weapon with one hand while firing the pistol with the other.

The first demon the blade touched sparked and flamed, as did the next one. But each blue spark was weaker than the last and Pam realized that the protection was wearing off of her makeshift sword.

Above, Pearl swooped in to slash at the dragon's arm that restrained the child but was rewarded with a slap of the tail that sent her head over heels into the roof of the farmhouse. She rolled down, falling two stories before hitting the ground with a sickening thud. Across the yard, Houston darted out of his truck under Bobby Wayne's cover fire to get to the madam's side before the milling demons realized where she lay.

In the air above where Pam fought, Blackthorne slashed at the beast's side with his sword. If the dragon let her baby go, who would catch her?

Pam fought her way through the hellish crowd towards where she assumed her daughter might land.

Her only warning was a burst of heat and she leaped to the side, landing on her back in the mud. A squirt of liquid fire from the circling monster sizzled beside her head. She didn't dare fire at the creature that held Katie, so she leaped up to keep as many of its associates as she could out of the area. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ellie Mae tossing demons into the air as easily as she did her stuffed doggy toys.

The crowd of demons the dog landed in had scattered with screams of dismay and blue sparks as Ellie Mae picked up the first one she found by the scruff of the neck and shook it like a terrier with a rat. The tinier, weaker demons trying to seize the huge animal were rewarded with a neon blue bolt of fire that turned them into black piles of hot ash immediately.

A ferocious roar of challenge forced Pam's attention towards the farmhouse's front porch, where the huge demon stood with a smoking sword over a corpse she prayed was not her mother or father. He brandished the sword and stretched his bulbous lips out into a grotesque leer, his teeth at least an inch and a half long, pointed and stained. Stained with *what* was something Pam didn't want to think about right then. She roared in return and sprinted towards the monster that might have laid his hands on her child. She looked like madwoman, her hair on end and her face blackened. Beside her Ellie Mae ran, wraithlike. The dog growled and tore at every demon that dared to stumble into their path.

They weren't fast enough to beat the battered vehicle, which chugged past like a caffeinated rhino, straight for the huge demon.

* * * *

The moment her friend and the dog bailed out of the cargo window of the truck, Rhi hit the gas, ignoring the weapons Pam had made ready. She already had a weapon at hand, a big one. She paused long enough to stuff the Bible into one of the large inner pockets of her barn jacket where it lay like a stone, humming happily against her body.

With a jerk of the wheel, she carved a wide swath through the yard and burst through a cattle pen. A nauseating path of bulbous, quivering death lay behind her. The burning, half dead carcasses tried to pull themselves upright to feed on each other or whatever they were tearing apart when the demons met up with a rampaging mountain of metal that burned to the touch.

Keeping an eye on the dragon and the other on Blackthorne and Pearl battling in the air above the ranch, Rhi racked her brain, and reached for her other self.

"What do I do? How do I fight this, Raven? Come on, I know you're in there, damn it." She watched Pearl plummet from the sky and Houston run to crouch protectively over the madam's body. Behind him, Bobby Wayne kept firing from the bed of the truck, protecting the victims in the cab, who Rhi hoped were Pam's mother, Lillian, and her husband, Colonel Douglas.

Behind Houston, yet another hulking demon arose from the depths of the barn, a twin for the monster on the front porch Pam charged towards. The new demon headed straight for the ex-pilot, who rose to take a defensive stance in front of Pearl, his hunting rifle up. Houston fired at the being's massive red chest, one shot after another.

She couldn't see her dog.

"Crap."

Stuffing the pistol into the waist of her jeans, Rhi grabbed the sheathed sword. She floored the gas and steered straight at the front porch of the house.

"One, two, three ..." She threw open the door and hit the ground rolling, feeling her clothes and flesh tear as inertia dragged her over the ground. Her head hit something and she fought for consciousness. She focused on the twenty-foot high flames shooting up from the remains of the porch. The demon had exploded on impact.

Solid hands grabbed her and Pam jerked her to her feet without regard for any injuries she might have gotten in her fall.

"Do something, Rhi, please do something," Pam sobbed. The other woman was now covered with gore, the machete still in her hand. The all-too-familiar bites and scratches of Rhi's nightmares marked her face and body.

Winching, Rhi pulled in her strength and reached deep and hard for her power. The power to stop the monster in the air, power that her past self had never been strong enough to call upon.

Above, Blackthorne darted in and out at the creature. The blue flames of his sword flared, igniting a lost memory and Rhi gasped as her power flowed. Sheets of electric blue flame shot from her hands towards the dragon. Even as she felt the energy surge, she realized that it was not enough.

The black dragon shrieked in pain, writhing in the air. Its vicious tail whipped back, cutting into the man who hurtled through the air. The blue nimbus that shielded Blackthorne's body faded, time enough for the beast to hurl another glob of fire at the unprotected body of the knight. The liquid brimstone sizzled as it made contact and Blackthorne plummeted to the earth. The dragon made a graceful, gliding turn towards the mountains.

"Catch him, catch him, catch him," Rhi muttered and reached out a hand. Blackthorne's decent stopped and she lowered his burnt and broken body to the ground with her mind. She dropped to her knees as Pam stumbled away towards Bobby Wayne's pickup truck where her mother struggled to get her wounded husband out of the cab.

Pam's mother, an older version of the skinny farm girl, helped the colonel to the ground beside the truck. After carefully checking him over, she collapsed to ground, sobbing hysterically.

Pearl, who had regained consciousness, sat in the mud with Houston's head in her lap. The bedraggled madam wept sooty tears as she smoothed his thinning gold hair. The expression on her face told Rhi all she needed to know. The second massive demon was nowhere to be seen.

Ellie Mae materialized out of the rolling clouds of smoke to limp beside Rhi as she made her way towards where Blackthorne lay sprawled in the mud. Behind her, she could hear Bobby Wayne telling Pam's mother to stay near the truck with her wounded husband while he secured the area. He jumped out of the truck and marched past her without a glance, gun in hand.

"They got what they came here for, Bobby Wayne," she whispered. She knelt for a few moments beside Blackthorne, not daring to look to see if he was breathing.

After a few minutes, a moan from the knight caught her attention. Hope flared and she opened her eyes. The monstrous burns on his torso made her want to throw up.

Pam returned to crouch beside her and examine his wounds. "Houston's dead." The blunt words hurt.

Businesslike, Pam ran her thin hands over Blackthorne's body, checking for broken bones and being careful not to touch the gaping burns. "So's my cousin, Greg, and the housekeeper Rosa." She rocked back on her heels. "Blackthorne looks worse than he is, Rhi. No major organs are in too much trouble, which I figure is about the only way to kill these guys ... my parents made it to the barn when that thing hit. Dad was able to get his guns out of the rack in the back of his truck. It's the reason they're alive. But we didn't make a dent in the demons. They disappeared into the ground as soon as that monster flew away with Katie." Her voice didn't break when saying her daughter's name. She was strong, sure and deadly. "What do we do next?"

Another moan escaped the unconscious man as one of the more jagged cuts across one of his thigh knitted together. Hurriedly, Rhi ripped the heavy fabric of his fatigues leg to keep the cloth from being healed into the new scar.

"We carry our wounded and dead out of here and get ready. Mourn later," replied Rhi, her eyes fixed on Blackthorne's slack features as she loosened the rest of his clothing. "We can't call anyone for help and we can't let anyone know what happened here other than a bad fire, Pam."

"The 'balance'/end-of-the-world factor you mentioned?"

"Yeah, something like that. Take care of it, okay? Get Pearl to help you. I might be out of my head for a few hours," she replied. She sat beside Blackthorne, cross-legged, and took his head into her lap. Absently, Rhi ran her fingers through his hair, and the hideous wounds from the dragon fire slowly, miraculously healed. "Empty out Cripple Creek, except for whoever is willing and open-minded enough to fight, Pam. You have to do this for me. I won't be able to, I will be - changing."

Pam's face cleared as comprehension dawned. Rhi breathed a small sigh of relief. She needed her friend to function right now.

Manius Black took Katie to force her to give him the skull. Unfortunately for the fallen knight, Rhi was now going to give it to him. But to put the fix in on this gamble, she would have to become a changeling and the Raven part of her soul knew what it could possibly cost.

Rhi hesitated for a second to say goodbye to her humanity, to having children, to living a normal life with a normal man and dying in her own time and not one in a far distant era. Would she go to Hell for this?

Screw it, she was there already.

The vein in Jack Blackthorne's throat pulsed under her touch. His face was serene in the dim light of the smoke and cloud ridden morning. She yanked the Bible from the pocket of her jacket and handed it to Pam. "Keep an eye on this thing for me. I might not be able to watch it as closely as I'd like."

Pam nodded, tucking the book inside what was left of her own jacket and buttoning it up. Bobby Wayne reappeared to take up a guard position between Pearl and the couple beside the battered pickup. Rhi bent over her lover's neck and, ignoring Pearl's sudden call of alarm, bit deeply.

"What is she doing?"

She could hear Bobby Wayne's shout fading and then she heard nothing but Blackthorne's pulse in her ears. It was a strong beat that got louder as she drank. And

drank. His blood was as hot as lava and as cold as permafrost. She gagged but forced herself to continue to drink, choking down as much as her stomach could hold. Her veins burned, the heat threatening to burst out of her skin.

If stealing the 'gift' from Blackthorne didn't kill her, they might all live long enough to make it through the weekend.

Chapter Thirty

Katie had tired of screaming. Jaded from watching too much television, she had gotten bored with the ride in the dragon's claws. When the roof of the farmhouse had been ripped off above her head, the little girl had been alternating between napping and watching the Wiggles on television in her upstairs bedroom. She was snatched out of her pink bed sheets before she could open her mouth or grab her stuffed elephant to cling to for comfort.

The sight of the shrieking housekeeper's fiery fate as she stood in the doorway of the little girl's room had been concealed from the child by the confining grip of the dragon. Katie had also missed the sacking of the ranch and the death of her cousin, Greg, a deputy from Eagle County visiting his relatives. He had died in a storm of flames while covering the escape of Colonel Douglas and his wife from the house. The wounded colonel had been busy dragging his screaming wife behind him as she tried to break free to chase after her granddaughter.

Amazingly calm, Katie now amused herself by watching the swirling shapes formed by the morning clouds. The dragon flew above the concealing mists, into the mountains from the smoking plain. As her captor descended, Katie could see the giant stone house her mother had always called The Castle, a brooding fortress right out of one of the nastier cartoons she managed to sneak a peek at when her mother wasn't looking.

As light as a snowflake, the dragon touched down in the front courtyard of the great stone house and deposited his tiny prisoner onto her feet on the flagstones. It took to the air as a thin man emerged from one of the 10-foot-tall front doors of the house and sidled towards Katie. His walk resembled the movements of one of the snakes her mother sometimes pointed out to her on their hikes through the woods. His face held a strange mixture of anger, self-loathing and sorrow, which twisted his features into a grimace.

"Bye, bye!" Katie turned and waved at the dragon as it swooped in the air and disappeared behind the crest of the nearest mountain. "Stinky old dragon."

Away from the heat of the beast that carried her into the mountains, Katie felt the chill of the day. She examined the pearl buttons of her sweater, deciding if she was going to try to fasten them. Giving up on the buttons, she examined her surroundings as she waited for the strange man to get to her. She wiped at her pink corduroys and sweater, attempting to get some of the ashes off of her clothes.

"Where's my mommy?" she demanded, turning her rosebud face up to him as he reached her.

"She's on her way, young lady, you can count on that," the man replied with a wry grin. "I'm Troy and I'll take care of you until then, okay? Now, let's get you some clean clothes and breakfast, shall we?"

"But I already *had* breakfast," the child objected. She then leaned towards him and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "And then I rode on a *dragon*."

"I know," he whispered back. "And dragon riding takes a lot out of little girls,

I'm sure. We'll get you some more breakfast. Then we'll go see your room. I made up a special room for you. There are toys and TV and books. But you must be very quiet, okay? The master needs his sleep and he'll be a bit cranky if we wake him."

She considered that for a moment.

"Like my mommy after working a lot?"

"Exactly."

She held her arms up to the man as he reached out. "I'm Katie."

* * * *

Troy thoughtfully looked down at the handful of pink and gold in his arms as he went into the house. The child's velvet blue eyes got as big as dinner plates at the sight of one of the smaller demons sitting on a sideboard in the hall across from the dining salon. It was eating God-only-knew what and dropping pieces on the clean floor. The demon's lax behavior scared Troy. It was a sign his master was losing control of them. Troy wondered for a moment if the chef was still alive in his kitchen haven.

"Is that a monster, Mr. Troy?" She asked the question in a tiny voice, showing him the first sign of discomfort. Trust Pam Douglas to have a kid with the constitution of a NAVY Seal.

Troy considered his answer. He had to keep the child secluded from Manius, who was likely to become irritated at the slightest sound from the girl and feed on her to shut her up. And Katie Douglas was not just a hostage to lure Rhi Brennan to the Gate, but also Troy's insurance in case things went south for his master. It was not likely that the other Blackthorne brother would forgive him for his previous bad acts unless the little girl was unspoiled and as little traumatized as he could manage under the circumstances.

"Yes, it is a monster, Katie, and there are a bunch of them in this house," he replied. "You can never leave your room unless you're with me or they will eat you up."

Fear crept into the child's face and she clung to him as he carried her through the halls. Horrid little faces peeped out at them from behind furniture and curtains. Scurrying sounds could be heard and claws scrambling across the polished stone floors. Katie buried her face in his sweater.

"But they can't come in your room, okay?" he told her as he maneuvered to open the door to the room he had prepared next to his for Pam Douglas's daughter. They were greeted by the sight of an elegant, turn of the century bedroom decorated in several shades of yellow and gold. A fire burned in the grate, cutting the lingering chill of the courtyard and the television already blared in an opened armoire in the corner. Stuffed animals and books were scattered throughout the room and a monstrous pile of little girl's clothing lay on the bed. A silver tray, loaded with pastries and fruit, sat on the ottoman. Troy hesitated for a moment. The chef had been banished to the kitchens and his rooms for days to prevent his demise-by-hungry-demon and Troy had been delivering the foodstuffs to his master. He hadn't brought up the tray. He deposited the child on the ground, where she stood as near to his leg as she could get. The little girl examined the room's contents, searching for more monsters.

"Enough food for a week and enough clothes for a year, not two days, but then, he is nothing if not a shop-a-holic," Troy muttered.

A figure rose from the wingback facing the television. "Of course I'm a shop-a-holic, my dear boy. Now ..." Manius crouched down to be eye-to-eye with his new guest. He had dressed in a velvet smoking jacket and silk pajamas embroidered with tiny

gold bees on a black background. "Hello, Katie."

Still wary, the little girl eyed him. "Hi. Do you know when my mommy is coming? She sent a dragon to get me, you know."

"A dragon, you say? How marvelous!" Manius cannily smiled.

Troy struggled to conceal a shudder. What was the game this time? Why was he bothering to charm the child?

"Your mommy is delayed but I am sure we'll see her tomorrow night, darling. Until then we will have to amuse ourselves as best we can." Manius picked up the little girl and carried her to his chair in front of the television. "Do you like the Home Shopping Network?"

"Nope. Cartoons?" Katie hopped out his arms to examine the tray of goodies. "And milk. No soda pop." She pointed at the offending cans on the tray.

Troy braced himself. He was not sure he could watch Manius feed on the little girl and maintain his sanity.

Manius raised an eyebrow. "You heard her, Troy. Get her some milk." He sat back down and picked up the remote with a sigh. "Cartoons it is."

Chapter Thirty-One

Her own face, thinner, paler and weaker stared back.

"Only one pure of intent can open or close the gate. And the portal must be closed from the other side."

"From the other side?" Rhi opened her eyes to see the familiar field of white lace topping the bed in the Pearl DeVere's guestroom, which seemed to belong to Rhi. Maybe it always had.

"Rhi?" His voice was within a foot of her. Crap. "What did you say?"

"I said that it hurts inside," she managed to reply, clutching her stomach. Technically, she wasn't lying. It *did* hurt on the inside but she also carefully shielded her thoughts in case a stray piece of her unrelenting horror pulled free. *Closed from the inside. Uh, right.*

Rhi suspected that her stomach had been ground for hamburger and her joints were on fire. She could barely turn her head to examine the man who again sat nearby, his sock feet propped on the bed. He was dressed in jeans and a heather-colored sweatshirt. The dreadful, gaping burns that marked him earlier didn't appear to be troubling him.

"Alive?"

"Barely. How come I'm the one who gets to pass out every five minutes in this scenario? I think it's your turn or Pam's," she retorted. Her voice sounded terrible, reduced to a painful croak. "Pam. Houston. Oh my God, Pam." She struggled to get up but couldn't manage to wedge an arm underneath herself to lift up her body. Ellie Mae's head popped up over the side of the bed to nuzzle her leg, the dog's tail wagging. Rhi tried to check the animal for wounds but gave up as her pet, satisfied that her mistress was alright, turned to trot out the bedroom door and pad down the hall on the oriental runner. Ellie Mae was right at home in Pearl's house, Rhi decided, watching the animal go.

"I'm truly sorry about Houston and Pam's daughter," Blackthorne told her. Then his face turned grim. "But the next time you decide to take enough demon infected blood into yourself to change an army, prepare to be down for the count. You're lucky you're alive. You realize the Brotherhood has no idea whether we are damned for taking the blood or not, don't you? When we die or choose to die is when we get to find out."

She shrugged. "I didn't know if I was Heaven bound before. Why should I get to know now? How long have I been out?" He rose to help her sit up. Every movement was agony. Her body had been turned inside out and back again.

"It's 9 p.m. You've been out all day." He tentatively put an arm around her waist to support her. For a blissful second, she rested her head on his shoulder, and then straightened.

"I hurt," she stated.

"The process of becoming a Changeling has killed many seasoned warriors," he replied, removing the arm. "You *should* hurt. I was amazed that it didn't kill Pearl and

even more amazed it didn't kill you."

"Childbirth."

"What?"

"Women are born with a built in tolerance for pain because they have to go through childbirth." Rhi examined her bare legs, which didn't have a scratch on them. She noticed she was wearing nothing but her underwear and a gigantic t-shirt. Blackthorne's, she was sure. "We're probably better suited to the Change than you are. Now could you get me a robe or something? And where's Pam? Where's my Bible?"

"What?"

At that moment the door burst open and Pam hustled through in full military dress, followed by the biggest, most tattooed biker Rhi had ever seen. The man was at least six foot eight and, although lean as a wolf, had shoulders big enough to bench press a barge. He was dressed in jeans, and a Notre Dame sweatshirt. His features were those of either a saint or a madman, and the long gray/brown hair and beard gave him the appearance of a body building Jesus.

Red-faced with effort, she managed to stand and shuffle a few steps towards Pam, her hand outstretched. Blackthorne didn't try to help her this time.

"Rhi, lie back down," Pam barked.

"I can't."

"Look, it isn't game time until moonrise tomorrow night. You're the quarterback and you've got to be ready to play - I didn't drive back up the hill with you lying in the back seat screaming like a banshee to let you croak on me now. At least, not before you save my daughter." A muscle in the other woman's face twitched. "You *will* lie down and you *will* listen to me." Pam waved towards her companion. "And you stay out of this, Molay! This is a No Templars allowed room, so take your little buddy," she indicated Blackthorne, "... and get out."

Rhi was too tired to be shocked. A Templar. She had never bothered to ask what order of crusading knights Blackthorne had been a member of when he was still human. Of course he belonged to the ultimate cliché of knightly orders. "Jacques de Molay? No offense, but aren't you dead? And since the Catholic Church is responsible for burning you at the stake, don't you think a t-shirt advertising one of their colleges is in poor taste?"

The last grand master of the Templar Knights, functioning head of the Brotherhood of the Gate, who had been burned at the stake in 1314, raised an eyebrow in Rhi's direction. "And I thought that *this* was the spunky one. You sure can pick'em, Blackie." He addressed Rhi directly. "I've never stopped being a Catholic and, aside from the unfortunate burning incident, have always gotten along well with the Church. But the extermination of the Templars who were still human convinced the rest of us that we needed to go underground. People get nasty when they realize you're going to live a much longer time than they are." His slight French accent was startling, coming out of such a big, bikeresque physique. He stared into her pale face sternly. "Since you insisted upon taking the blood without asking, you might want to remember that. You aren't a member of the Brotherhood and haven't taken the vows of secrecy."

She returned his gaze with scorn. "Yeah, those vows worked well with the Blackthorne brothers. One becomes a demon worshipper and the other gets married. I can't wait to take them myself."

“Who said that you would be asked?”

“Don’t have to do me any favors, sweet cheeks.”

“You already know who he is?” Pam had the grace to look shocked for a moment before regaining her icy resolve. “Of course. You’re the bookworm from hell.”

“Not only in this life but in the last life as well, I think,” Rhi replied as she eased her body back down on the bed beside Blackthorne, who was having a problem meeting her friend’s gaze. “Houston?”

A hint of moisture appeared in Pam’s red-rimmed eyes and her lips tightened. “We’ve got him laid out at the morgue. Pearl tried to give him the Gift before he died this morning but the stubborn little bastard wouldn’t take it. Said he wanted his next life so he could come back taller.”

Rhi stood silent for a moment, reaching for the pain of loss but something kept it from her. If she were lucky, there’d be time to cry for her friend later. If she were lucky, Houston would be the only one to shed tears over.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Blackthorne, for the last time, I don’t blame you!” Pam plunked tiredly into the nearby chair and ran a hand through her frizzy hair, succeeding in making it stand on end even more. “At least not now. I need you too badly to kill you. Yet.” She then proceeded to report to Rhi, in a deadly, monotone voice that raised chill bumps on Rhi’s neck.

“Bobby Wayne and I burned down most of the farm to cover up the battle, with Dad setting half the fires. The old man’s amazing. He believed everything we told him and why it must kept under wraps. He’s hobbling around Bobby Wayne’s at this moment, sorting through guns. Mom’s in shock, I think, and we have her drugged to the gills up at my house with Melon watching over her. She hasn’t spoken three words since we left the farm. Pearl put a hoodoo on the cops and firemen who showed up for the fire. They didn’t notice things like how beat up we were. And they accepted the story of the housekeeper and my cousin dying in the fire.” Her composure showed a hairline crack for a split second before she recovered and continued her report.

The town had been emptied as well as could be managed. Skeleton crews manned the casinos. On Pearl’s direction, management ordered the remainder of the town’s work force to stay home due to the weather forecast. A huge blizzard, the worst in a hundred years, was on its way and most locals were either battened down in their homes or down the hill in the Springs. Winterfest had been cancelled. Chief Boyd had rounded up local reinforcements in case anything made its way into town.

Pam ended her monologue with a startling statement. “Did you know that Nicholas Boyd is Pearl’s great grandson?”

“Whaa?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Pearl had a son before she ever became a changeling. The kid lived with his father in St. Louis. He was a teenager when she was turned and when she worked up the nerve to contact him, he moved here. But he never would take the blood from her and neither would his son or the son after, etc. They have this religious objection to it.” Pam reached over to pull the Bible from the pile of Rhi’s clothes near the bed. “And don’t you have something to get out of this thing? I need to know when you’re gonna do it, because all hell will break loose when you do. By the way, Pearl told me where the gate is and I have to say - weird.”

The two men stared at the book warily. Blackthorne’s face was the face of a man

who had eaten a suspicious tasting oyster. Molay's mouth opened and shut several times. Pam had left the Bible in the pile of clothes like the book was a half read romance novel. They ignored or hadn't heard Pam's reference to the gate.

The location of the gate was, to say the least, insensitive. "Yes, Pam, my husband buried me on the threshold of Hell. Raven's mausoleum leads back into the hill under the graveyard and to the gate itself." Rhi's retrieval of her other self had been very informative.

"It's a very nice monument and I could check on the Gate and visit her grave at the same time," muttered Blackthorne.

"Well, we wouldn't want you to have to spend extra time visiting the Gate *and* my grave, now would we?" Rhi waved a hand at him.

Her knight decided to save himself by looking outraged. "How long have you had this," he demanded, pointing at the Bible.

"For a while, Blackthorne. How insensitive of me not to tell you I've had the book all the time," Rhi retorted as she considered her options for a moment. The toughest path would be the one they had to take. If Pam didn't shoot her for asking her to wait to save her child. "Not tonight, Pam. I have to wait until the last possible moment before I let this thing loose. In the morning, we'll get set up to fight whatever pops up tomorrow night, working in daylight. He hasn't done anything to Katie and won't before tomorrow night. The Earth itself would cry out to me if he had touched her." Rhi got up and placed a shaky restraining hand on her friend's arm.

Pam's face crumpled for a moment and then hardened. "You aren't shy about asking a lot, are you? What's to keep me from walking out the door and going after her myself?"

The two women stood toe to toe, eyeballing each other. Rhi had to crane her head back to meet the taller woman's glare but didn't shrink away.

Molay stepped around them to examine Rhi, who was dressed in a gigantic t-shirt and a scowl. He crossed his huge arms over his chest thoughtfully. "It's true. He's done nothing to the child, I am certain, because Rhi would have felt it, as would I. That worries me more than anything else - why has he not at least terrorized the child? It's the kind of thing he would be entertained by."

"Maybe he knows what he's in for if he does," Rhi replied, knowing better. Manius did nothing without a motive and she had a crawling suspicion she knew what this motive was.

"Manius was able to block the sunlight this morning at the farm," Pam pointed out. "I'm not the most patient of women. The sooner I cut his gonads off, the better."

"We've got to be ready." Rhi's voice turned pleading, begging Pam for time the other woman had no reason to give. "I know what he's up to, Pam, and we have a better chance of getting Katie back in one piece if we wait." She laid a trembling hand on her friend's arm. "Go get some rest. Katie is going to need you in top form."

The other woman nodded at her friend and left the room, Rhi knew, not to sleep but to sit up, prepare and stare out the window into the mountains, wondering about the fate of her child.

"That's where it is? After all of these years?" Blackthorne reached out to touch the cracked leather of the book. Rhi snatched it away, holding the Bible tightly to her chest. He stepped back from her, holding his hands up in supplication. "I couldn't take it

from you if I wanted to, Rhi.”

The Bible hummed as a green light, tinged with red streaks, escaped from the pages. Rhi thumped it irritably. “Oh, shut up. Whoops, not you guys. Sorry.”

The book gave a little hiccup and shut down. Rhi placed it in the drawer of the nightstand to shut. “It’s sleeping now.”

Molay’s expression was horrified. “You’re not thinking about bringing the thing anywhere near the gate tomorrow night?”

“Didn’t your own sages, truthsayers or whatever the heck, say I’ll destroy the gate with the help of the skull on the date of the original creation of this particular gate?”

He nodded and dread colored his features.

“Tomorrow night’s the night. I’m going to get Pam’s daughter back in one piece and I am going to make sure the town never has to deal with this again, got it? We’re going to do this my way, period. And I’ll tell you what you need to know when you need to know. You haven’t been forthcoming with me so I don’t feel that I need to be very forthcoming with you.” Rhi turned and limped towards the bed. “Now if someone could get me a pail? I have to dry heave for a while. Then I’ll need to feed. I’ll need an accommodating human for an aura check.”

Blackthorne ushered his boss to the door, not answering until he had shut the door behind him. He crossed the room to lift her off her feet and carry her back to the bed. His face was full of questions but none were voiced in his next words.

“The strongest aura you can feed on is mine,” he told her huskily as he leaned her head back on the pillows and arranged the length of her hair over her shoulders, his big, scarred fingers snagging on a black strand here and there.

She reached out her arms to wrap them around his neck and pull him down to kiss his face, inhaling the glow of blue aura she, in her hunger, could see dance around his body. Tentatively, she inhaled a mouthful of the blue light. A small tear escaped and ran down the side of her face as she drank him in. She sensed her body begin to relax and heal with the influx of his spirit.

“Hold me, Jack. Let’s pretend we are normal, boring people with nothing more to worry about tomorrow than gas and grocery bills,” she whispered.

He drew back for a moment. “Even if we win, we can never be those people, not now, Rhi. And, if we’re truthful, we could never have been those people before either. We two are doomed to be interesting people who will meet a bad end.”

“Then let’s meet it head on and go out with a bang.”

* * * *

Blackthorne stared down at the tiny woman in his arms. Rhi was definitely not the woman he married so long ago ... she was Raven and so much more. He had longed for his wife for so long; now he couldn’t imagine letting her go into the light without him at her side again. She had captured his heart as Raven but as Rhi, she owned both his heart and his soul.

He leaned down to gently kiss her lips. She opened to his touch immediately and the familiar flames rose.

“Are you up to this?”

“Your ‘essence’ was like drinking a double mocha cappuccino in a gallon bucket.” Rhi sat up to yank the t-shirt over her head, leaving her smooth, fully healed body bare. She slid her arms around his neck and pressed against him.

Desire rose the moment he took her mouth. His hands kneaded her compact backside as he deepened the kiss, consuming her heat. She wrapped her legs around his waist and busily pulled at his clothes. He groaned and disengaged her hands to get to his feet and strip his clothes off.

As sleek as a cat, she slid off the bed to stand in front of him, drinking in the sight of his body.

“You know,” he said, pulling her in his arms, “ladies in your last life were a bit more ... modest.”

She slid out of his arms to lie back on the bed, her cat green gaze never leaving his face. “Aren’t you glad this isn’t that life?”

He leaned over her, pinning her with the long hard length of his body. He leaned low to kiss her mouth and then torturously worked his way down her neck. She twisted in his arms and her skin glowed with blue light.

“Let me show you what I consider vogue,” he whispered, raw hunger flavoring his words. Her body shivered as he tasted her breasts, her belly, and then drank from her aching core, burying his face in her flesh until she could not tell what part of her was not also a part of him.

Finally, he rose above her and braced himself on his forearms, staring into her glowing eyes. Rhi gasped at the sensation as he slowly entered her, forcing her body to writhe and arch beneath him. Blue flames spread through their limbs. Then he moved, heated sinew and velvet, the sensation sweeping both into a maelstrom of desire. The moment she decided that her heart could not take another powerful thrust, the orgasm burst through and she buried her face in his shoulder, muffling her cries. A moment later, his climax filled her body and soul as he buried his face in her soft skin to keep from calling out. Then there was the night, the lace of the bed, his arms around her and the illusion he could protect and keep her safe.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The next day found the group in the cozy kitchen of Pearl's historic house, draining the massive coffee pot and feeding Ellie Mae scraps of leftover bacon.

Outside, snow fell in a bi-polar fashion, torrents one minute then a patch of clear sky and sunshine for the next ten. Rhi, Blackthorne and Molay were pulling on their gear as Pam, already dressed or maybe still dressed from the night before, kicked at her chair leg.

Chief Nicholas Boyd sat on the counter nearby, glaring at his great-great grandmother over the rim of his coffee cup.

"If you'd listened to me and kept them from opening casinos in this town, this would never have happened, Nana," he stated, ignoring the startled glances of the other occupants of the room.

Pearl, stirring eggs on the gas range, didn't bat an eye or even bother to turn to face her grandson. "It would have made no difference at all, Nicky; I've said it a hundred times. He would have found another way ... this was fated." She filled a plate with eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy and handed it to him. "Now eat your brunch, sweet pea, you need your strength. You are absolutely pale."

The motherly attitude of the woman towards the chubby policeman jarred Rhi. Pearl appeared to be at least ten years younger than Boyd. The only flaw in her beauty this morning was her red-rimmed eyes, bloody from crying and sleeplessness. The death of Houston had pained her, her grief obvious and raw.

"That's just weird, man," Rhi muttered as she laced her boots. Crying would come later for her, maybe. She rolled her grief for her dead friend and guilt over Katie into a poisonous ball and held it tight in the pit of her stomach. If the emotions burst loose, she'd be catatonic.

"What is taking so long?" Pam pulled her pistol, now carried in a shoulder holster, out to inspect the weapon for the fifth time. "We have to meet your knights, Bobby Wayne and his group of freaks at the Hospitality House in about 15 minutes."

Pam wore her grief and anger openly, like an icy badge. She would spill blood soon. The premonition flowed around the thin blackjack dealer's shoulders clearly to Rhi. She could only pray any acts fueled by a mother's fury would not cost her friend her soul.

Rhi straightened and nodded towards the phone on the wall nearby. "I'm waiting for a call."

The phone rang and, at a nod from Pearl, she picked it up and spoke one word.

"What?"

"How rude, Mrs. Blackthorne. Whoops, I guess that's a sore point, huh?" Manius Black's voice was smug and untouched by remorse.

"How's Katie? Are you sick of cartoons yet?"

There was silence on the other end of the line. Rhi swallowed a smile, imagining the man's discomfort at her statement. Rhi knew he wouldn't touch the little girl or upset

her in any way. He needed someone pure of heart, pure of intent.

“How do you know I haven’t cooked her up and fed her to my little friends?”

“Because I’d feel it and smash the skull in a second,” she retorted, hoping he didn’t know if she were able to destroy the skull or not.

“I have to admit, the creature is growing on me. The little darling introduced me to the a 24-hour cartoon station right after she ate her cereal. I’m no longer sure I want to give her back. She’s like a pet.”

Rhi suppressed her revulsion at the idea of the mass murderer watching television with Katie. He was capable of reaching out and snapping the child’s neck on a whim.

“I suppose you’d like to meet me at moonrise tonight at my mausoleum?” She asked the question calmly.

“With the skull, please; it’s all I need. I know everything else you wouldn’t share with me the last time we played. You can bring my brother, that dreadful bore Molay and his knights, Pearl and that harridan you like to hang out with but they have to stay outside. I rather like the idea of them right where I can see them. Bring me the skull and your pretty butt and I’ll let the kid take off with her mummy. Screw with me and I’ll slit the girl’s teeny tiny throat right there. If you want to go to war over her, it’ll have to be after I’ve got the skull in hand and am standing in front of the gate. It’s the only way you’ll ever lay hands on the child,” he stated and hung up. His confidence was unsettling. He didn’t care if Molay and the Brotherhood were with her. He had that much faith in his power.

She slid the phone back into its cradle and turned to face the room. Pam stood and stretched, her fists coming dangerously close to the light fixture. “Time to go.”

Rhi retrieved her Bible, gun and the cavalry saber from the counter. She also, with some effort, picked up the heavy backpack Bobby Wayne delivered earlier that morning at her request, refusing Blackthorne’s silent offer to carry it for her with a sharp glare. The less he knew about the bag, the better. “Coming?”

“We’ll meet you downtown in a few minutes. Nicky has to finish his breakfast and be convinced of a few things, like why he can’t call out the National Guard,” Pearl said as Molay, Blackthorne and Pam rose to follow Rhi from the room. The chief managed to look sheepish as they filed out.

“Uh, *why* can’t they call out the National Guard?” Pam asked her.

“Well. It might be a bit more difficult to contain if the government gets involved, Pam, and can you imagine what the geniuses in the US military would do with access to a Gate? Pearl is not able to permanently wipe everyone’s memories, you know, some people are resistant.”

They both shuddered at the thought.

Outside, Pam trudged silently beside her, the M-16 at alert. Rhi took her friend’s arm and together they climbed into the SUV to head for the red brick storefronts of downtown Cripple Creek.

* * * *

The crowd gathered under Bobby Wayne’s direction in the front hall of the Hospitality House Hotel was a motley collection of the best, worst and weirdest citizens Cripple Creek had to offer. The Greek revival hotel, which once served as the Teller County Hospital, had a fleet of well-used pickup trucks and SUV’s parked in front of the building. Inside, some of the more open minded hunters, miners, survivalists, casino

employees and members of the alien Abduction Club mingled and chatted.

The most frightening part, Rhi decided as she took stock of the group, was that they were all openly armed and dressed for extreme weather. Someone told Betty that they were hunting a type of vampire, because the older woman was completely decked out in warm, black, Goth clothing. Silver crosses hung from her neck and ears and several wooden stakes were in her belt along with a wicked hunting knife and a .357 magnum.

After giving Rhi a tap on the shoulder, Blackthorne and Molay deserted them the moment they got into the front hall to engage Bobby Wayne in a quiet but intense conversation. Several large, dangerous looking men with the same aged wisdom in their faces as Molay and Blackthorne stood off in a corner. The strangers examined the crowd with expression ranging from distrustful to downright amused. Pam's father, Colonel Douglas, stood beside them on crutches, in full battle dress, another warrior. Rhi noticed her friend didn't move to greet her one functioning parent. The pain was too raw. Both knew what needed to be done.

Max Hunter, the general manager of the Silver Pearl, stood off to one side as he dug through the pockets of his greatcoat, double checking the locations of his ammunition and weapons. Max, a man of few words, grunted at the girls and continued his weapons check. Stephen, Rhi and Pam's pit boss stood nearby, holding both his and Max's shotguns. He gave them a cheery nod. His normal timidity with human beings obviously didn't extend to demons.

"I wondered when you girls would get here," Stephen said as they approached. "I should have known you'd be at the center of this."

"What exactly have they told you?" Pam asked him curiously. Pam had requested early in the operation her daughter's kidnapping be kept quiet simply because she could not bear to talk about the subject to concerned friends.

The pit boss gave them an amused grin. "The forces of Hell are about to descend upon us like they did back in the gold rush days. I could have told them that those guys descended upon us long ago, when we decided to put in nickel slots near a town like Colorado Springs that's filled to the brim with military retirees."

"So you know about the fire and the fight in the 1800s?"

"Sure. Doesn't everyone? My great-grandfather fought them. And now I guess I'll have to as well, although there's also a good chance I'll make a break for it if things get nasty. You know how I feel about blood, especially my own."

Pam and Rhi glanced at each other in disgust. Did anyone *not* know that Cripple Creek was overrun with evil except the two of them?

Nearby, two men in flannel shirts and barn jackets carefully opened a wriggling burlap sack the pair held between them and peeked inside. The tie to the sack was a leather cord from which a crucifix dangled. The religious symbol gave off blue sparks when it came in contact with the bag. The bag itself had been embroidered with a variety of symbols and appeared to be very old. Catching demons in bags might have been a fun pastime for someone at some time. "I told you there were gremlins in the woods, Earl. My great-grand pappy hunted stray ones for years after the little varmints burned the town down. Gramps told me that he was truly sad when they all finally got hunted down. There wasn't nothin' fun to chase no more."

The other man peered into the bag and jumped back when a small, clawed hand

snatched at his face. "Shit!"

Pam turned to face Rhi. "How come all of the crazy people are with us?"

"You have to ask?" she replied, relieved Pam was able to smart off, even if it was just a little. She surveyed the crowd. "Don't be dissing my people, Pam. They're about to take on a demon storm and don't seem particularly worried about it. They might as well be facing 'Biker Day' at the casinos."

"Don't be underestimating 'Biker Day'. It's pretty bad," Pam said. "And Rhi?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Rhi was taken aback. "For what? Getting people killed and your daughter snatched by an overdressed dark wizard wannabe?"

"There is that. But when push came to shove, most would have headed for the nearest hole, jumped in and pulled it in behind them. Katie's the only worthwhile thing I've produced in this life and I'll take on Hell for her. I'm glad you're going with me." Pam gave her a weak grin.

Nearby, the two men with a demon in a bag were delving into a serious discussion about the possibility of having the creature's head stuffed and mounted, much to the distress of the demon, which started to whimper.

Stephen, who stood nearby in awed silence, watching the bag jump on its own, suddenly regained his cheer.

"Okay girls! Let's get a picture while Pam is in her cammos and Rhi is in her - ski pants and hiking boots in a battle is so pedestrian, girl! You should at *least* be wearing leather!" He pulled out a digital camera to photograph the pair.

Blackthorne returned, carrying his sword in a sheath across his back, his gun over one shoulder. His crisp, black fatigues contrasted wildly with the rest of the motley crowd's scratched together battle wear.

"This is what I am talking about! *Look* at this guy! And what about *her*!"

Stephen's face took on the reverent glow he usually saved for discussions about aging actresses from the 70's. Pearl obviously had arrived.

Blackthorne glowered and took his place to the right of Rhi.

"Everyone's moving into the respective locations," he told her. "The locals will be holding back, hiding on the back streets until they get the signal to defend the town. A few groups will be in and around the houses near the cemetery to back us up with Bobby Wayne. Colonel Douglas will be in a truck in the driveway of one of the houses off of Teller One, ready to swoop in and get Katie as soon as we get our hands on her and get her out of there. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Rhi hadn't told anyone but Pam the extent of her plans, after instructing her friend on the particulars of shielding her thoughts. But she had left one important element out from her explanation. "I can't explain it all but keep whatever is up there busy once Hell breaks loose. Especially your brother. Shoot him, stab him, garrote him but keep him away from me and the gate once we get Katie away from him."

Dressed in brown suede pants and a sheepskin-lined parka, Pearl worked the crowd like a diva. She glided through the hall with her grandson trailing behind her, greeting many of the locals by name. It was obvious that the majority of the long term residents were well aware of the identity of the woman.

"So much for anonymity, huh? Why didn't anyone in town share this stuff with

me?” Pam complained.

Bobby Wayne jumped up on the hotel’s counter and whistled to get the attention of the assembled crowd. The man was in his element and enjoying himself. “Okay. We all know where we have to be and we all know what has to happen. The storm’s about to break so it will hopefully keep whoever is uninformed and stupid inside the casinos until this is over. We’ll not be able to see the moon rise because of the snowstorm, but be prepared for action at 0600. Until then, be in place by 0300. Any other locals or visitors you can convince to leave before then, please do so. This is not going to be a good place come nightfall.”

“What about the graveyard, Bobby? Who’s covering the place where this shindig is gonna start?” One of the men struggling with the sack full of demon called.

Bobby Wayne’s face turned vicious. “These gentlemen from – err – a highly secretive government agency,” he waved a hand at the assembled Brotherhood knights, “and some of you, whom I have already put into my group, and Rhi and Pam will handle the graveyard. I might have a few other surprises in store for the varmints as well. Be sure of this: if they get past us into town, we will do our best to whittle them down before they get to you.”

A cheer rang through the room and the crowd dispersed. Batty Betty, on her way out the door, turned and grabbed Rhi’s arm in a talon-like hand. Blackthorne and Pam both moved as one towards the old woman but Rhi held up a hand for calm.

“Is there something you wanted to say to me, Betty?”

The older woman smiled and her face suddenly revealed the remnants of what had been a great beauty in spite of the wrinkled skin and the yellowed teeth in her mouth that shone oddly in the gloom of the hall.

“Don’t be afraid. Hell cannot hold the pure of heart, child.”

She turned and pirouetted away, leaving Rhi behind to stare at the retreating form. “I can’t believe anyone sold that woman a gun.”

“You won’t be going anywhere near Hell so it won’t be a problem, will it Rhi?” Blackthorne towered over her, his face divided by worry and anger.

“No, Blackie, I won’t be going near Hell,” Rhi replied in a whisper, for the first time using his nickname. A glimmer of hope burned for a moment and she firmly pushed the notion away.

Outside, storm clouds blackened the afternoon sky, and snowflakes as large as casino tokens started to fall.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The mausoleum in the back corner of the Mt. Pisgah graveyard was beautiful, Rhi decided as she examined the dead brush hiding the building in the summer. Built of imported, rose-colored marble, the neo-classical building was adorned with small Doric columns. Dug into the hillside, the building was scarcely visible to passersby on the road. She paused for a moment beside a recessed shelf holding the small bust of a slender, doe-eyed girl. She shook her head, hard. She could hear the collective breath of the group behind her being held, waiting to see when she would break, as brittle as a coffee mug microwaved one too many times.

“Keys,” she asked Blackthorne without glancing into his face.

He handed her an old-fashioned iron key on a giant metal ring. She fumbled a bit with the lock, her hands shaking, and the lock on Raven Blackthorne’s crypt snapped open. Rhi turned to face the circle of knights who surrounded her. Pam, loaded down with packs, stood off to one side, a little closer than the men. Ellie Mae stood at her side. The dog and the woman were the only beings Rhi trusted at this moment.

“It’s nowhere near time for sunset yet, even though we can’t see it through these clouds. I would like a few minutes alone, please. Except for Pam and Ellie.” Knowing how this would wound Blackthorne, Rhi fought the urge to reach a hand out to touch his arm. A bigger wound was in store for him later.

She’d been holding back the coming storm for most of the day, allowing the clouds to swell and grow above the town. When unleashed, the storm would be a weapon. The weather cover would be a valuable tool to whichever side had prepared properly, hopefully theirs. But she felt as though her mind held up the sky and the sky wasn’t too happy about it.

Blackthorne hovered nearby, ignoring her request. The other knights took up positions farther out from the gate. Out of the corner of her eye she tried catch a glimpse of Bobby Wayne and the men under his command. They were nowhere to be seen. But Rhi had the feeling the Mount Pisgah Cemetery was in for a hell of a fireworks show that evening. Bobby Wayne did love his demolitions training. The snow in several places near the site appeared to be too well groomed and flat.

“Okay Rhi, I’ve followed your lead on this all day. It’s about time you trust me. What are you planning?” His eyes flashed with neon blue light, betraying his emotion. He towered over her as she stood by her most recent final resting place.

Tears streaked her face. Hardening her heart and her resolve, she picked the most hurtful thing to say, to drive him as far away as possible. Her love for him was the one thing that would make her hesitate. Love. Her stomach clenched. Yes, she loved him. She had loved him all of her life, somewhere deep in her soul. Every romance she had ever embarked upon, from her first crush in second grade to her failed marriage, came up short and she had never known why until this moment. Only one man in the universe fit her. And he would never allow her to do what she must to fight this war. She had no choice. “I don’t know how you guys sneak up on anyone when your eyes glow every

time you're pissed off. Trust you? Since when have you trusted me, Blackthorne? You've lied to me from the first day I met you. You trust me first, sweetheart."

Pam strolled over, openly checking and rechecking her gun. "I think she said she needs some alone time."

With a burning glance, he stalked away to lean near a Woodsmen-of-the-World tombstone. "Go ahead. Nobody's stopping you. But I'd hold off on getting the thing out of that Bible until your hostage arrives - that's just a suggestion to keep Pam's daughter alive."

"Jerk." Pam re-holstered her pistol and turned to where Rhi struggled with the huge iron door.

"Let's see how many nasty names we can call him later, okay? Never mind him, help me get this thing opened." The first snowflake hit Rhi's nose. She paused and took a deep breath, swallowing a sob. There was no time for sniffing. "I can't hold back the storm much longer."

On cue, the heavy door opened. Rhi fumbled for her flashlight as a musty mixture of scents, sulfur, dust and death, hit them. Three steps down, she stood for a moment and allowed her gaze to adjust to the gloom. A chill seeped through her heavy clothing as Ellie Mae padded past to inspect the dusty, not-quite empty room. The tomb was a perfect box, dimly lit in the daytime by a tiny row of windows near the ceiling. The dog cocked her head and trotted towards a coffin standing on a stone pedestal off to one side, which she inspected with her sensitive nose for a moment. Then, with a deep sigh, Ellie Mae did three turns before curling up at the foot of the pedestal.

Behind her, Pam turned on the battery-powered lamp in her hand and exposed the room to harsh electric light. Both women gasped in amazement.

"Ok, this isn't too bad," Pam whispered as she examined the crypt. Off to one side stood the stone pedestal topped by what they could see was an elaborately carved sarcophagus. The lid was covered with carvings of runes, vines and flowers. A simple brass plaque on the side announced the name of the occupant, Raven Blackthorne.

Four huge iron torch holders lined each side wall while the back wall was dominated by the façade of a huge gate, outlined in gold and iron, covered in jewels, runes and pictographs telling the story of the Gates and the inevitable fate of those who dared tamper with the order of the universe in such a careless fashion.

"I can't believe no one's ransacked this place in all of these years. The crap on that gate is worth more than the combined wealth of the entire town." Pam lit the torches, bathing the room in a golden glow.

"My tomb *has* been broken into," Rhi remarked as she placed her backpack on the floor and dug into one of the other packs. Triumphant, she arose with a crowbar in hand and headed for the coffin. "Blackthorne would feel thieves breaking in and pop in to gut them. Their bones are probably scattered all over these mountains. But the picture on the wall is not the Gate, it's the doorway into the hill to the tunnel that leads to the Gate."

The other woman stared at her in horror. "That guy is beginning to freak me out, just so you know. *What* are you doing? There is no way you are opening your own coffin. This is so Freudian."

Rhi was busily prying open the box.

An outraged expression on her long face, Ellie Mae got up grumbling and left to sit on her haunches nearby, facing the front door to the crypt.

“Shut up and help me. Manius won’t let us carry anything resembling a weapon in when we make the exchange. I want this close and accessible. We might get lucky. He’d never believe I’d have the nerve to put anything in my own coffin and for that matter, neither will his brother. So the backpack goes in here. And my sword, your machete and how about a few guns? What do you think?”

“I think it scares the crap out of me that Bobby Wayne got this so easily and he lives right down the road from me. Oh, stuff the thing full, your other self was teeny from what everyone says and she’s too dead to notice. There should be plenty of room.” Pam joined Rhi at the coffin to help lift the lid. “You open the gate, go *inside* and set the itty bitty nuke to close up the gate? How are you getting back out? And won’t we all get fried by this thing or at least glow a bit?”

Rhi didn’t meet her friend’s eyes. “I’m fairly powerful now, Pam. I’ll get back out before it blows. The gate’s invulnerable from the outside but from the inside – the thing will crumple like a napkin from a fast food restaurant. But from our side, there will be nothing. The gate will just disappear. And yes, it is scary Bobby Wayne got this kind of thingamabob on such short notice. Where did he get that kind of money and who the hell is he friends with? You might want to inspect his barn at some point in the near future.”

“What if Manius kills my daughter because you stuffed this in here?”

“He won’t touch Katie or make her mad. He needs her to open the gate. A child is always pure of heart enough to open the gate. The ancients used kids all of the time – lying to them and threatening their families to get them to open the Gates,” she replied, focusing on the widening crack in the coffin. Her own heart lurched at the sound of wood splintering somewhere in the back of the coffin. “It’s coming!”

Pam looked horrified. “*You* aren’t thinking of using Katie to open it?”

“Hell no, she’ll be out of here long before we get that far.”

Pam joined her and added her own wiry strength to the struggle. “And how are you going to get her out of here? We’ll be down a tunnel, you remember.”

“Would you believe I set up a ride out for her over a hundred years ago? And *I’m* going to open the gate so I can destroy the thing.” Rhi pushed up on the coffin lid as hard as possible. One more good shove. She braced herself.

“Let me get this straight. Everything rides on *your* purity? You do realize you’re a *divorced blackjack dealer*, right? Pure? You committed adultery last night!”

“Was it adultery if I married him in a past life and didn’t divorce him?” Rhi asked.

The lid slid back, revealing a tiny shriveled body, dressed in rotting Victorian clothing. The long black hair still flowed down Raven’s shoulders and a huge cameo had been pinned on her shirtwaist. Behind them, Ellie Mae whimpered. A death-like chill settled in the hearts of both of the women who stood over the coffin.

“Pam, only someone truly pure of heart would face her own dead, rotted body. Now give me the pack.” Cringing, Rhi pushed the desiccated body to the side to make room. “Let’s not totally disarm ourselves. He’ll think we’re idiots otherwise or worse, up to something.”

* * * *

They stepped out into a maelstrom of snow and ice, which had descended upon the town with ferocious speed the moment after Rhi opened the coffin. The glowing

lights of the casinos in town could not be seen through the snow.

There was no sign of the half dozen members of the Brotherhood or Bobby Wayne's group. Only Blackthorne, Molay and Pearl stood outside, the madam having joined them by means of another large SUV parked nearby on the winding road leading through the graveyard.

Slivers of snow stung Rhi's face as she joined the group, still shadowed by Pam and Ellie Mae. Blackthorne had remained silent upon her arrival. His gaze swept over her once and then turned towards the sky.

"He should be here soon. Where'd everybody go? Do ya'all really think he won't notice them hiding in the woods?" Rhi asked as she brushed the flakes out of her hair. Her hands, even in heavy-duty gloves, were freezing. They would be warm enough soon, she told herself drearily.

"Of course he'll know they're hiding nearby," Pearl replied. The famous lavender gaze glittered above the cashmere scarf wrapped around her head and face. "But he'll be too arrogant to ask how many or what they're armed with, won't he?"

"Great," Rhi muttered. She pulled her backpack off to dig out the Bible. "I'm going to war with a pack of ancient knights who kill people as easily as I step on cockroaches, a conspiracy nut and his buddies, a psychotic ex-marine, and a 130 year old ex-hooker."

"One hundred and twenty nine," Pearl corrected absently before pointing upwards at the swirling black sky. The smell of brimstone abruptly overwhelmed the clean scent of falling snow and the roar of a descending dragon broke the silence of the storm. "They're here."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Through his night vision goggles, Bobby Wayne Bedford couldn't take his eyes off of the shadowy figure of Rhi Brennan. The fear and uncertainty he'd been plagued with had been purged because now Bobby Wayne knew what it was he fought and the knowledge gave him a certain peace.

He was toasty warm, parked in his pickup in the driveway of an abandoned mining shack. Beside him on the seat lay a switchboard that controlled the hundreds of pounds of explosives he had wired the graveyard with over the preceding days at the request of Houston and Pearl DeVere. The loss of the fiery little pilot hurt.

"I'll not lose another man," Bobby Wayne swore out loud. He thought better of that for a moment and added a hasty caveat. "Or woman. Or dog."

In warded houses and cars near the cemetery, he and fifteen of the more dangerous locals in his force waited for the exodus of an army. The seven knights who accompanied Molay to Cripple Creek were nowhere to be seen but he could feel their presence, powerful and ancient.

The survivalist had waited most of his life for the war he was convinced he'd been born to fight. Everything centered upon the woman in the graveyard, who stood, ramrod straight next to her husband.

"I hope you know what you're doing, little girl."

A shadow appeared beside the truck and opened the door.

"You shouldn't leave this unlocked," remarked the chief as he climbed in beside him. Chief Boyd appeared to be half frozen as he cradled his rifle in his arms. He peered out into the snow.

"I knew you were coming," replied the other man. "How was flying over in the snow with Granny?"

"It would have been cold, but Nana decided to drive here."

Bobby Wayne grinned. "Nana?"

"Shut up."

"Here it comes," the survivalist told him, pointing at the moving shadows on the hillside. One in particular was huge and just landing.

* * * *

A single man rode astride the dragon when the beast alighted nearby. Troy swung his leg over the creature's back and slid to the ground. He sauntered over to the group, reaching for an elegant, nonchalant attitude he didn't possess.

Pam confronted him as soon as he got close enough for her to shove the barrel of her gun in his face.

"Where is Katie at?" she demanded.

Nonplused, he moved the gun aside and stepped closer. "You know, you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition, Pam. Maybe you should have listened in school a bit more and partied a bit less. But then, if you weren't a party girl, you wouldn't even have the little bastard, would you?"

A hard, bony knee shot up into his groin with a thunk. The dragon watched the scene benignly, without moving. Rhi could have sworn she spotted a bit of a grin on the creature's hideous mouth.

"Where's Katie at, asshole? If this is a double cross to get us to bring the skull out in the open, you're going to catch the worst of it, you know," Pam hissed at him through clenched teeth. "Looks like your dragon doesn't care what I do to you, so this might get nasty."

Rhi smirked at the man rolling on the snow-covered ground. She leaned over to examine Troy, noting the front of his pants were wet. "Wow - I think you might have burst something on the poor guy. Whoops, never mind - he tinkled on himself."

"Would you ladies stop entertaining yourselves long enough for me to ask this idiot where my brother's hiding?" Blackthorne bent down to lift the smaller man up by the back of his parka.

Rhi placed a restraining hand on his arm. "Wait." She pointed at the wrought iron gates of the cemetery, half visible across the vast space of tombstone filled tundra. The approaching headlights belonged to a sleek black luxury version of the SUV's that inhabited every driveway in town. The new arrival made its way through the gate and up the hill towards them. The snow fell around the huge vehicle, avoiding the metal. The tires and wheels were spotless, even though the gravel road through the cemetery was marked every foot or so with slush and mud filled potholes.

"How does he do that? I can never keep a vehicle clean up here," Pearl muttered.

"I should have known he wouldn't ride here on a dragon, the trip might muss his hair." Blackthorne still dangled Troy from one hand, held straight out from his side. His brother's sidekick struggled, trying to take a swing at Blackthorne or anyone he could get near. The next second he unceremoniously dumped the other man onto the ground where Pam stood over him, one of her boots holding him face down in the snow.

"This position seems to have become a habit for us, Troy," she noted cheerfully.

After parking near the foot of the hill, Manius got out from behind the wheel and waved to the group before stepping back to the rear door of the vehicle to remove Katie from, of all things, a car seat. The little girl was dressed in a tiny mink parka and the smallest sheepskin boots Rhi had ever seen. She looked like an ad for designer baby clothes.

"Hi, Mommy!" Katie called sleepily as her captor carried her up the hill. Behind them an ominous dark presence rose up from the ground to follow the pair, their forms obscured by the falling snow. Large and small, an army of perhaps a hundred demons in varying shapes and sizes darted in and out of the crowded tombstones, advancing up the hill. They stopped short as Manius Black approached with Katie Douglas balanced on his hip.

He had dressed as if he were going to an afternoon football game in Denver, in a turtleneck, wool slacks and a sheepskin coat. Manius' pulled together appearance ended with the sword buckled across his back. His handsome face was haggard and wasted from the effort of controlling the army behind him and the dragon parked on the hill above. Rhi shuddered at the thought of what he would do when he had a legion of demons to do his bidding and the skull with which to control them. Blackthorne's younger brother would be as stupidly ambitious as his predecessors.

"Really, Troy, you should try to keep your mouth shut when you're near these

women,” he noted with a weary grin as he approached.

“We thought you’d changed your mind.” Rhi eyed the arm with which he held Katie. His hand held an ornate dagger, curved against the little girl’s stomach. The child was perfectly positioned for a deadly drop onto the wicked-looking blade. “Is that a knife in your hand?”

“Shush!” As Manius spoke, he nuzzled Katie’s golden hair. The obviously drugged child sleepily smiled back at him and rested her head on his shoulder. “You’ll upset the baby! I gave her something to calm her down, but we wouldn’t want her to squirm too much, would we?”

Pam kicked Troy out of the way and lunged towards him, only to be caught around the waist by Blackthorne.

“Hold up, soldier,” he commanded in a whisper.

Manius examined the shadowy twilight expanses of the graveyard, made even more obscure by the falling snow. “I know your buddies are out there and you can take your shot in a few minutes. The young ladies, my assistant and I will be going down to the gate unescorted. You can try to deal with whatever comes back up - of course after I allow Miss Douglas to leave with her daughter following the opening of the gate.”

“I have to open the first door to the tunnel,” replied Blackthorne dryly. “Rhi can’t open it.”

“Yes, I can,” Rhi corrected him, interrupting a staring contest between the brothers threatening to go on for way too long. “I took the words from your mind in the night. And I’m freezing my rear off out here, so let’s go.”

Incredulous, he turned. “You speak of trust and then steal the words of opening from my mind as I sleep? What’s happened to you, Rhi? Is there nothing left of Raven in your soul but her power?”

She couldn’t let him go with her, her mind wailed. She would never be able to do what she had to do if Blackthorne was nearby.

Blackthorne stalked away. The tenuous thread that reattached them the night before broke. He turned again to speak as the women and his brother made their way towards the crypt. “Why does she get to go?” He pointed at Pearl, who joined the little group.

“It’s always good to have someone along who possesses a decent sense of style,” his brother told him blandly. He addressed the women standing at the doorway. “All weapons will be left here, please. Don’t forget your tacky sword, Pearl.”

Rhi removed a buck knife from a sheath around her waist and a gun from the holster under her arm to place it in the growing pile beside the open door. She suppressed a nervous giggle as Pearl and Pam each relieved themselves of weapon after weapon. After a sizable pile of armaments had appeared, both women nodded at each other in appreciation and turned to face the door.

Manius stood waiting with the sleeping child on his hip. Nearby stood Rhi, a limping Troy and Ellie Mae. The dog had ambled along, unnoticed, beside them. On the rise beyond the doors, Blackthorne stood like a menacing thundercloud, his huge broadsword drawn.

“This isn’t over, Manius,” he growled.

“Not by far, brother,” Manius replied. Rhi jumped in terror when he shifted Katie on his hip, rubbing the dagger against her little body.

“Would you please watch it?” She took the Bible from beneath her coat.

“Is that where it’s been?” Manius patted Katie’s curls as he descended the stairs.

“I should have known. You were always such a Puritan. Shall we go down?”

* * * *

The lines etched across the gate on the back wall of the tomb blazed into brightness when they reached the base of the stairs.

“Want to pay your respects?” Manius asked with a smirk.

“I would’ve thought you wouldn’t fall for such an easy line.” Rhi rolled her eyes.

“I guess I overestimated you. Now can I get to work or would you like to miss the moonrise?” She walked with a slight swagger past the coffin, allowing the wretched knight to observe a woman covering her terror with false audacity. Let him believe she was frightened and weak.

Heck, she *was* frightened. But she couldn’t afford weakness.

Holding the book under her arm, Rhi placed her hands on each side of the gate over the top of the gold filigree representing the locks.

“*“Like the dew on the mountain, like the foam on the river, like the bubble on the fountain, Thou art gone, and forever!”*” Rhi spoke the stolen words and stepped back. The wall faded, leaving only a jeweled gate, which swung open, revealing a large tunnel roughly the same diameter as the tomb. A staircase, lit by an unsourced red glow, led downwards.

“That didn’t sound like an ancient incantation,” Pam remarked from behind her.

“This gate was built by my - by Blackthorne after Raven died.” Rhi stepped forward, trying not to think about the man who stood waiting outside the tomb. She hadn’t told him goodbye out of fear that he would see what lay in her heart and mind. “It’s a quote from Sir Walter Scott. I used to like his writing. I used to like a lot of things. This,” she indicated the tunnel in front of them, “used to be a hole in the ground with a big rock sealing it off. Shall we go down?”

“Ladies first,” Manius said with a nod of his head.

Pam and Rhi hesitated for a moment as Pearl passed them with Ellie Mae at her side to begin the decent. She paused on the stairway. Even the eerie glow of the tunnel beautifully lit her features.

“Coming, girls?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Outside the tomb, the snow was like bee stings when the ice particles hit bare skin. Bobby Wayne and the chief took turns with the night vision goggles, watching the motionless man on the hill. In the growing darkness of the coming night, Blackthorne was made of stone, surrounded by a creeping fog. The crowd of advancing demons, creeping closer to where the knight stood, made Bobby Wayne nervous. There was no sign of Blackthorne's brother knights or Bobby Wayne's men.

He turned to the chief. "How long do we have to wait?"

"When they get close enough to bite him on the ass or when Rhi gives the signal to attack, I suppose," the chief replied with a shrug.

"She never said what the signal would be - but I suppose with her being a woman, it will be something obvious."

The dragon took to the air. The beast spit a great stream of fire from its jaws, setting the hill ablaze before swirling towards the dimly lit little town below. There was a collective gasp and the gathering of demons surged forward to fall upon the knight. His sword blazed blue and his brothers rose from the earth and darted out of the sky to stand beside him. Their swords threw crackles of blue sparks into the storm.

Bobby's Wayne's truck roared to life. He mashed the pedal to the floor as he tore through a field to get to the fence of the graveyard.

At the same moment, several four-wheel drive vehicles full of locals, armed to the teeth, burst through the garage doors of the houses close to the bottom of the hill.

Several of the locals rode in the beds of the pickups, equipped with a variety of armaments, cocked and ready. The trucks lined up beside Bobby Wayne in a spoke pattern behind the fence separating Cripple Creek from the cemetery. A number of halogen spotlights powered up for better accuracy and to make the demon hordes uncomfortable. Then they waited.

In the cab of the truck, Bobby Wayne reached for his switchboard. The chief threw open the door.

"Looks like it's time to party! See you at Little Round Top," Boyd yelled over his shoulder. Pearl's great-grandson pulled a sword out of the bed of the truck and gave the weapon a rather competent looking swish before slamming the door shut. He climbed into the bed of the truck, popped open the toolbox and picked up one of the M-16s hidden inside and banged on the roof of the cab.

"Don't you know about any other guns, old man?"

"Wonder who taught him how to do that with a sword?" Bobby Wayne muttered, ignoring the question as he fiddled with his control board. He waited until the largest demon he could spot, one roughly the size and shape of a rhinoceros, thundered down the hill. Flipping a switch, Bobby Wayne let loose the wrath of God in the form of blessed and holy explosives.

He watched the being as it disintegrated in the light thrown up by the explosion. "Amen." He began flipping switches in earnest.

The parts of the demonic herd turned from the hill by the explosions and awesome power of the knights ran full tilt towards the iron fence surrounding the cemetery, straight for the town.

A barrage of automatic weapons fire cut down the first few that made it to the fence. The volunteers fired at will from the dubious protection of their vehicles and smoking bodies piled up at the boundary. The ammunition had a drawback, however. It killed smaller demons instantly. But the larger, more human appearing demons were wounded but still able to advance. Like a burst dam, the crowd surged around them and slipped through their positions.

Bobby Wayne picked up his radio as he continued to destroy a significant part of the graveyard.

“They’re coming, Betty. Get to work,” he said calmly.

* * * *

For Rhi, the stairs went on forever. The wide flight of steps twisted and turned downwards into the heart of the mountains. Her mind could feel the mineshafts running along the pit, never encroaching upon the barriers set by the Gates’ creators so long ago. There were no side tunnels as mentioned in the Spanish monk’s account, that particular enchantment seemed to have been lifted by the Gate’s guardian. She winced at the thought of Blackthorne and gripped the Bible so hard her fingers began to go numb.

The temperature quickly shot up. The three women dropped their coats on the stairs, out of the way of Manius, who followed them with Katie in his arms. His face was flushed with concentration and the beads of sweat on his forehead glistened in the unnatural glow of the tunnel. Rhi couldn’t help but wonder what kind of orders he was directing to his demons on the surface.

In one moment the ground shook and a dart of dirt dislodged from the roof of the tunnel, exploding in a cloud of red dust. She shot a glance at Manius, who smirked. He had already betrayed them and didn’t care if she knew. Bobby Wayne was blowing up the surface of the graveyard above because of a demon attack. She reached out a hand to run it along the wall as she made her way down the steps. The enchantment that kept gold miners from tunneling into the cavern would hopefully hold the walls and cavern up against the charges going off above. Hopefully.

Ellie Mae stayed at her side. The dog’s long tongue almost touched the steps as she panted in the heat. Rhi reached out to touch the golden fur and took a moment of comfort. If God could send her Ellie Mae, maybe He was a little bit on her side in this mess.

The bottom of the staircase appeared. The group stood in a large cavern, the size and shape of an amphitheatre. On one side stood a larger version of the golden gates Rhi had opened in the tomb. Twenty-four feet at their zenith and again as wide, the beauty and artifice of the precious metals and jewels the portal had been formed from dazzled from across the wide room.

“My God,” Pam breathed.

“Pretty gaudy, don’t you think?” Rhi asked her conversationally.

“I’m not talking about the gates, Rhi. I’m talking about the floor.” The woman pointed at the dusty shapes on the ground that escaped Rhi’s attention while she was bemused by the gates. The bones of at least two hundred men lay scattered across the floor of the cavern, their hands clutching their swords and the jewels they had probably

thought to steal at one time or another. Many wore the armor of the Spanish conquistadors, while the remainder wore a variety of dress. The skeletons were clothed in everything from the rotted hides worn by the Ute Indians to a six-shooter and spurs worn by an unlucky intruder from the gold rush days. It seemed many had been lured to the gates only to die before them, by the hand of the gate's guardian.

"He killed all of them?" she asked Pearl, her trembling hand again wrapped in the fur on Ellie Mae's back. The madam steadily returned her look. The perfection of her features radiated a cold calm.

"Of course he killed them, Rhiannon," Manius answered for the madam, who began to pick her way through the carnage towards the gate. "My brother's a killer. Like me. Now go."

* * * *

On the roof of the Palace Hotel, Earl and Clay had set up two lawn chairs and anchored a large beach pavilion down with ropes to keep the worst of the snow off of their heads. Protected by plastic sheeting, a pile of weapons lay between the two chairs the men had hauled up to the roof earlier in the day.

"I can't hear shit in this snow except the damned wind howling," Earl complained as he kept watch on the roads into town with his night vision goggles.

Clay arose from his chair to lean on the brick pediment of the roof, his shotgun in hand. "What'd you expect? I knew that asshole Bedford would hog all of the glory over in the graveyard while we sit on our butts down here. Man, it's cold tonight! I think I'm gonna go home, crank up the heat and forget about this crap. We've got our trophy." He indicated a bag lying ominously motionless nearby, "But I think you might have cracked it on the head a bit hard, Earl - Earl?"

The other man had lowered his goggles and stared into the black, snow filled sky in amazement.

"Clay, you might not have to wait for heat," he whispered. "Now hand me the elephant gun. And call the taxidermist. I'm getting this thing's head stuffed for sure."

The sky was abruptly filled with a giant glob of liquid flame belched out by the dragon that soared over the men's heads. The fire flew past the Palace and into the upper story of the Brass Ass Casino. Flames shot into the sky as bewildered casino employees and patrons filed into the street. The satin running suits of the gamblers shone in the street lamps through the falling snow. They were like fat, shiny sausages on display.

"Screw the gun, Clay. Grab my rocket launcher over there before this thing eats those idiots wandering around down there in the street," Earl grumbled as he turned to take the launcher. "This had better not ruin my trophy."

* * * *

"You'd think he'd come down here and clean them out once in a while," Pearl muttered as she picked her way through the crumpled piles of death. Impatiently, she kicked aside bones to clear a path for those behind her. Pam gave the other woman a look and got a shrug in reply. "We haven't got all night."

Following Pearl's cleared path through the minefield of bones, Rhi stood before the gate with the Bible in her hand. Manius crowded behind her, Katie still snug in his arms. The girl's tiny arms were trustingly wrapped around his neck.

Ellie Mae softly growled. Pam and Pearl stood nearby, the madam posed in a leisurely stance. As Rhi leaned over the book, a movement caught her eye. She glanced

up at the silent gate, realizing the red material between the bars was opaque, like the crystal. She leaned forward to examine the material at close range only to step back in horror as an agonized face appeared on the other side, screaming and burning in silence.

The terrible truth hit.

"You can see through to the other side from here," Rhi gasped in wonder, running a hand down the obscenely warm crystal window. A red, scorched hand appeared on the other side to scratch at the pane. The entire surface of the gate was a window of crystal with the screaming masses of the damned looking in from the other side. For a moment Rhi fancied she could hear their screams.

Pam spoke up. "Before you do anything, give me my baby and let me out of here."

Manius replied through gritted teeth, his concentration on the battle above absolute. "When I have the skull in hand." He handed Katie and the dagger off to Troy, who limped down the stairs behind them, his sullen fear tangible.

Rhi gave Pam a warning glance and stared down at the worn book in her hands. She opened the volume's front cover and stared at the picture, careful to keep the artwork from Manius' line of sight.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock." She spoke and reached with her mind into the book, calling both the skull and her chosen guardian forth. A brilliant blue flash blinded the group and the skull was in her hand, the Bible gone. Roughly the same size as a human skull, the relic had been formed of quartz crystal of a strange green shade and mottled with red streaks, which gave the skull the appearance of crying bloody tears.

Manius drew his sword. The hiss of the metal rattled down Rhi's backbone. "Give it to me!" he snapped, grabbing at the relic awkwardly.

Why was he being so clumsy? As suspicion formed in Rhi's mind, she managed to scuttle out of the way. Ellie Mae leaped between them, viciously barking. He drew back his sword to strike but was knocked halfway across the room by another powerful blue flash as the guardian of the skull arrived.

The heavens only knew what the tiny dragon Raven called upon a hundred years before had been dining on in the other plane the creature had been sent to with the skull. The newest dragon to grace the Rocky Mountains was covered with emerald green scales and was roughly the same size as Manius' pet ... or the size of a tractor-trailer. Released from Manius' service, the dragon was now colored in alternating waves of deep green. Its jeweled green gaze stared coldly down at the man who lay sprawled on the floor.

"Kill the kid if it moves!" Manius screamed at Troy, who stood, terrified and clutching a now fully awake Katie in his arms.

Pam and Pearl were in motion. Pearl snatched a sword from the skeletal hand of one of the dead in mid sprint.

"Give me Mommy!" the little girl screamed, kicking and wriggling violently. Pam snatched her child from the man's arms and hid the girl's face against her chest. Pearl, close behind, ran her ancient sword through Troy's ribcage in one smooth motion.

Startled, he gaped at the sight of the protruding sword for a moment before falling backwards into a large pile of bones, joining the other dead before the gate.

"Pam, get on the dragon," Rhi screamed as she ran for the gate. "Do it now! Get her out of here and bring me what I need!"

Pam scrambled onto the dragon's neck with Katie under one arm while Pearl

joined Rhi and Ellie Mae at the gate, another dead man's sword in her hand.

"*That* was your plan?"

"Go!" Rhi shrieked at the beast. It stared down at Manius longingly and took to the air. A fireball worked its way up the throat of the dragon and exploded against the ceiling of the cavern. The glob of liquid fire fell towards where Manius lay stunned but the treacherous knight managed to shield himself at the last moment in glowing red light.

"Well, *that* might have saved us some trouble," remarked Pearl.

The dragon flew up through the falling stone and earth, shouldering aside boulders the size of houses and pickup trucks. Its passengers were well protected by the glowing nimbus projected over them by Rhi from her place in front of the Gate. The dragon fought its way free of the earth, ripping open the pit, exposing everyone to the falling snow and night sky. In a trick of space and time, the rim of the pit was now fifty feet above them, the steep steps a part of the enchantment to hide the gate. Rhi could hear the battle above but had no time to think about it as Manius got to his feet, sword in hand, the hatred on his face pulsating.

"Come to me!" he screamed to the sky as he sprinted for the gate.

"You have to hold them off!" Rhi called to Pearl as she turned and ran her hands over the gate, searching for an unseen niche.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" Pearl demanded as she deftly cut the head off the first demon to leap into the pit directly in front of them.

"To destroy the gate, it's got to be opened!" There! The niche was under her fingertips, disguised in the ornate carvings of the gate. The skull would be a perfect fit.

"Do you *know* what's on the other side of that thing?" Pearl screamed, as she stood at Rhi's back in a defensive stance. "You know I haven't got a chance against the rush of Manius Black, one of the greatest knights ever trained by the Brotherhood? I knew that I should have taken more fencing lessons."

"Trust me!"

Ellie Mae leaped at Manius' face as Pearl parried his first blow and her sword shattered. The man brushed aside the dog with a contemptuous wave of his hand, the red sparks from his movement singeing the animal's fur. The hound flew across the room and hit the wall with a yelp of pain. She collapsed to the floor, stunned.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The greatest madam west of the Mississippi stood weaponless between Manius Black and his prey. Rhi heard her dog's yelp of pain but didn't dare look back. She read the runes inscribed on the skull, watching the crystal begin to glow a sullen red.

As demons poured over the sides of the newly opened pit like cockroaches, Manius raised his sword above the auburn haired woman to strike. "Pearl, you have no idea how much this is going to hurt me. But like sister, like sister!"

Pearl braced herself for the blow, knowing her power might be enough to stop a bullet but not enough to stop the spelled blade. She gathered her essence up anyway, balling her energies into her heart and glowing blue eyes. The explosion from her death might not fry the bastard but it would at least sauté him a bit.

A deafening clang forced her to glance up.

Above her head, Blackthorne's great sword had caught the deathblow. He shoved his brother away with a surge of power that threw the other man across the room.

"You left this," he told her gruffly. Pearl's ornate sword dropped onto the ground beside her. "Take care of Rhi for me." He glanced back at the girl, who stood with her back to him, oblivious to everyone and everything but the skull in her hands.

In a crouch, Manius awaited his brother's charge. Behind him, the knights of the brotherhood dropped into the pit to engage the demons, swords flashing. "Is it finally time for you to kill me, Blackie? Did you get permission," he taunted. His body burned red as he rose into the air to surge forward. Blackthorne rose as well, his sword flaming to blue.

Roaring, with the mindless fury born hatred between those who share blood, the brothers slammed together in the center of the pit in a shower of sparks. They hacked at each other with the blinding speed of those who have tasted the blood of a demon.

* * * *

In front of the gate, Pearl held back the tide, joined by Molay and two of his knights. Rhi could hear the clash of their blades but could do nothing. The green dragon dove into the pit with Pam on its back, armed to the teeth. Landing in a fury of gunfire, she destroyed a dozen of the smaller fiends climbing down the wall as she landed. She leaped off of the dragon to join Rhi at the door and dumped the backpack and the saber beside her friend.

Rhi, not breaking the flow of her chanting, reached down to retrieve the backpack and slid its heavy weight onto a shoulder. She completed the spell, slid the skull into place with a click and reached down for her sword.

"Pam, get the hell out of here - and get my dog," she snapped at her friend as an ominous creak rattled through the nerves of all of the humans and semi humans in the pit. A hairpin crack appeared in the gate.

"I'm not leaving you!" The other woman screamed into the hot wind blowing over them.

"I'm no longer human, I can take the fire. You can't!" Pulling the skull from its

slot and stuffing it in the backpack, Rhi grabbed Pearl by the arm and pulled her back. "Pearl, get Pam and everyone you can out of here!"

The realization that the gate was opening rolled over all those present. Understanding the danger immediately, Pearl grabbed Pam and pushed her onto the back of the dragon, climbing up behind her.

"I'm not leaving!"

"She has her dragon to slay and we have ours," Pearl said grimly as the dragon took to the sky.

Only after they flew out of the pit did Pam remember that she had not grabbed Ellie Mae. But by then it was too late.

Below, Molay and his knights held off the encroaching demons, their backs to the heat of the opening gate.

"This is madness but whatever you are going to do, girl, do it quickly before the Gate is fully opened," Molay called.

Rhi waited for the gate to open wide enough to allow her to squeeze through. Reddened hands and faces appeared in the crack and she shuddered at the possibility of their touch.

The Blackthorne brothers circled each other in the center of the pit, both men beaten, cut and bruised.

"You're rusty," Blackthorne spat, holding his sword in a defensive position.

"It's this age, I'm afraid," replied Manius. "Channel surfing does make one's behind a bit soft." He stepped into his brother's boundaries, unleashing a series of strokes, biting into the other man in several places between the plates of his modern armor.

A flaming demon flew past them, having squeezed its way out of the gate. It flew over Rhi and the knights guarding her.

"What's she doing?" It was agony for him to not turn and see what Rhi was doing. He finally succumbed for a split second and turned his head.

"She's doing exactly what I want, Blackie," screamed his brother in triumph as he rushed at him.

Blackthorne was hit with a sudden, biting pain in his shoulder from behind. He released his sword and dropped to his knees. "Damn," he commented to nobody in particular as he fell onto his side. Behind him, one of the huge, horned man-demons fought its way past the other knights, kicked the sword free of his body and raised the weapon to strike.

"No! I want him to see this!" Manius crouched beside his brother and clutched his arm. "Watch her, Jack. She'll open the gate for me and, after the skull is infused with the power of Hell itself, I'll take it. And being the noble little girl we know and love, she'll close the door for me, Jack, locking herself in Hell and away from you forever."

Blackthorne turned his head towards the gate. He had a clear view of Rhi fighting her way into the entrance.

"No!" He tried to call to her but his words were a hoarse whisper.

"That's my girl!" Manius yelled triumphantly. He looked down at Blackthorne, who lay in a growing pond of blood in the floor.

"Who's the winner now?" He turned his back on his brother to run towards the

gate, the huge demon at his side.

The pit was filled with various pitched battles between the knights and the demons Manius called up from the earth. But the only battle that mattered was at the gate, where Jacques De Molay and two of his men protected Rhiannon Brennan's back. Manius called his creatures to him as he sprinted across the floor and tore into the knights in a flash of red light and steel.

The ferocity of Manius' attack on Rhi's protectors and the fall of Blackthorne enabled him to get behind their line. He made a beeline towards Rhi, who had shouldered her way inside the gate, past hordes of panicked demons and sprits of the damned. The escaped demonic horde poured out of the widening crack and up the walls of the cavern like a mobile fungus. Manius beat and battled his way towards her as she fought to slip inside.

The plans of Manius Black were about to come to completion. For decades he had learned, spied, planned and plotted. Roaming the world in spirit form, he gathered enough knowledge of the skull to know how to empower the relic and open the gate himself. He just didn't fancy closing it from the other side.

* * * *

From above, the light of the streetlamps illuminated the streets enough for Pam to see the battle for the town was not going well. Manius' black dragon, wings tattered, strafed the buildings, succeeding in catching the rooftops on fire. Pam grinned. In the rebuilding of Cripple Creek after the Great Fire, fireproof brick had been the rule of the day.

"Got any ideas?" Pearl shouted in her ear.

"Yes, I do," she yelled and patted the gun hanging over her shoulder. "The thing's been hit a few times, maybe I'll get lucky. I'm gonna let you off to make hay in the street while I take a shot. Is that sword of yours sharp and magically endowed? I'm going to try something I saw in a movie."

"Rhi's right, you are crazy. Are you thinking of the movie I think you are thinking of?"

The other woman nodded.

Pearl grimaced and handed her the sword. "You watch too many movies."

Their dragon made a turn above the top of the far end of Bennett Avenue, close enough for Pearl to leap to the ground with her gun in hand. She shouted orders at the Cripple Creek regulars battling demons in the street as Pam and her mount took once more to the sky.

"Crap, I'm cold. Okay, big guy. Let's show this big bastard what you can do," Pam whispered into the wind as they rose into the air. Clinging to a gap between her own dragon's scales with one gloved hand, she took three useless shots at the other beast with her pistol. The bullets sparked off of the dragon's scales. "Come on, you pussy!"

Using her knees as guides, Pam instinctively steered her dragon like a horse towards the empty reaches of the upper regions of Pike's Peak. Enraged by the bullets and seeming to understand the insult, the other dragon roared and followed them.

As she made her way through clouds of snow, she wondered if NORAD in Cheyenne Mountain would pick up the thing on radar. With a snort of disgust, her dragon avoided the periodic blasts of fire from their pursuer. At the top of the peak and without prompting, the green dragon did an about face in mid air. Pam let loose with

barrage of bullets into the black dragon's face. Surprised, the other dragon did not throw up a shield against the attack.

Roaring and blinded, the beast plummeted to the rocks below them, tearing at its steaming face.

The smaller green dragon alighted nearby and Pam leaped to the ground, sword in hand. Fire erupted from the wounded dragon's mouth and scattered around them, lighting up the side of the mountain. Pam scampered between the claws of the beast and under its flailing head, as close to its serpentine neck as she dared. The gigantic claws stuck home twice, ripping through the leg and arm of her battle fatigues. Bloody and weak, she thrust the sword upwards with all of the force she could muster into the softer looking scales under its neck. Blue fire exploded out of the sword when the metal came into contact with the weaker scales. She sawed frantically, finally severing the head of the dragon from its neck, something Pearl had not been able to do in the air above the Duncan Farm, probably because she couldn't get to the creature's underside. Pam managed to leap out of the reach of the dragon's death throes, landing in a pile of eroded granite rocks that resembled a large pile of marbles.

She gingerly pulled herself to her feet and limped to where her own dragon sat waiting. She sagged against the wall of green scales to scratch the dragon's head. "I think I'll call you Jethro."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Rhi could hear the brothers battling behind her, over the riot of noise at the gate. Blocking the clanging of the swords from her mind, she kicked and beat her way in between the damned and their more skittish keepers, all of whom were vigorously fleeing their incarceration.

“This is worse than a white sale at the mall!” A huge, scaled claw raked across Rhi’s thigh. She was covered with cuts and vicious rips in her clothes and skin. If she had been human, she would have already bled out. But she was getting weaker by the minute.

Use the skull, dummy! A soft voice spoke in her head.

Raven? Are you in there? Rhi asked in surprise.

Of course I’m in here! I’m you! Use the skull; it will control the demons and the damned.

A sudden realization shook her. Manius wanted her to open the gate. Not to let the forces of Hell loose, but to activate the skull! He had no problem raising the forces of darkness. He just had a problem controlling them! And he was arrogant enough to think he’d be able to take the skull from her and get her to graciously close the gate behind him while he made his escape.

She yanked the skull out of the pack and held it high.

“Burn, baby, burn!”

A flare of white light exploded from the skull, frying every demon within ten-feet.

“Freeze! Don’t move!” she shouted the command to the demons in and around the pit. Unbeknownst to her, her voice carried for miles, borne on the power of the skull. The battle in downtown Cripple Creek, in the graveyard and in the pit screeched to a halt as every demon stopped, frozen in its tracks. The Cripple Creek militia and the knights continued to hack at the frozen creatures, beheading them and gunning them down where they stood.

The sudden stillness was horrific for Rhi. She could still hear the clang of steel behind her.

“Rhi, stop!” Blackthorne’s voice was weak. She could hear him above the sudden roar of the flames on the other side of the gate. Not looking back, she shielded herself in the white light of the skull and stepped into the depths of Hell.

The huge grotto on the other side of the gate was a nightmare of unending fire and despair. She stood on a ledge on the edge of an endless pit of lava, fire and the writhing bodies of the damned. She couldn’t see the other side, but lining the walls she could see were a series of bridges and ledges, supporting a bizarre variety of buildings. Castles mixed with modern skyscrapers and suburban strip malls. In the open spaces, the fiends of Hell could be glimpsed going about the business of tormenting the wicked. Other gates could be glimpsed scattered over the wall, like bright windows with a view into the realm of the living.

The few remaining demons on the ledge were frozen in the light of the skull,

which extended to surround the ledge and the wall with its protective light. But beyond the border of the protective glow of the skull, masses of the damned could be seen crawling up the wall and climbing in from the side, waiting for her to drop her guard.

"Hell looks like California," she muttered and turned back to the gate. The other niche for the skull was five feet away. She stuffed the skull into it and dropped the backpack to the molten ground. Protected by the light the skull still emitted from its niche, she flipped open the pack and set the timer on the homemade backpack nuke Bobby Wayne had dug up. Rising, she turned to face the gate with a sigh. The blast from the nuke would not penetrate the closed gate. Manius stood before the gate, smiling, sword in hand.

"I knew you could do it, princess!"

Rhi stared at him and then at the skull. "That's why you let Pam and Pearl come. You had to put up a bit of a fight before letting me open the gate and empower the skull."

"Of course," he replied with a swish of his sword. "I don't actually like Pearl, you know. I've never liked whores. Now why don't you hand me the skull and close the gate for me?"

"Why don't you kill me for it?" She took the skull from the niche and tossed it from one hand to another, goading him.

"Oh no, you're too noble, sweetie. You know I'd never be courageous enough to close myself in here. All of the hordes of Hell will be unleashed upon the earth. But I'm willing to take the skull and be on my way." He lunged for her and she scampered out of the way.

"So, how long does the skull stay juiced up after it is used like this?" She crouched before him, the saber in one hand and the skull in the other. She had to make him wait.

"For a lifetime, about 50 years from what I've figured out. And in those various lifetimes, the pyramids were built, the temple in Jerusalem, you name it," he replied and rose up into the air to pounce upon her. "And each of its users had a nice girl like you to close the gate behind them. Sacrifice is such a cliché, don't you think?"

In a second, he was on top of her and trying to wrestle the skull out of her hands. His fetid breath hit her, the smell of road kill after a few days in the sun. She channeled bolts of blue lightning out of her fingertips into his body but his hands were on the skull, which now held the power of Hell. Red sparks blinded her and Rhi was thrown back several feet. She teetered at the edge of the abyss for a breathtaking moment before righting herself.

Manius ran for the door, his hands filled with his sword and the skull. The protective light blinked out the moment he took the artifact and the triumphant howls of the damned arose behind her. She could hear claws scampering over the rock but didn't dare glance back. Rhi took to the air, for the first time using her demon blood powers. She plowed into Manius, a direct hit between the shoulder blades, with all of the force she could muster. The pair hit the floor with a hard smack, peeling skin from their arms. Rhi could feel her clothes and flesh burn as she jerked the skull out of his hands and flew to the niche once more to jam the piece of crystal in.

She made a beeline for the gate, slashing at the demons on the ledge with her saber. Wedging a shoulder against the opened gate, she painfully tried to push it closed. She tried not to look at her shoulder, the clothing burned away and the skin sizzling from

the touch of the gate's metal. She could almost see her shoulder bone through the burnt skin. The blood gave her the strength to bear the pain – almost.

“No!” Manius jerked her from the gate and kicked the sword away. He put a large hand around her throat, placing his face close to hers. “You will close this gate, Rhiannon.”

Rhi fought for words and air in the steel vise of his hand. “Why are you worried about being trapped in Hell? You're on your way there anyways ...” She began to see black spots.

“I'm Catholic. I'll do what I want to for as long as it amuses me and then I'll ask for forgiveness.” He leaned forward and licked her face. His tongue was as sharp as a blade and as gritty as sandpaper. “Yummy. You've always tasted so sticky sweet. It's such a shame we don't have much time together.”

“I think you have to be sorry for your actions for a confession to work properly.” Bile rose in her throat as he forced her towards the niche, mowing down the growing number of demons surrounding them with his sword.

“I'll take my chances.” He smirked. “I have faith.”

A distinctive howl rose in the air behind the pair.

Rhi's half-closed eyes popped open as a golden comet ran over the knight holding her throat in a deadlock. Ellie Mae, surrounded by a glowing blue nimbus, dove in between Manius and the skull. Darting in and out of the reach of the sword, the dog forced him back from the skull and partially fried every demon she came into close contact with.

“That damned dog!” Manius released his hold on Rhi near the gate to turn and raise his sword in both hands over the bloodhound.

“No!” Rhi screeched and reached for him.

The demons had worked their way around the fighting dog and knight and began to force her through the gate. Desperately she tried to scratch and kick her way back in, blasting the demons around her with blue fire.

Twenty demons took the place of the ten she destroyed. Rhi could see Ellie Mae dart in and out of the strokes of Manius Black's sword through the red crystal windows of the gate. The huge dog leaped at him, forcing him back hard against the opened gate. The golden entrance to Hell swung shut and clicked, trapping Manius, the skull and Ellie Mae behind it. For a split second, Rhi could hear Manius' shriek of horror and one last howl from the dog. Then nothing.

Rhi fell to her knees in front of the gate, sobbing. She ignored the remaining demons that swarmed around her, Molay and his men. The knights who had survived the initial fight made their way to the steps of the gate, battling through the ranks of the damned. One of the largest men carried Blackthorne's limp body tossed over one shoulder. He deposited him beside Rhi in front of the closed gate, where Blackthorne lay motionless. The six knights continued to fight the demons in the pit, guarding the small weeping woman and the hideously wounded man.

Rhi glanced up the precise second the glow through the panels of the gate flared to blinding brilliance, temporarily blinding her and everyone who looked at the gate that moment. Then the gate was gone, replaced by a blank wall. The thirteenth Gate of Hell no longer existed.

She crouched beside Blackthorne to examine the wound on his shoulder. Pulling

the torn uniform aside, she could see bone. He was almost cut in half, shoulder to abdomen. The huge slice glowed with an ominous red light.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped as she staunched the blood. “Jack - Jack, listen to me. You have to drink my essence. You’re going to die if you don’t. Please ...” She felt that she would crumble at any moment.

His eyes opened briefly and the ghost of a smile crossed his face. “No, baby. It’s my turn to turn you down. I can’t take any more from you.”

Blue light poured from her body as she pressed her lips against him, forcing her soul into his. “I can give whatever I have to.”

In a few moments, Rhi raised her head and looked at the wound. The red glow had faded and the wound appeared to be slowly closing. With a sigh, she lay her head down on his chest to listen to his heartbeat. Blackthorne pulled up an arm to put around her shoulders. It fell back to the ground, useless.

“I love you, Rhiannon Brennan Blackthorne,” he whispered. “I’ll love you forever, however long that is.”

Rhi could not work up a response. Behind them, the knights mopped up the remnants of the damned in the cavern.

“Rhi.” He gently reached out a gloved hand. “I’m sorry about Ellie Mae.”

Rhi took his hand for a moment and then leaned over to kiss his forehead. She forced herself to her feet, swaying. As weak as a newborn, she staggered to the now blank wall, placing her face and clenched fists against smooth surface for a moment as she stared down at her filthy pants. The black fabric was ripped to shreds by demon claws and teeth. Her body was covered in large burns, bites and scratches. The wounds were unbearably familiar.

“What in the name of all that is holy was that flash?” Molay demanded incredulously from behind her.

Rhi took a deep breath. “It was a small, personal, made-from-scratch backpack nuke. Bobby Wayne probably picked it up at Wal Mart.”

She turned from the wall to face the group of men. The floor of the pit was littered with smoking demon corpses on top of the older bones. There were also the headless bodies of two of the knights. “I counted on the gate to protect everyone. It almost worked, except for my dog and your two men. I guess you guys don’t think that was too great a sacrifice. After all, the Brotherhood got what they wanted. Your knights volunteered for this. What’s the big deal about a dog? The gate’s destroyed. She was just a dog.”

Another sob hung in Rhi’s chest like a brick. The coppery smell of blood mixed with sulfur made her want to gag as she forced herself to look down at Blackthorne’s white face. He was battered and covered in a variety of blood but underneath the mess she could see the strong features that had haunted her dreams for a lifetime. Carefully, she imprinted the planes and lines of his face onto her memory. His vivid blue gaze seared into her brain.

“I’m going to go home, if you’re okay,” she told him, still looking into his eyes. Silently, Blackthorne nodded. Rhi turned to Molay. “If you don’t mind cleaning this mess up. I seem to be bleeding onto the floor.”

She swayed for a moment. Molay reached out his hand.

Rhi turned to the sky so she would not have to see Blackthorne’s face. “I’m outta

here.”

* * * *

Blackthorne watched as Rhi gracefully rose into the air, borne on the wings of her own power. Power should have been drained from her to the point of death at this juncture but wasn't. His wife's power was stronger than any member of the Brotherhood had ever possessed.

The heaviest of the snow was over and only a few flakes obscured his line of sight as she flew away from him, into the night, black hair fanned out in a cape behind her. Mute, he glanced down at his empty hand as it began to reach towards the retreating form. But there was only the moon, stars and black velvet sky of a Colorado winter night.

Molay sat down beside him to place a callused hand on his shoulder. “Brother. We have the cleanup of the century to get on with here. You have to heal. Let her rest. Then go to her.” The head of the order looked thoughtful for a moment before adding, “Preferably on your knees. We need that little girl, Blackie.”

Epilogue

Six Months later

Rhi stood at the lower end of Bennett Avenue, examining the business end of the donkey in front of her.

“Pam, are you sure feeding this critter an apple is going to make it follow me?” She arched an eyebrow over the top of her Ray-Bans. The sun might not burn her to a crisp now that she was a changeling but its rays weren’t kind to Rhi’s very sensitive skin. A ball cap covered her head, her long black hair caught up in a jaunty ponytail. She had slathered on sunblock with a rating of fifty SPF and had dressed in lightweight jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt in spite of the heat.

Cripple Creek’s Donkey Derby Days festival was in full swing and the highlight of the festivities was about to begin. Teams from each casino and various local organizations had gone to the temporary corral in the middle of the blocked off street to choose their ‘racehorse’ and make friends with it. The semi-wild little burros of the town were easygoing about their capture, most knowing it was temporary. The ridiculous humans would lead the animals up the main street of town in a race to the top. Then the donkeys would be fed treats and released to roam the town again at their discretion. The pampered animals lived very well on the town’s tab, but they were greedy for the treats offered by tourists and spoiled.

Pam, dressed in a halter-top and Daisy Duke cut-offs, held the loop she had tossed over their particular animal’s head as she inspected their catch.

“Stick one of the other apples in your back pocket and it’ll follow you anywhere.” Pam glanced over her shoulder at the gathered crowd. “Look at them, anxious to see our blood, are they?”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“Mommy, the donkey is stinky,” Katie complained. The tiny girl was perched atop Nicholas Boyd’s shoulders, waving her cotton candy at the street. Several other teams were gathered around their donkeys, sweet-talking the wild little animals and bribing them with everything from apples to Alpo. “Are you going to make them run, Mommy?”

“Those donkeys are so fat, you’ll be lucky to get a good trot out of them,” the ex-Chief noted with a good-natured laugh.

Nick had resigned after refusing to elaborate to state investigators about the Great Cripple Creek Riot and Blizzard. The story of how a huge motorcycle gang staying in town because of the weather had torn the town and cemetery apart in a drunken frenzy was not something he remembered much about upon questioning.

One of the odder parts of the devastation from the riot was a section in the back of the historical Mount Pisgah graveyard marked by a perfect fifty-foot diameter circle of flattened earth in the center. The coffins and tombstones buried in the vicinity had been tossed several yards away from the spot in either direction. Strangely, several large men

were present in the graveyard at the same time the state investigators appeared. They were in the process of destroying the crime scene by mending and replacing tombstones and reburying coffins. Their presence had a strange effect on the investigators, who turned away from the cemetery and forgot that they ever saw them.

The mob had burned down two casinos and three houses, killing four local citizens and wounding dozens, including several hysterical tourists who insisted that the bikers were monsters.

The locals who witnessed the incident swore by everything holy that the culprits were bikers and nothing more, even in the face of the fact that a group of 50 men in a caravan of trucks and Harleys had escaped without notice into a snowy Colorado night. The combination of snow and motorcycles itself was a virtual impossibility, as was the fact that all of the casino security tapes from the time of the brawl had all been erased by some kind of power surge. But the chief's tardiness in sending for outside help during the storm, no matter how cut off communications were, was considered inexcusable.

The gaze of the beautiful woman with auburn hair who acted as the chief's attorney kept the investigation low key. She also acted as the town's public relations officer throughout the aftermath, soothing and charming the reporters and any variety of law enforcement officials who showed up to check out the mess. They walked away with blissful expressions and the boring story of a drunken brawl in a town that had many years before been the capitol of drunken brawls.

The entire incident had gone away in the eyes of outside authorities. In town, however, the stories of the battle were told nightly down at the Dancing Elk and embroidered upon with great relish.

"If you think you're going to marry me, you might want to start being a little more supportive of my goals, Nick," Pam replied. "I've been trying to win this damned race for five years and I'm getting that trophy this time if it's the last thing I do."

Rhi grinned at Nick. "You do know you're marrying one scary woman. Who owns a dragon, no less."

"Now, that is something we do need to talk about, girls," Nick replied. He jogged a bit to bounce his daughter-to-be on his shoulders. Katie screamed with laughter. The night flights of the dragon with Pam on its back hadn't been witnessed yet by anyone other than a few night owls who didn't trust their eyes or their minds.

"Jethro stays right where he is, Nick." Pam put her hands on her hips and assumed the 'nag' position. "You might want to give some thought to building me a bigger barn. He makes the cats nervous. And make it fireproof while you're at it. And I'll need a herd of cattle or sheep - buying a side of beef every other day for my baby is getting pricey."

"Woman, you do realize I'm unemployed, don't you?"

Rhi shook her head, well aware that Boyd was suffering about as much as a prince in his family's kingdom possibly could. The chief didn't find being unemployed overtaxing because of a generous trust from by his great-great grandmother. He also could rest comfortably in the knowledge that as soon as things died down, the town fathers would put him right back into his job. The temporary chief would insist upon it. The new man had already tired of the position, being more interested in hunting down the few remaining demons that had escaped into the mountains.

In the meantime, Boyd amused himself with guarding the peace and privacy of

the shell-shocked women of Horse Thief Gulch day and night. During his exile, he became close to Pam Douglas and her daughter, a fondness that culminated in a marriage proposal two weeks prior to the race. The most traumatizing part of the entire thing for Pam, other than the fact she was a head taller than her groom, was that with both of her parents busy rebuilding the family farm, Pearl had taken over planning the wedding.

As Pam and Boyd's romance blossomed, Rhi wandered the hills alone, ghostlike, and locked herself in her cabin for days at a time with her books. Molay called on a regular basis to check up on her and to report on Blackthorne's recovery from the battle but other than that, the Brotherhood and Rhi's healing husband stayed away.

"Nick, there is plenty of room out here for him to roam about without anyone getting a look at him and Jethro obeys Pam like a trained police dog," noted Rhi. "It'll be fine. If he gets too big, I'll take him somewhere 'else' and Pam can visit him. I'm keeping an eye on Jethro too."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Yes, a dragon as a pet is a great idea. Let's all get one. But Pam's dad doesn't like the thing any more than I do."

"You're wrong, Nick," his fiancée informed him archly. "Daddy was nervous with him at first. But any animal that took out the thing that burned his house and killed Gary and Juanita is okay with Dad in the end. Are you listening to me?"

He looked over her head towards the other side of the intersection. "My replacement's here." He snorted. "And she made him give her a ride. It's good to see someone else walking a mile in my shoes."

One of the police department's Broncos had appeared at one of the blocked off streets. A uniformed Bobby Wayne Beaufort hopped out of the driver's side door. He quick-marched to the other side of his vehicle, opened the door and stood at attention as Pearl gracefully alighted. Rhi was surprised that he didn't yank off his shirt and arrange it on the street so she wouldn't get her driving moccasins dusty.

Pearl was spectacularly dressed, as usual, in tan slacks and a designer silk tee. An off-white scarf had been wrapped a la Jackie O around her head and huge sunglasses hid her eyes. She looked as glamorous as a woman could manage on a street filled with sweaty tourists and donkeys.

Rhi knew why the madam hadn't left with the rest of the Brotherhood after the cleanup and the messing with the susceptible minds of outside law enforcement was complete. She was waiting for Rhi.

But Rhi was not one of those people. They had used her without mercy, and they were responsible for the death of her dog. The angry thoughts ran through her mind as she squared her shoulders and prepared for Pearl's approach. For a split second when her eyes closed, an ice blue gaze flashed at her, along with a devilish grin. Then the image swirled away down into the corridors of her memory. He was always with her, a presence that made ripples of anticipation run up her backbone on a regular basis up to the moment she remembered he was gone. She hadn't seen Blackthorne for six months, not since she fled his hurt gaze on the battlefield of Mt. Pisgah.

Pearl stepped past the barricade to cross the street with Bobby Wayne following behind like an obedient puppy. She paused for a moment at the pedestal marking the center of the intersection. A life-sized bronze statue of a huge bloodhound stood at attention atop a square marble column. The long ears and soulful gaze were too real for Rhi, who ached every time she saw her dog's honorarium. A similar column and a

bronze likeness of Houston, cowboy hat and all, marked the intersection at the other end of the street up the hill. The local police had one problem with the statues: vandals routinely left bottles of tequila and shot glasses at Houston's feet and steaks and squeaky toys near the feet of the dog.

"Oh, look, you've got Martha!" the madam exclaimed as she approached. Pearl patted the donkey on the head and the little burro reciprocated by nuzzling her sleeve. "She'll do nicely, Pam."

Pam's eye took on a wicked glint. "Do you know every man, woman, child and donkey in Cripple Creek, Granny?"

"How is the cleanup going?" Bobby Wayne asked Nick conversationally, wisely changing the subject. "Catching anything up near the girls' place?"

"Don't worry, Bobby, there will be plenty of demons left in the hills for you to hunt. There are a few good old boys, like Earl and Clay, who are getting one or more a day, but I suspect we'll be killing these things for a while."

A pleased expression on his face, Bobby Wayne seemed about to return to his truck when sight of a large figure emerging from the alleyway behind the group rooted him to the spot.

* * * *

Blackthorne saw her back first, small and straight and dressed in a new 'Donkey Derby Days' t-shirt. Her face, turned to the side to better examine her donkey, was pale and thin. Rhi resembled her past self more than ever before.

She abruptly twisted towards him and Blackthorne felt his heart constrict like it always did around her. He held up his palms in a placating manner.

"Rhi, let me talk to you for a minute and I'll go away, okay?" He would never understand how the woman had managed to get such a tight grip on his soul, but her hold was absolute, alive or dead, with him or not.

The dark eyes never left his face. Rhi's square little jaw set itself and she nodded her head. "What?"

He took a deep breath and prepared to beg. The last few months had been misery, knowing she was alive, alone and needing him but too angry to allow herself to love him. "I know this has been - horrible. You built this peaceful existence and everything gets blown to Hell in a week. But I can't live like this, knowing you're here, alone. I'll give up everything and get a job as security in one of the casinos or as a big box store greeter. I'm stinking rich - I'll buy you a castle or take you around the world but please, just take me with you."

The corner of her mouth lifted. "A greeter? You'd scare the crap out of people."

* * * *

Rhi's voice shook when she managed to answer. She had sensed his gaze on her back and realized immediately that Blackthorne stood behind her because of the goose bumps that rose on her neck. It took all of her control to keep from leaping into his arms.

"I'm just horny. I should try to make a run for it before things begin to blow up," she muttered.

Pam grabbed her by the elbow. "Think before you make him relocate to the suburbs, Rhi," she whispered in her ear. "A sheep or a tigress. The next five hundred years in a tract house or saving the world - I know which one I'd pick."

Rhi stepped into the curve of his arm. "I'll try to fit into your world - for a while,

anyways. Until you leave your underwear in the floor one too many times.” She paused. “I didn’t tell you this when I left you in the pit. I love you and will love you until the world spins down. Totally against my will.”

Blackthorne grinned and the crinkles in the corners of his eyes were all Rhi needed to see before he leaned down to kiss her. He held her in his arms for a moment before turning to Pearl.

“Molay needs you to get back at work, woman,” he informed her sternly, not releasing Rhi. “He says you’ve dawdled long enough.”

Pearl tossed her head and pursed her lips into a sensual red pout. “I knew everything you idiots are doing would go to hell without me. What’s imploding now?”

As Pearl and Blackthorne bickered, the race official motioned for them to line up. Rhi patted Pam on the shoulder. “Let’s do this.”

At the far end of Bennett, a commotion had ensued and several members of the crowd climbed over the wood barricades to gather around a familiar figure in the center of the street.

“They can’t contest the race. We haven’t even started,” Pam protested, squinting up at the crowd. There was a flash of gold in the center of the group and Batty Betty could be clearly seen. The woman wore a gigantic formal race-day hat, adorned with roses. She had dressed for the event with the same care a southern belle would have taken for the Kentucky Derby.

An amazing howl, the long, deep-voiced, melodic call of a full-grown female bloodhound, shocked the group into sudden silence.

A huge red-gold dog loped down the street, dragging Batty Betty along with her, who lost her hat in the sprint.

The dog’s long ears flapped behind her like sails and the hound’s gigantic paws made her appear gangly and clumsy as she ran.

“Ellie?” Rhi whispered.

The big dog skidded to a stop in front of the group, startling the donkey, which shuddered and pulled at its rope. The little animal hadn’t signed up for a giant dog encounter.

Ellie Mae hopped in giddy circles before jumping to her full height to place her huge paws on her mistress’ shoulders. The hound ran her tongue down Rhi’s face, leaving a sticky trail of slobber and then dropped down to demand hugs with pleading brown eyes.

The locals in the crowd cheered as Rhi got down on her knees to wrap her arms around the dog’s neck. Katie loudly demanded to be released from her perch and joined Rhi in hugging the animal. The dog’s cable tail wagged dangerously fast.

Pam handed her donkey’s lead to Pearl. “Hold my ass, would you?”

“How’s this possible?” Blackthorne asked in amazement.

Betty passed the leash to him and stepped back to watch the reunion in satisfaction. “I told you Hell couldn’t hold or hurt the pure of heart. One of the bigger Hell cracks in the mountains was all I needed to call her from the depths. I sat out there in the woods for a few days but it was worth it.” She ran a blue veined hand over the dog’s head. “Poor doggie. She was in pretty bad shape, having wandered the paths of Hell for a few days. I decided to tend to her and see if she was going to live before I told you I’d found her. She might be a bit of a changeling herself now - I’m pretty sure she

ingested some demon blood. The stuff didn't kill her, as it would have most animals. This dog should never have healed like she did."

Pearl glanced disapprovingly at the old woman. "Betty, you old witch, you know this is bending the rules, don't you?"

Betty sniffed in disdain. "Like you've ever followed the rules, Pearl."

Pam's face filled with wonder. "Shouldn't this dog be a crispy critter? I mean she withstood a small nuclear blast behind the gate!"

Blackthorne hunched down to examine the dog, muttering to himself.

"What's wrong with you?" Rhi demanded.

"This breed was bred to hunt demons and it seems ..." the big man ran his hands over the dog's fur. "It seems that when the breed runs true, they're pretty much fireproof, even against a small thermonuclear device and Hellfire. This is very interesting."

Pam laughed. "You mean that when the powers-that-be finally screw up enough to push the big red button and end it all, the cockroaches and the bloodhounds will inherit the earth? Why does the mental picture of a planet populated by nothing but big slobbery dogs give me the warm fuzzies? But what about Manius ... was he fireproof?"

Blackthorne's grin was vicious. "No, he was definitely not fireproof." He glanced over at his wife, who ignored the conversation as she sat on the pavement and happily rubbed Ellie Mae's ears. The dog groaned with pleasure and leaned against Rhi, almost tipping them both over. "Is Ellie Mae coming with us to save the world?"

"Well, the world is a fine place and worth fighting for. Besides, there's nothing good on Animal Planet any more," she replied from her seat on the sidewalk.

"Paraphrasing Hemingway, are we?" Pearl examined the dusty leash in her manicured hand with distaste and prudently handing it to Bobby Wayne.

Pam plunked down beside Rhi to get her share of bloodhound slobber on her clothes. She elbowed her friend. "Pearl slept with Hemingway, you know."

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Above the town the sun blended with the aqua sky and the granite pinnacles of the mountains were tall enough to tear gashes in the clouds. The top of one mountain in particular sheltered a large pile of ash and meat hidden behind a pile of boulders on its left flank. The sooty mess had lain frozen throughout the winter but upon the spring thaw, a tall, spindly creature discovered the bounty of the dead dragon and feasted upon the decayed flesh daily, building his strength.

Finally, he had escaped the torment he had been condemned to for thousands of years. Now it was time to feed and grow in strength, hidden away in the solitude of the mountains. Vengeance would wait - for a while.

The End