ATTICUS FOR THE UNDEAD
A Legal Fiction

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Furthermore, while this book is a "legal fiction," the emphasis is on the fiction. While some
of the case law referenced in the book is real, some of it is fictitious, and in any event, nothing in
this book should be construed as legal advice or as establishing an attorney-client relationship.

Also By John:

Novels:
Weaver (The Weaver Saga, Book 1)
The Void (The Weaver Saga, Book 2)

Identity Theft (Hunter Gamble #2), Early 2013!

Short Fiction:
The Antlerbury Tales

For Jonathan Brand, who taught me that the law
can be important, and fun, too.

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Prologue

Family, Friends Mourn As Boy Killed On Eve of Graduation
By Ingrid Collins

The University of Texas community was rocked by tragedy over the weekend when Samuel Pollard, age twenty-four, died in his apartment the night after finishing his last round of final exams. Authorities are reporting the cause of death as a drug overdo --

CRUNCH!

Sam Pollard took no notice of the crumpled up newspaper report of his death even as he stepped on it. He continued down the sidewalk that led to the Barton Creek Mall, pulling the hood of his bright orange sweatshirt a little further over his head. There was probably no need to hide his face, Sam knew -- he'd never been famous, and the odds that he'd be recognized while shopping were relatively low. Still, Sam prided himself on being informed, on keeping up with the news, and so he knew what had happened to others like him. Better safe than sorry.

Sam looked around at the others approaching the mall, a thrill of paranoia running through him. None of the others were wearing sweatshirts. Of course they weren't -- the summer heat still ruled Texas with an iron fist, which meant that it was ninety degrees outside on a relatively cool day. Everyone else was in short sleeves or tank tops. Crap. Maybe I should have gone with sunglasses or something...

He shuffled through the glass doors into the mall, passing a nail care store to his left and an arcade on his right. The arcade was more to his taste -- he wanted distraction, after all, something to take his mind off of what had happened. But his eyes lit immediately on the newest Resident Evil game, which stood at the entrance to the arcade, and he decided to keep walking. Somehow, shooting zombies just didn't appeal to him right now.

Down the corridor to the right was a man giving a speech from a raised platform. Decent size crowd.
"... what to call them," the man screamed into his megaphone, his words reverberating around the mall. "Organizations like ABLE claim it's important to refer to our supernatural neighbors as 'arcanes.' They say that terms like 'supernatural' or 'paranormal' are demeaning. But we know the truth, don't we?"

"Yeah!" roared the crowd, in unison.

Ouch.

"We in the Salvation Alliance know that such well-intentioned political correctness is dangerous, don't we?"

"Yeah!"

Sam held back a shudder.

"We know that tolerance is the first step toward acceptance, even advocacy of unnatural lifestyles, don't we?"

"Yeah!"

"Right. Not going that way." Sam walked on. He was suddenly cloyingly certain that each patron he passed was staring at him, taking careful notice of his sluggish movements or perhaps seeing his face underneath the hood. Why had he ever thought a hood would hide his features to begin with? Even though he was overdressed, he felt increasingly naked. He was constantly sure that discovery was only a moment away ....

Finally, he found what he was looking for -- the miniatures store. He especially loved the small model robots, loved buying them and spending hours absorbed in the details of painting them. It was a cathartic process, and every completed robot gave him a fresh sense of accomplishment. The discipline and attention to detail required to do it well had proved useful in law school, too.

But as he was about to go in, he noticed something in his peripheral vision -- someone was watching him. Someone was watching him very intently, in fact. A young man, surely no older than Sam himself, wearing a white t-shirt and faded jeans. Sam cautiously moved to enter the store, and the other young man moved to block the doorway. Kind of a ridiculous move, given that the entrance was much wider than the young man was.

"Excuse me," Sam said, quietly and politely.

"No."

Fuck. I was afraid of this.

"I'm just here to shop. I don't want any trouble."

"Neither do we. " The young man made a gesture with his arm that encompassed the entire population of the mall. "Which is why I think you should leave."

"I haven't done anything wrong."

"You don't have to," the young man drawled. "See, these fine people have plenty to worry about already -- keeping their jobs and making sure their kids don't get sick and all. You being here means they have to worry about getting bitten, too -- and we just don't need that, you know?"

"I'm not gonna bite anyone," Sam subtly tried to move around his unwanted conversation partner and into the store.

But the man moved with him, blocking his path. "It doesn't work that way, mutant. The Hunger makes you crazy -- out of control. You think we're stupid?" He shoved Sam backward so hard that Sam stumbled, then toppled into the fountain.
A sharp pain shot through his back as it impacted against the fountain's stone base. *So now my clothes are obvious and soaked.* He pushed himself upright again, muttering, "Well, actually ...."

It was then that he realized that the noise of him falling into the fountain had attracted attention, and that passing shoppers were stopping and turning to look. He could hear frenzied whispers from every direction as the passersby consulted fearfully with each other.

"*Is he really --*
"*I hear just standing too close can infect you --*
"*Is there a gun store in this mall?*

Sam got the hint. His outing to the mall was over. Turning away from the store and the young man who had accosted him, he started toward the exit, doing his best to quicken his pace and cursing the fact that he was physically unable to run. For now, the bystanders in the mall seemed afraid to pursue. He could only hope that continued … and that no one called mall security ….

Those guys usually had guns.

**Chapter 1**

"Well, you don't look much like a lawyer," said the man who opened the door for Hunter, in a deep voice. The man's brown eyes locked on Hunter's own as he spoke.

Hunter wasn't sure what to make of the comment, so he just smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir, but I am a lawyer." He reached a hand into his pants pocket and pulled out his wallet, and from the wallet he withdrew one of his business cards, handing it to the other man. The other man took the card, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized it. On its front was printed:

Hunter Gamble
Associate Attorney
McCLAIN & GAMBLE, P.C.
Arcane Defense Law Practice

"*We Get Results -- Like Magic!*

The firm's address and phone number were on its back. After a minute spent silently studying the information, the stranger looked back up at Hunter, still seeming unconvinced. "You must be Mr. Orr," Hunter said.

Instead of answering, Mr. Orr said, "Why are you dressed like that?"
"Excuse me, Mr. Orr?" he asked politely.
"I said, why are you dressed like that?" As he spoke, Mr. Orr skeptically eyed Hunter's outfit: a grey t-shirt covered by a short-sleeved, unbuttoned button-down shirt.

Hunter raised an eyebrow at Mr. Orr. "How should I be dressed, sir?"
"I dunno," Orr shrugged. "I thought all you lawyers wore suits and had sticks up your asses."

It was not lost on Hunter that Mr. Orr was currently wearing a suit, or that his posture, expression, and general demeanor all strongly suggested that he had a stick in a similar location. But he didn't say that -- after all, Mr. Orr would hopefully soon be a client, and it was best not to offend the person who was paying your bills.
Well, to the extent that this job ever paid Hunter's bills.
"There are all kinds of lawyers, Mr. Orr," Hunter flashed the other man another easy smile, "but enough about me. I understand you're in need of my services."
"Yes. Come in." Mr. Orr stood aside and gestured for him to enter the house. Inside, Hunter found a perfectly tidy living room, with a couch behind a coffee table on which lay a small stack of magazines and newspapers. A television was against one wall, and a plaque above the fireplace read, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."
Hunter took all of this in with a glance before returning his attention to Mr. Orr. "So, tell me about the nature of your problem," Hunter began, before realizing that there was a more logical first question. "Actually, before we get to that, if you don't mind my asking, what sort of arcane are you?"
Mr. Orr's head snapped back to Hunter so fast that it should have given the man whiplash. "What'd you say??"
"I asked you what sort of arcane you are, sir," Hunter repeated. "Mage, vampire, werewolf? You don't strike me as a zombie, but I suppose anything's possi --" "Now, listen!" Melvin Orr wagged a finger in Hunter's face, regarding him with cold fury. "Don't you ever imply I'm one of those goddamn paranormal freaks ever again, you hear me? I'm a good, law-abiding man, I'm not some supernatural!"
"I'm sorry, sir, no offense intended," Hunter raised his hands in a gesture of surrender to placate the man, "but you understand I'm an arcane defense lawyer, right? So if you're not an arcane, then I probably can't --"
"Melvin?" An athletic-looking blonde woman rounded the corner. "Are you talking to the law -- who are you?" she asked, stopping in her tracks as her eyes fell on Hunter. Hunter extended his hand. "Hunter Gamble, I'm an attorney. You must be Annabelle, Melvin's wife."
"That's right," Annabelle answered in a no-nonsense tone, taking his hand for a brief handshake. "Why are you dressed like that?"
Oy. "I generally wear civvies when I'm not going to court."
"If you wanna get clients, Mr. Gamble, you should show up to meetings looking respectable," Annabelle Orr told him, condescending as a mother lecturing a small, misbehaving child.
"Yeah, well, about that, as I was just explaining to your husband, I think there may have been a misunderstanding when we spoke on the phone. You see, my firm's practice is limited to arcane defense, and since your husband says he's not an arcane --"
"My husband's not the one with the legal problem."
"Oh!" Hunter exclaimed, confusion evaporating in a heartbeat. "Oh, of course, I should have realized. Who is it, then, you?"
"Our daughter, Sabrina," Annabelle told him. "Melvin, get Sabrina down here! We kept her home from school today just to talk to you."
"You didn't have to do that, Mrs. Orr, I could have come after school or --"
"Sabrina!" Melvin Orr bellowed. "Sabrina, get down here!"
Hunter's eyes went to the stairs. For a full minute, nothing happened. Then, a young woman trudged down the stairs, blond hair tied back in a braid. She looked roughly like a shorter, younger version of Annabelle Orr, and was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. Her eyes were fixed on a book she held in front of her -- a copy of Macbeth. She seemed so unaware of her surroundings that Hunter was surprised she made it down the stairs without falling.
"Studying for English class?" Hunter asked amicably.
Sabrina looked up at him. "Memorizing lines," she told him, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. "Dress rehearsal's in three weeks."
"Oh," he grinned. "School play?"
"Don't be ridiculous," she snorted, waving a hand dismissively at the suggestion. "I try very hard to stay out of the school plays. It's just too embarrassing." With that, she returned her eyes to the script.
"Nervous that everyone else will be better than you?" Hunter asked. She was a teenage girl, after all -- status was everything at that age.
Sabrina gave him a look that suggested she thought he had graduated from moron to neanderthal. "Ashamed that everyone else is always worse than me," she corrected him. "I do community theater. There are still a lot of embarrassing moments, but Mom and Dad say I'm not allowed to join a professional company until I finish school." From her expression, she found this restriction quite silly, but gave a resigned shrug and went back to her script.
Her father coughed. "Sabrina, this is Hunter Gamble. He's the lawyer we're thinking about having defend you in your case."
"Oh. Hello." She walked forward and shook Hunter's hand.
"Pleasure to meet you."
"Yeah," Sabrina lifted one of her eyebrows inquisitively. "So why are you dressed like that?"
"Oh for --" A bit of frustration slipped through Hunter's normally calm demeanor. "I'm not as comfortable in a suit," he said, forcing himself back to civility. "I feel more like myself this way."
"You don't feel like yourself in a suit?" Sabrina seemed to find this a strange concept.
Hunter shook his head. "It's too formal. Too stuffy."
"You don't like being formal and stuffy?" Sabrina asked.
"Not especially, no."
"I think you picked the wrong profession."
"Gotta love this family," Hunter thought. "Well, you may not like my clothes, but I think you'll like my results. Your parents tell me you're having a legal problem."
"Some moron at Sabrina's school is slandering my daughter," Melvin Orr roared.
"Melvin!" Mrs. Orr looked aghast.
Hunter held up a hand to forestall further ranting from Mr. Orr. "I appreciate your anger, sir, and I'm sure there's a very good reason for it, but your wife has the right idea. I'd like Sabrina to tell me about what happened, if you wouldn't mind."
Mr. Orr fell silent, though his face made plain that he didn't like being shut down in that way. Hunter, not caring in the slightest what Mr. Orr did or did not like, turned back to Sabrina and smiled. "So, what happened?"
"Paul the Pimple Face thinks I attacked him," Sabrina explained.
Hunter couldn't help laughing slightly. "Paul the Pimple Face?"
"Paul Storton," Sabrina told him. "Resident chess grandmaster and professional pain in the -- err," she stopped herself as she realized her father was still in the room. "Anyway, we call him Pimple Face because of his acne problems."

"All right," Hunter nodded, wondering if he had been like this as a teenager. "Why does he think you attacked him?"

"He walked into the auditorium while I was rehearsing my lines," Sabrina scowled. "Apparently being a chess master doesn't take many brains, because he decided I was some sort of supernatural and that I must be casting a spell on him. He ran away in terror and the next thing I knew, the police were pulling up in front of the school!"

"Okay, so your classmate decided you were an arcane --"

"A supernatural," Sabrina insisted.

"Your classmate decided you were an arcane," Hunter emphasized. "What were you charged with?"

"Aggravated assault. Apparently the prosecutor thinks that since I'm obviously a witch," Sabrina rolled her eyes to show what she thought of that notion, "the spell --"

"The spell itself constitutes a deadly weapon sufficient to justify making it a felony charge instead of a misdemeanor," Hunter finished for her.

"Yeah," Sabrina answered, looking as if she hadn't understood a thing he'd just said. "That."

"All right. Are you a witch?"

"What?" Sabrina asked angrily, eyes narrowing.

"Sabrina, let me explain something -- as your lawyer, it doesn't make the slightest difference to me whether you're innocent or guilty. Even if you were casting a spell on him, if you want to plead not guilty, I'll go to court and tell the jury you're innocent. But it helps me to have the fullest picture of what happened that day that I can."

Sabrina still looked deeply offended. "I'm not a witch!" she said. "I'm not some supernatural freak!"

"Okay, so you're not an arcane," Hunter corrected her again.

"Supernatural."

"Arcane."

"Oh, good grief!" Sabrina erupted, raising her arms in frustration, her green eyes flashing at him. "They're supernaturals, okay? Mages and zombies and the rest have no place in the animal kingdom! Most of them don't even reproduce in the normal way!"

"Just because we don't know something is a part of nature, doesn't mean it isn't. Science has been wrong before, you know," he shot back, increasingly peevish.

"Nature has produced serial killers and child molesters, too," Sabrina countered. "Doesn't mean the rest of us should welcome them."

Hunter was ready to explode at her for that, but Mr. Orr spoke first. "Mr. Gamble," he cut in, tone full of finality, "our daughter is a perfectly normal young woman, and I'll thank you not to suggest otherwise again. I'll also thank you to tell us if you can help her."

Hunter sighed, forcing himself to be calm for what seemed like the thirtieth time this conversation. Then he turned to Mr. Orr. "I think I can, but I have a few more questions first, if that's all right."

"Good," Hunter said, and returned his attention to Sabrina. "So, Sabrina, this was Macbeth you were rehearsing for?"

"Yes."

"And what role do you play?"
"I'm one of the Three Witches," Sabrina told him matter-of-factly. Hunter face-palmed as she continued, "When Pimple Face walked in, I was rehearsing their incantation. You know, 'Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble,'" she recited, her voice assuming theatrical tones.

"So you're rehearsing to play a witch and you get accused of being a witch," Hunter summarized.

"That's the idea, yes."

"Can you help her?" Mr. Orr asked.

Hunter grinned tightly. He found the Orrs incredibly annoying, and he doubted that that would ever change, but if he and Kirsten did their jobs right, this case should be a slam dunk.

"Yes. I think I can."

--

Several months later, the bailiff called the courtroom to order as Hunter sat there in his suit, a necktie knotted around his neck. Sabrina was seated next to him. "This court is now in session!" the bailiff called out. "All rise for His Honor, Judge Martin Treeworth."

"Where are we in the docket?" the judge asked, looking alertly at the bailiff.

"Docket number one-zero-dash-zero-zero-five-two-seven, People of the State of Texas vs. Sabrina Orr," the bailiff answered. The judge looked over to the prosecutor's table, where a young woman sat in a grey pantsuit, brown hair pulled back in a hair clip, an eager expression on her face. She rose as Judge Treeworth regarded her.

"Melissa Norton for the People, Your Honor," she said.

"Hunter Gamble for Ms. Orr," he answered, forcing himself to stand crisply at attention. The formality had always been the part of the job Hunter hated most – what did it have to do with helping people?

"And why are we here, counselors?" Treeworth asked.

"Your Honor, we're here because I've filed a motion to dismiss. The charges against Ms. Orr are not only baseless, they're unconstitutional, in clear violation of my client's First Amendment right to Free Expression."

"She was casting a spell, Your Honor, which is itself an offensive action that is clearly beyond the protections of the First Amendment," Norton returned without hesitation.

"She was rehearsing for a production of Macbeth, Your Honor," Hunter answered, exasperated. "Ms. Orr was cast as one of the Three Witches. The director of the play can confirm it and I would point out that the State has offered no evidence to the contrary."

"That's because it's impossible for us to do so, Your Honor, as Mr. Gamble is well aware. Verbal spells are identical to normal speech until completion," Norton countered. "You can't hold us to an impossible burden of proof."

"The State's burden of proof isn't my client's problem, Your Honor," Hunter countered briskly. "The law is clear. Brandenburg v. Ohio." Hunter made a mental note to thank Kirsten for finding the case for him. "The state can only punish speech that incites imminent lawless action. That requires both an incitement to lawless action and some indication that the lawless action will actually occur, and neither of those requirements are met here. There's no reason to put the court, a jury, or my client through a lengthy trial just because some fifteen year old boy freaked out and decided Sabrina was a teenage witch."
“Mr. Gamble has a point, Ms. Norton,” Judge Treeworth pointed out, flipping through some papers on his desk. “According to his motion, the words Ms. Orr was overheard saying were ‘eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog.’ That’s hardly an incitement to violence, and certainly doesn’t show any indication that violence was about to occur.”

To her credit, Norton was ready for that answer. “Your Honor, ever since The Unveiling, the line between speech and action has become blurred. You and I both know that mages and other arcane often need to do nothing but finish their incantations to harm their victims. Brandenburg was decided in a time when a person needed to raise a fist or a weapon to do another person harm. That just isn’t the case anymore.”

“So you’re saying that the decision needs to be revisited?” Treeworth asked.

“Yes, Your Honor,” Norton nodded.

Treeworth exhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair. He steeped his fingers in front of him and was lost in thought for a moment. Then he leaned forward and spoke, slowly and deliberately. “I certainly understand that many parts of the law were rendered obsolete by the Unveiling,” he began, “including our old notions of what can constitute an assault. And I understand that sometime, probably in the very near future, the law will need to catch up to the reality. Having said that … I’m bound by the dictates of the Supreme Court, and they’re quite clear. This case provides neither an incitement to lawless action nor any evidence that such action was about to occur. Moreover …”

“Your Honor,” Norton started to object, but Treeworth asserted himself.

“Moreover, neither the Congress of the United States nor the legislature of this state has seen fit to try to change the definition of ‘assault’ by statute, despite considerable pressure from groups like the Salvation Alliance. In the absence of such Congressional action … I’m afraid my hands are tied. I’m sorry, Ms. Norton, but I will not be the first judge to criminalize theater rehearsal.”

Hunter cheered inwardly, carefully keeping his outward reaction to a minimum, then turned to Sabrina. This was usually the part where the client thanked him, blessed him, hugged him, sometimes even wept for joy at having beaten the system. But Sabrina did not. She simply nodded and said, “I guess I’ll see you around,” before turning to walk out of the courtroom.

Hunter was shocked. “No ‘thank you’?”

Orr shrugged. “I was innocent. You proved it. Good job, but it’s not like there was much to fight about.”

With that, she turned and headed toward her parents, who were separating themselves from the flock of people in the audience moving toward the courtroom exit. By turns, they embraced her and kissed the crown of her head, their faces radiating relief. Grinning, Sabrina’s father waved to Hunter. Then, without saying another word to him, the three of them turned and left.

Hunter sighed. “Being a hero is so overrated,” he muttered, watching Sabrina’s retreating back.

Chapter 2

Hunter pulled his blue Nissan Altima into the parking lot of his office only to find that his path was blocked. Marching around the ramp leading up to the lot were five figures, clad in bright crimson robes. All but one were male, and all held signs saying things like, “Vampires suck,” or “America’s Going To The Dogs.”
Hunter actually grinned wryly at the sight. “Figures.” He rolled down the window, sticking his head out and looking directly at the robed protesters. “Excuse me,” he said. “Would you mind clearing a path? I work in this building and need to get back to my office.”

One of them, a towering man with a mop of slick black hair over a hawkish brow, cast a glance over at Hunter’s building, his gaze fixing particularly on Hunter’s sign, which had an old-fashioned scale to the right of the words “McCLAIN & GAMBLE, P.C.”. Then he turned the piercing brown eyes beneath the jet black eyebrows on Hunter. “You a lawyer?” the man asked.

Hunter raised a polite eyebrow. “You know I am.”

“Then you know we got a right to be here. We’re just concerned citizens expressin’ our opinions about the … work,” he snorted, this last word drawing a snicker from his robed colleagues, “that goes on in this building. That's our right.”

Hunter laughed. “Not on private property, it's not. See, I own this building, and this parking lot, which means you've only got a right to be here if I say you can be here. So please take your friends and clear out … Mr. DeVorr.” Hunter grinned tightly as he invoked the other man's name. Always catch the enemy off guard, as his father often said.

The other man walked closer, coming to stand inches from Hunter’s head and looking down into his eyes. “Heard of me, then?”

“I’m sure you’d expect someone in my business to be familiar with the leader of Austin’s branch of the Salvation Alliance,” Hunter said.

DeVorr shot a predatory glare at Hunter. “Defendin’ freaks and Godless blasphemies isn’t a business. It’s a one way ticket straight to hell. And it won’t just be you that God judges. It’ll be all of them that tolerate your heresy.” He waved a hand around to encompass the entire city – perhaps the entire planet.

Who can fathom the minds of crazy people? Hunter thought, keeping an expression of amused detachment on his face. He actually did find this amusing – mostly. “Mr. DeVorr – may I call you Adrian?”

“No you may not. Use of my first name is reserved for people I respect.”

Hunter nodded. “I see. Well, then, Adrian, let me see if I’ve got this straight. What you’re telling me is that you have no problem with lawyers defending murderers and child molesters, that’s all well and good, but it becomes horrible and sinful and damnation for all mankind if we defend people who just happen to be arcanes.”

“Don’t make it sound like it’s just somethin’ that happens to ‘em. Most of the vampires and werewolves in the world chose to get Changed, an’ you know that. Don’t play dumb!” He shook his fist.

“Actually, I don’t,” Hunter answered, a soft grin still on his lips. “Since the studies that ‘prove’ that point are scientifically questionable at best. But you never answered my question.”

DeVorr raised an indignant eyebrow. “Oh? And what question was that?”

“You don’t have a problem with lawyers defending murderers and child molesters?” he asked again.

“I didn’t say that,” the other man answered. From the look on his face, Hunter could tell DeVorr was rattled.

“Then why aren’t you protesting outside their offices? Why have you chosen my firm to grace with your presence?” Hunter asked, his smile widening.

He could see the wheels turn in DeVorr’s head for a moment as the other man cast about for an answer. “Murderers and child molesters are still children of God. Strayed far from the path, perhaps, but children of God. These … things …”
“Had to get here somehow,” Hunter finished the sentence before DeVorr could, reaching into his pants pocket and pulling out his cell phone. “Now, as much fun as this has been, I really do need you to take your friends and leave, or I’ll have to call the police. I’m sure they’d be happy to show you the way out if you can’t find it yourself.”

Adrian DeVorr’s eyes narrowed to slits, and for a moment rage consumed his face. It seemed in that instant as if he might attack Hunter then and there – but he did not. Instead, he merely huffed, then turned and gathered his friends. They all retreated, carrying their signs with them.

“Just another day in the life,” Hunter mused, grinning as he pulled his car into his parking space.

--

“Gotcha!”

Kirsten Harper pumped a fist in the air as she flipped to the next page of the case she was reading. Her office – her bunker, as she liked to call it – felt supercharged with energy. Quickly, excitedly, her eyes scanned the page she’d just turned to, a familiar fevered, giddy feeling growing inside of her. It was the feeling that meant that she’d found what she was looking for, that she was on the brink of cracking whatever case she and Hunter were working on at the moment.

She was the legal hunter, and she’d just cornered her latest prey.

“And there it is!” A predatory gleam shone in her blue eyes as they lit on exactly the words she’d been looking for. She turned her head to one side, where a spiral notebook lay on her desk, open to a page half-full of scribbled notes. She added yet another note in the blank area, underlining it several times in her excitement. And then, double-clicking her mouse to wake her computer from hibernation, she began to gather her various notes into a coherent legal memorandum that Hunter could use in court ….

Her tongue rested inside her right cheek, as it always did when she was deep in concentration, and for several minutes she filled up page after page on her word processor with arguments and facts and case citations. Her fingers thundering away at the keys produced a loud tap-tap-tapping noise, but Kirsten was completely oblivious to everything but the screen and her own thoughts, until –

“I swear, Kirsten,” Hunter Gamble’s voice cut into her shell of concentration, and she looked up from her computer screen to see him standing there in a short-sleeved yellow button-down shirt and slacks, lounging in the doorway with one hand resting lazily against the doorframe. “You should get a GPS device for your own head, with how often you get lost in your thoughts.”

Kirsten’s retort was quick and ready. “It happens when you sit in front of a computer for hours on end,” she said, a wry grin curling her lips upward. “You should try it sometime.” After two years of working together, she and Hunter knew each other well and she felt comfortable saying whatever came to mind.

“Hey now!” Hunter feigned wounded pride. “I’ve been out saving innocent drama queens all morning. Besides which, you know I have no gift for research.” He gave her a significant look. She laughed, though she knew it was true. More than one judge had remarked that the quality of Hunter’s briefs and memos had increased exponentially since he’d hired Kirsten.

“How’d the hearing go?” she asked pleasantly, leaning back in her chair as he took a few slow
steps into her office. The two seemed to move in sync, a testament to the quality of their working relationship.

“Judge dismissed the charges,” Hunter told her, waving a hand dismissively, as if the outcome had been obvious from the start. “You don’t argue with the First Amendment.”

“Tell that to the Salvation Alliance.”

“Judge said the same thing. Still, he’s the one with the robe, not them. Thanks for finding the Brandenburg case for me, by the way. It was a godsend.” He grinned at her.

And so are you, she imagined him saying for a moment, hearing the words clearly in her own mind, and for just the barest moment allowing herself to believe that Hunter had uttered them. But of course he had not, and she squelched the momentary pain she always felt at realizing that such dreams were, in fact, just dreams. “No problem,” she said, as blandly as she could manage.

“So what’s on tap?” Hunter asked, easing himself into one of the chairs on the opposite side of her desk. He rested his chin in one hand, elbow on her desk, brown eyes on her face with polite curiosity.

"Harburt case," Kirsten answered, to a blank look from Hunter.

"Refresh me?"

"Harburt owns a liquor store," Kirsten explained. "Few months back, some kids came in and bought a pack of beer. Their IDs checked out, so Harburt sold it to them. Trouble is, after they got themselves drunk, they went and murdered young Andrea Alston. The Alstons are now suing Mr. Harbut in civil court, claiming that he negligently sold the kids the beer which led to their daughter's murder. Harburt's an arcane, so we took the case."

"Well, that should be a slam dunk! You're not liable for a third party's criminal conduct, right? That's, uh, uh," he snapped his fingers, willing his brain to remember the name of the case. Finally, he conceded defeat. "I can't remember the name of the case."

"You're thinking of Phan Son Van v. Pena, and that's what I thought, too," Kirsten replied, opening her desk drawer and pulling out a small stack of papers held together by a staple. "But the case says more than that. You're not liable for a third party's criminal conduct if the conduct was unforeseeable." She handed the papers to Hunter.

Hunter took the papers from her, looking down at them. He saw a copy of the Phan Son Van case, with sections highlighted by Kirsten. Sure enough, the case said exactly what she'd said it said. "So why would this be foreseeable? Plenty of people buy beer and don't commit murder the same night."

Kirsten sent a quirky grin in Hunter's direction. "Because Mr. Harbutt's a psychic," she answered. Hunter covered his face in his hands.

"Don't these people know that there's a reason that psychic testimony isn't allowed in court? It's such an inexact science that it's about as reliable as tarot cards."

"The Alston family might not know that, but the Texas Supreme Court does." Without missing a beat, Kirsten reached again into her desk drawer, withdrew another stack of papers. "Mitchell v. Williams -- a psychic store clerk's testimony that a terrible accident would soon occur in the store was not enough to put a reasonable shift manager on notice that there was a puddle of liquid near the vending machines."

Hunter looked down at the case she had handed him. It was, again, highlighted and had several notes in the sidelines.

"Just as our previous jurisprudence made clear that the length of time a dangerous condition had existed was more important in the determination of a store owner's negligence than an
employee's proximity to that condition during the period of its existence," Kirsten said, her eyes never wavering from Hunter's face, "so we now hold that the 'length of time' test trumps visions of the future had by store employees who may happen to have psychic abilities. The Unveiling changed many aspects of American law and life, but our jurisprudence on duty of care is not one of those things."

Hunter was confused for a moment, but then he looked down at the case and saw a section that was both highlighted and underlined -- containing the exact wording she'd just recited. His jaw dropped in abject awe. "You memorized that?"

"Err -- yes, sir," she answered, a trace of embarrassment touching her cheeks.

In response, Hunter just sat there slack-jawed. "You know there's something freakish about you, right?"

Kirsten grinned. "It's been mentioned once or twice."

"By me?" Hunter asked.

" Mostly."

"Good work." He beamed.

He turned to leave, but as he approached the door to her office, she remembered something.

“Oh, Hunter?” she called out to him, already tensing in anticipation of his reaction to what she was about to say.

He turned to face her again. “Hmm?” he asked.

“Your father called. He wants you to call him back.”

Hunter rolled his eyes, visibly suppressing a wince. “Thanks,” he answered, more than a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. He turned again and walked out, but this time, his posture was that of a man walking to the gallows.

--

It was during lunch hour that day that Kirsten Harper first met Sam Pollard. Hunter had gone out to eat, but Kirsten opted to stay in her office, as she often did. And so she was eating forkfuls of salad with one hand and pressing the "down" key on her keyboard with the other when the knock came at her door.

"Excuse me," said the soft voice, "I'm looking for Hunter Gamble."

Kirsten looked up. It was a young man, probably no older than Kirsten herself, with neatly-trimmed brown hair and brown eyes. He wore a suit and plain red tie, and overall looked like a picture-perfect professional, except for one thing. His skin was pale -- in fact, it was an almost sickly shade.

Kirsten silently wondered at that as she responded, "I'm sorry, he's out to lunch right now. Can I help you?"

"Maybe. Has Hunter told you anything about the lobbying campaign?"

Kirsten's eyebrow arched. "Lobbying campaign? I don't think we do any lobbying, sir. We're an arcane defense law firm."

"I know who you guys are," the young man said. He walked to her desk and held out his hand. "I'm Sam Pollard, and I work with All Beings Are Legal Equals. Mr. Gamble expressed interest in joining one of our upcoming lobbying campaigns against some anti-arcane legislation that's being introduced in Congress."

"Oh," Kirsten answered, rising and shaking the proffered hand. "I'm sorry, he hadn't mentioned that to --" She stopped in her tracks as their hands touched. His skin was cold.
"Are -- are you all right?" Sam asked, looking confused and a bit anxious. 
Kirsten gave him a knowing look. "You're not just an ally, are you?"
"Excuse me?"
"Of the arcane rights movement," she explained. "You're not just an ally."
Sam sighed, looking downcast. "No," he answered. "No, I'm not."
"Well, you're out in broad daylight, so I'm guessing you're not a vampire," Kirsten reasoned.
"Zombie?"
Sam nodded.
"Hey, this is the place to be if you're an arcane -- we don't judge." She grinned tightly at him, to let him know all was well. "So are you one of the lucky five percent that stays rational after the bite?"
Sam shook his head. "I wasn't bitten."
Kirsten's eyebrow rose inquisitively. "Resurrection spell?"
Sam nodded.
Kirsten understood immediately. The term "resurrection spell" was a misnomer, as it was impossible to truly bring someone back from the dead, even for an arcane. Instead, a resurrection spell restored its subject to a simulation of life, recreating a person's personality, memories, senses, and a limited amount of motor function. Such people were considered zombies legally because their hearts no longer beat and because their sluggish gait resembled the shambling lurch of true zombies, the kind that were Changed by biting. Also because they, like "real" zombies, were vulnerable to the Hunger.
For a moment, Kirsten wanted to ask what had killed him so young, but she decided against it. "Well," she said instead, "if you want to hang around in the lobby, he should be back before too long. Otherwise, I can tell him you stopped by."
"If you'd tell him to give me a call," Sam told her, reaching into a pocket and handing her a business card, "I'd appreciate it."
"Sure." Kirsten took the card, then sat back down at her desk, returning to her research.
"Hey, just out of curiosity," Sam's voice shattered her concentration a moment later, and she looked up to find him standing in her doorway.
"Yeah?" she answered, looking and sounding annoyed at the interruption.
"Oh, sorry, I just -- did you guys take the Harrell case?" Sam asked.
Kirsten's eyebrow shot up in surprise. "Mr. Harrell is a client of ours, yes -- it's his case I'm researching right now, actually. Why?"
"I've been following it for a while."
"Following it how?" Kirsten's surprise deepened. "It hasn't made much press -- not yet, at least."
Sam smiled coyly. "It has if you work at ABLE."
This got a small chuckle from Kirsten. "Fair enough."
"Anyway, I think it's really unfair, and I hope you can get him guardianship rights of those kids."
"Well, you and me both, but I wouldn't bet on it."
"Oh?"
"Yeah, the grandparents' lawyer is playing hardball, arguing that since Harrell is a werewolf, making him guardian is like making a sex offender guardian. They say he's disqualified just like a sex offender would be. That's not in the Probate Code, of course, but who cares?" She gave a derisive snort.
Sam rolled his eyes in reply. "Let me guess: the monthly Change makes him just as dangerous?"
"That's what they're saying, yeah."
"These people don't come up with new stuff, do they?" Sam asked. "It's just the same old bigoted crap every time."
"Pretty much. Unfortunately, calling them 'unoriginal' won't get the judge to rule for us."
"No," Sam answered, without missing a beat, "but the fact that sex offenders aren't disqualified from being guardians of children might."
"What?"
"Sex offenders aren't disqualified from being guardians."
"You're shitting me," she said, sputtering in disbelief.
He shook his head. "Mind if I hop on your computer for a second?"
She was so incredulous that she simply nodded and rose from her chair, offering it to him. He sat down, his fingers flying over the keyboard as he navigated their online research database. Kirsten leaned down, watching over his shoulder, their faces only inches apart. Sure enough, a moment later --
"There!" Sam crowed, pointing to the screen. Kirsten read it -- and he was right. Sex offenders were not barred from being guardians of children. The Texas Supreme Court had said so itself. For a long moment Kirsten was speechless.
And then her intelligence caught up with her. "How did you know that?" she asked him. "How did you even know how to use our database?"
He smiled sadly at her. "Because I was going to be a lawyer," he said, rising to his feet again. "Anyway, I'd better get back to the office. Tell Hunter I stopped by?"
"Huh?" Kirsten had forgotten all about the original purpose of his visit. "Oh, yeah, sure."
He nodded, then turned and walked out of the office.
Shame he didn't become a lawyer, Kirsten thought in his wake. He might have been fun to work with.

Chapter 3

Though only a single story, Weldon Gamble's house was over four thousand square feet in size, and so seemed to occupy the entire range of Hunter’s vision. The cool brown stone of which it was made took on shades of black and grey against the night sky. Even the light coming from the house’s many windows was muted somewhat by the curtains. It was not, to Hunter’s mind, a welcoming place.

Then again, he reflected, that might have more to do with his feelings toward the house’s occupant. Taking a deep breath, he rolled down the driver’s side window and pressed the “Talk” button on the panel to one side of him. “This is a private residence,” came a thickly accented voice, “can we help you?”
Hunter smiled slightly in spite of his dread at the coming meeting. “Hello, Claus,” he told the man on the other end. “My father asked me to join him for dinner tonight, would you tell him I’m here?”
“Hunter?” Claus asked. “What are you doing out so late? Shouldn’t you be in bed?”
“Not for a few years now, Claus.” Hunter grinned warmly. Claus’s feigned disbelief that Hunter was a grown man now was an old joke between them.
“Oh well,” Claus answered. “Can’t blame me for trying. I’ll tell Weldon you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Hunter said, as the front gates swung open automatically. Hunter drove up the long, winding path leading to his father’s house. He brought the car to a stop between the house itself and the fountain just in front of it. In Hunter’s memory, his father had never run water through the fountain, and Hunter was not even entirely sure that it actually worked, but Weldon Gamble had never had the fountain torn down, and so it stood there, a defunct relic.

A few moments later, the front door opened and a man emerged. Wearing two days’ worth of stubble and a few pounds worth of paunch, Claus nevertheless had an entirely pleasant affect. His face was perpetually set in a toothless smile, the brown eyes taking in everything with an almost childlike sense of glee. How the man’s seemingly indomitable good humor had survived two decades as Weldon Gamble’s butler, Hunter would never know, but he admired the older man greatly for it. Hunter looked on Claus as some combination of a surrogate father and a doting uncle, and as the older man approached, Hunter turned off his car, stepped out of it, and embraced him.

“How are you, sir?” the butler asked him as they pulled apart.

Hunter’s brown eyes twinkled warmly at the man. “Claus, after the number of my scraped knees you bandaged – not to mention my broken hearts – you don’t have to call me ‘sir’. Hunter works just fine. And I’m good. Dad treating you okay?”

“As always.” Claus nodded quickly, seeming entirely sincere. As the two fell into lockstep and walked into the house, the butler continued. “Why you two don’t get along better, I’ll never know, but ….”

“That’s easy,” Hunter interjected. “He’s cold-hearted, self-absorbed, and if he’s got an empathetic bone in his body, I’ve never seen it.”

Claus stopped in his tracks, turned to Hunter, and scowled. The look on his face was one Hunter knew very well from his childhood – it meant that Hunter had struck a nerve, and actually managed to provoke some anger in the normally unflappable man. Hunter sighed. “Claus, I’m sorry, I know how you feel about him –”

“If someone did for you what he did for me, you’d feel that way about them too,” Claus told him sternly.

“You’re right, and – ” Hunter started, but Claus interrupted him again.

“And what’s more,” the butler continued, in the same tone he’d used to lecture Hunter as a child when he’d misbehaved, “you don’t really believe what you just said, either.”

Hunter raised an eyebrow, caught off guard by that. “Claus, I’m sorry for what I said, but don’t tell me how I feel. I know that better than you.”

“Oh really?” Claus countered, his tone changing from rebuking to challenging. “If you really think he’s that awful, then why are you still here? Why do you come when he calls?”

Hunter stopped in his tracks, an uncomfortable feeling coalescing in his gut. “It’s … complicated.”

“So is he,” Claus answered smartly, then turned and walked off, presumably to fetch Weldon Gamble. Hunter breathed a deep sigh as he watched the butler go.

The evening was off to a fine start already.

--

Hunter had always felt that his father took up the entirety of whatever room he was in. Not that Weldon Gamble was fat – on the contrary, he was a gaunt, cadaverous man. Nor was
Hunter’s father precisely a towering figure – he was tall, but not extraordinarily so, standing almost exactly six feet in height. And yet Weldon Gamble’s presence was much larger than the man himself, consuming all of the oxygen in whatever space he occupied.

Hunter had long found the air of authority his father exuded almost suffocating.

It was no different now as the older man stalked towards him, his brisk stride belying his graying hair and the deepening crow’s feet around his eyes. “Hello, son,” the elder Gamble called to Hunter, his voice gravelly, a hawkish grin spreading over his lips. Weldon pulled his son into a quick, highly formal hug, and the two men released quickly. The older man looked down at his son, his ice blue eyes searching Hunter’s face. “You look well.”

“Thank you,” Hunter grinned. “You too. Looks like Claus is taking good care of you.”

“Always,” Weldon chuckled, turning and beckoning for his son to follow. “Speaking of which, come on. I think you’ll find he’s made us quite the meal.”

Hunter shot his father a sideways glance. “Lasagna?” he asked, hopefully.

“He knows it’s your favorite,” his father told him as the two men marched down the hallway in lockstep. “The minute he heard you were coming, he got right to work on it.” Weldon looked over at Hunter. “He misses you.”

“Yeah,” Hunter replied, looking away guiltily. “I’ve just … been busy with work.”

His father regarded him skeptically. “You can’t make time to come around here more than once a month?”

“Remember when I was a kid and you were trying to make partner?” Hunter asked him.

“How much time did you have then?”

“That was different.”

“Why?”

“That was a real job.”

Anger exploded inside Hunter, and he whirled on his father, stopping in his tracks instantly. “Come on, Dad! I do criminal defense and civil litigation, what’s not real about that??”

“You represent arcanes,” Weldon countered.

“And?” Hunter raised an eyebrow. “Have you joined the Salvation Alliance without telling me?”

Weldon snorted. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t know whether I’d want a vampire living right next door, but there’s nothing to be gained by persecuting people over something they didn’t ask for and can’t help.”

“Nothing to be gained?” Disgust welled up inside Hunter. “Is that how you see everything? As a cost/benefit analysis? What about the benefit to these people’s lives, doesn’t that count for anything?”

The older man nodded. “Of course it does. But so does your life.”

“I’m happy with my life,” Hunter said, honestly confused now.

“For now,” Weldon said, restarting his march toward the dining room. Hunter stood there for a moment trying to sort out his confusion before following.

He caught up to his father in the dining room. As ever, the walls were lined with expensive paintings and cabinets full of fine plates, bowls, and utensils. A few old-fashioned lamps, bolted to the wall, provided the only light in the room, leaving much of the room covered in shade and causing any entrants to cast long shadows. In the center of the room, surrounded by a dozen chairs, sat a jet black dining table, surely ten feet long or more. Weldon ambled toward the chair at one end of the table, motioned Hunter toward the other end.
“Dad, seriously? I’m your son, not opposing counsel on your latest multimillion dollar case. Do we really need the formality?”

“The person who hasn’t been by here in six weeks is lecturing me on appropriate displays of familial affection?” Weldon chuckled.

Hunter had no answer to that. Ruefully, he went and took his seat at the opposite end of the table from his father. A moment later, Claus entered the room by a side door, holding a silver platter topped with plates of steaming lasagna and two mostly-full wine glasses. Silently, he presented each man with a plate, a glass, and a rolled-up napkin filled with silverware, and then retreated from the room.

“I don’t get it,” Hunter said as he unrolled his napkin and grabbed his silverware.

“What?” his father asked, having already tucked his own napkin into his shirt and dug into his lasagna.

“You took in Claus.”

Weldon stopped in his tracks, fork stuck in his lasagna, and looked up at Hunter abruptly, the older man’s eyes locking on his son’s. “I did. So?”

“So he was living on the street when you found him. He was filthy. For all you knew, he was only helping you out to win your trust so he could rob you blind.”

Weldon raised an eyebrow. “Surely you’re not going to lecture me on the evils of being kind to people who most of society shuns?”

“No, of course not, but that’s the point – it’s exactly what I’d have done in your place, and exactly the sort of thing you look down your nose at me for.”

“That’s because there’s a big difference between your situation and mine,” Weldon answered the unspoken question, returning his attention to his lasagna.

“Which is?” Hunter asked, honestly curious now, as he began to consume his own meal.

“I can afford to be nice.”

“Human decency isn’t the province of the rich, Dad.”

“You realize how childish that statement sounded, right?” Weldon asked, not taking his eyes off the bite of lasagna on his fork.

“You realize how heartless yours sounded?” Hunter shot back, without missing a beat.

Weldon dropped the fork in his hand at that, heaving a deep sigh of disappointment.

“You’ve got an answer to everything, don’t you?” the older man finally asked.

“Runs in the family.”

This actually provoked laughter from the elder Gamble. “Apparently so,” he answered. The look in his eyes softened. “Son ... all the arguing aside, I am concerned about you.”

“Why?”

“Because that law firm of yours could close its doors tomorrow,” Weldon answered, swallowing a large piece of lasagna.

Hunter felt a touch of wounded pride. “Kirsten and I keep it running pretty well,” he said.

“Ah, yes, the infamous Ms. Harper,” said Weldon, another wistful grin coming to his lips.

“She makes me wish I was a few decades younger.”

“You couldn’t keep up with her,” Hunter answered, in what he hoped was a teasing voice.

“That’s not what your mother used to say,” Weldon answered, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

Hunter blushed furiously. “Not what I meant,” he said, having to exert physical effort to keep his food down at the images of his father and Kirsten that came unbidden to his mind. “I
meant that she’s the best research lawyer I’ve ever met in my life. I don’t know why she’s at the
firm instead of at Fulbright & Jaworski. Or the Justice Department.”

Weldon gave Hunter an odd look in reply – the sort of look his father had always given him
during tutoring sessions, when Weldon was expecting Hunter to supply an answer to a question
he’d just asked. Finally, unable to stand the confusion, Hunter blurted out, “What?”
The older man chuckled and shook his head. “Nothing, son. But there's no way I can
convince you to come join my firm?”
"You know there isn't, so why oh why do you keep asking?"
"Because I know something you don't," said Weldon.
"And what's that?"
"I know that being completely dependent on one person for your livelihood is never a good
idea."
Hunter shrugged. "McClain's given me no signs he's gonna shut the place down. And even if
he did, I've been practicing four years now. There are jobs out there for people with four years of
experience."
"Not for you, there aren't."
This once again provoked Hunter’s anger. “What – Dad, come on. Even you can’t say I’m
bad at this.”
Weldon shook his head. “No, you’re very good at it. Get some more experience under your
belt, you could be one of the great trial lawyers.”
“But?”
“But no law firm on the planet will hire you with your resume,” Weldon said.
Hunter balked. “I’ve got four years of experience, Dad, I’m sure that will — “
“In a field the rest of the profession regards as one step above picking up garbage.” His
father's volume was rising. “The longer you keep doing that, the harder it will be for you to ever
do anything else, ever.”
Hunter sat back in his chair, letting the words wash over him. He saw the older man’s
reasoning, and it calmed him somewhat to know that what often seemed like disappointment for
its own sake was actually born of concern for Hunter’s well being. But it didn't change his mind.
“I can’t see myself ever wanting to do anything else." Hunter met his father's eyes as he
spoke, keeping his voice level.
“I hope it stays that way,” Weldon said, without evident sarcasm..
The rest of the meal passed in silence.

Chapter 4

Kirsten Harper’s tongue sat nestled in her right cheek, her chin rested on her right palm, and
she was so engrossed in what she was doing that she failed to notice that her right hand was
falling asleep. Her left forefinger idly hit the “down” arrow on her keyboard as she scrolled
through another case, and then another. She blew out a deep breath of frustration as she once
again found nothing useful in what she was reading.
“Boo.”

Kirsten involuntarily pushed back in her rolling chair hard enough that the chair’s back hit
the wall behind her with a loud crunch, her eyes bulging to roughly dinner plate size. Her eyes
shot upward toward her doorframe, where the sound had come from – and found Hunter standing
there. Or more accurately, *hunching* there, as her boss was presently doubled over, laughing hystERICALLY and holding his gut. Her eyes narrowed at him. "Don’t do that!"

"I'm sorry," he told her amid peals of laughter, grinning insufferably. "That just never gets old."

She glared at him through slitted eyes. "You're despicable, you know that?" she asked, in the bantering tone that the two of them used when kidding each other. And she was kidding, mostly. "What?" He wiped his eyes, pulling himself to a standing position and beginning to regain his composure. "I just like to make sure there's a little excitement in your life."

"Pretty sure the definition of ‘excitement’ is different from ‘mortal terror,’ thank you very much." She ignored entirely different retort that ran through her head about other ways he could make her life exciting.

"I always get those two confused." He shot her an easy smile as he strolled into her office. "So what’s on tap?"

"Belinda Hale," she told him, standing up and stretching. "Bella for short." She shook her right hand to stretch it, removing her glasses and rubbing her eyes with her left hand. She felt a moment’s lightheadedness as she realized just exactly how long she had been staring at her computer screen. Her clock told her it was 11:30 a.m., and she’d been working on this same case since she arrived at the office around 8:15. That meant over three hours. No wonder her body was punishing her.

"That’s the lady who was fired for being an arcane, right?" Hunter asked.

"Close. For dating one."

"Say what?" He raised an eyebrow in surprise, and she was briefly elated: for once, she'd caught Hunter off guard.

"Hale took up with a vampire a few months back. Her boss found out about it a month ago, and fired her on the spot."

"Anything we can do about it?"

Kirsten shook her head. "I don’t think so."

"Because this is an at-will state?" Hunter asked.

Kirsten nodded. "Your employer has the right to fire you for any reason, no reason, or even a bad reason. There are a few exceptions on public policy grounds, but they’re very limited and none of them come close to touching this situation."

"Title VII?" Hunter asked.

Kirsten shook her head. "The federal anti-discrimination law only applies if you’re fired because you’re a member of a protected class, not because your boytoy is. Besides, arcane isn't a protected class."

He sighed. "I guess we’ll have to tell her we can’t help her."

Kirsten nodded, not wanting to say anything. She knew Hunter hated to turn away clients in need, and he’d be even more unhappy to turn away a case like this, which was sure to offend his sense of fairness. Now that she thought about it, that sense of fairness was one of the things she’d always liked about him.

Hunter ambled over and sat in one of the two chairs on the other side of her desk, scratching his chin with a thumb. His eyes took on the faraway look that Kirsten recognized easily after two years of working with him. She watched the familiar evolution of his facial expression as he processed the sadness and regret and helplessness that came with realizing he couldn’t help someone. He opened his mouth to speak, and she braced herself -- knowing him, whatever he said was likely to be bitter and possibly highly self-critical.
"How do you feel about museums?"

Kirsten felt her jaw go slack -- the question was so utterly unexpected that she didn't know what to make of it. "Excuse me?"

"Museums," he repeated amicably. "How do you feel about museums?"

"… They're all right, I guess," she answered hesitantly, still confused and off-guard.

"Why?"

"Oh, Mel Maddox is holding a celebration of his own wonderfulness in honor of the pieces he just donated to our museum," he answered, referring to the well-known local multi-millionaire, philanthropist, and activist. "I was wondering if you'd like to go."

Was he actually asking what she thought he was? She wanted to ask, to clarify, but found that while she could form the words in her mind, she could not get them past her throat. "Since when do you give a shit about art?" she asked. The question was as brusque as any of their banter, but she realized as she spoke that she was not using the bantering tone. Her face warmed as she mentally berated herself, wondering if she was about to be fired.

"I don't," he answered instead, simply, though he looked taken aback. "I was thinking maybe we could sweet talk Mr. Maddox into providing some new funding for this place."

Kirsten raised an eyebrow. "Is McClain pulling out?"

"No," Hunter assured her quickly, "but Maddox is a big activist for arcane rights, and he's loaded, too. With another infusion of cash, maybe we could hire someone else, lighten your workload a little."

He cast his comments as casual, off-hand, but Kirsten thought she knew Hunter's real motivations. "Your Dad tried to scare you again, didn't he, Hunter?"

"No," he answered, but Kirsten was sure it sounded as unconvincing to his own ears as it did to hers.

"Yes, he did." Kirsten gave Hunter the look she always used when she knew she was right. "Gave you the 'you'll be out on the street if McClain backs out' speech, huh?"

Hunter finally conceded, apparently realizing that Kirsten knew him too well for him to keep up the deception. "Yeah." He leaned his head back and sighed. "And I want to say he's wrong, but… you and I both know we don't bring in enough to keep this place going without him. By all rights, McClain should have shut this place down already."

"But he hasn't."

"Yeah, but we don't even know why he hasn't."

"Maybe he just likes helping arcanes?" Kirsten shrugged. "He is the person who funds most of the free blood banks for vampires, and he funded the research that produced the compound zombies can eat in place of brains."

"So he's doing it out of charity? You wanna bet your job on his continued charity?" Hunter asked.

Kirsten had no answer.

The two sat there for a long moment in silence. Finally, Hunter leaned forward, putting his hands against the rim of her desk to brace himself and looking as tired as Kirsten had ever seen her boss."I can't do anything else, Kirsten," he told her, voice quiet and with an exhausted quality to it. "Even if the profession is about dollars and cents like Dad says, I missed that memo when I signed up for law school. I'm in it to make a difference, and if I can't do that, I don't want to do this."

"To Kill A Mockingbird," Kirsten answered with a faint smile, referencing Hunter's favorite book.
Hunter looked up and gave her his own faint smile in return. "The only book that ever changed my life. That book was what first made me wanna be a lawyer -- to be like Atticus. When the Unveiling happened, I remember thinking to myself 'here's my chance'. I can't leave my life's work up to McClain's whims, Kirsten. I just can't."

Kirsten was silent for a moment, an overpowering wave of affection for Hunter flooding through her. Then, finally, she spoke. "All right. I'll go with you."

Hunter grinned at her again, rising from his chair. "The reception's a week from Thursday," he said. "I'll pick you up at seven." With that, he turned and strolled out of her office, looking carefree as ever.

In his wake, Kirsten realized to her frustration that she still had no idea whether Hunter had just asked her out.

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Hunter pulled his car in front of Kirsten's apartment complex on the appointed evening, texting her to let her know he'd arrived. He blew out a deep breath, letting nervous energy wash over him. Hunter had never been particularly comfortable begging people for money, and what he was about to do felt to him like crass opportunism. He told himself once again that it was a necessary evil if he wanted to keep his law office running. Unlike Superman, us mortal superheroes have gotta eat.

That train of thought was entirely destroyed a moment later as Kirsten stepped through the front door of her apartment building, wearing an elegant red dress that left her arms and shoulders bare. Though Kirsten usually wore a sweatshirt and jeans to work, and rarely put much obvious effort into her appearance, Hunter had always known that she was pretty, but right now, he felt that she could be more accurately described as stunning. Even though he wore a suit jacket over a long-sleeved white shirt, he suddenly felt decidedly under-dressed for the occasion.

"You went all out," Hunter said, torn between bantering and admiring, as she opened the passenger door. "You gonna ask Maddox for money, or out on a date?"

Hunter was expecting a teasing reply, of the sort the two traded every day in the office. And so he was greatly surprised when her answer was a thin, soft, "Yeah," as she lowered herself into the car, closing the door behind her. Hunter actually did a double-take, he was so surprised.

"You all right?" he asked her, raising a curious -- and slightly concerned -- eyebrow.

"Huh?" she asked, before she apparently realized what he was talking about. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I just -- it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Hunter suspected that it was not, in fact, nothing, but decided not to press the point. Instead, he simply nodded, then turned the car on and began to drive. Kirsten spent the entire trip in silence, staring out the window, which made Hunter even more concerned. He knew her as a talkative and eloquent young woman: this was really out of character. He was also unaccustomed to the slightly anxious set of her face -- if anything, Kirsten was prone to being overly excitable. The only time he'd ever seen her nervous before was when she'd first started working for him.

His suspicions increased as they entered the museum, joining the crowd of fancily dressed people mingling in the main foyer. Kirsten's posture tensed visibly as they stepped through the doors, and she began to resemble a coiled spring. What was more, she stayed consistently several steps behind him and walked tentatively, as if she'd just been dropped on a strange alien planet and was unsure of the terrain. Things couldn't keep like this: Hunter would need her help if he was to convince Mel Maddox to contribute to his firm.
The good news was that Maddox appeared to be nowhere in sight, which meant that he had some time to deal with whatever was bothering Kirsten. He looked over his shoulder, intending to ask if he could speak to her in private, but before he could make the request, a gruff, strangely familiar voice from one side caught his attention.

"Mr. Gamble!"

Hunter turned towards the voice, and saw a suited man separating himself from a small clump of other patrons to approach him. He cringed inwardly as he realized who it was.

"I wanted to thank you for the fine work you did for my daughter," said Melvin Orr, holding out his hand for Hunter to shake. "Fantastic job, truly."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Orr," answered Hunter, taking the proffered hand and forcing himself to remain pleasant. "I hope Sabrina's doing okay and staying out of trouble?"

Mr. Orr chuckled. "Well, legal trouble, anyway. Being on the phone with boys in her room at one a.m.? Not so much," he chuckled. "But she's been cast in another play, so at least she's not letting that little … misunderstanding keep her from what she loves."

Hunter smiled. "Glad to hear it. She's a charming young woman, I'm sure she'll go a long way in life." In reality, Hunter had found Sabrina quite irritating, and had found it highly unsurprising that she wanted to be an actor, given her personality. He felt that she was an example of everything that was wrong with that particular profession. Still, he felt no particular need to say that to Mr. Orr—after all, there was no reason to alienate a potential repeat client.

Before Hunter could say anything else at all, Mr. Orr's attention promptly shifted to Kirsten.

"And who's the lucky lady?" he asked, his eyes gleaming as he regarded her.

"This is Kirsten Harper," Hunter answered, gesturing to her. He was about to explain the role she'd played in winning Sabrina's case, but Mr. Orr spoke again before he could.

"You have good taste, Ms. Harper," Orr told her, favoring her with a smile. "This is one talented young man. I'd hold on to him if I was you."

Hunter did not think Kirsten's face could have turned any redder.

"Actually, we're not dating, Mr. Orr," Hunter corrected him as Kirsten stood there, still shocked and mute. "Kirsten works for me. She had quite a lot to do with your daughter not going to prison. More than I did, in fact."

Now it was Mr. Orr's turn to flush red. "Oh," he stammered. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I should have -- I didn't --"

Hunter waited for Kirsten to make a snarky comment. He could almost hear her voice in his head: You sure your mouth is big enough to fit those shoes in? But instead, she just gave a small shrug, looking flustered and more nervous than ever.

"Well -- you have my thanks," Mr. Orr nodded in gratitude to her, and then walked away far too quickly.

"Well, our evening's off to a great start already, eh?"

But Kirsten simply strode past him at a brisk pace, her face still red, heading toward an adjoining hallway. "Kirsten!" he called, chasing after her.

He caught up with her halfway down the hallway, reaching out and taking her shoulder in one hand. She stopped, but didn't turn to face him. "Come on," he told her gently. "Don't let that guy being stupid ruin your day."

"It's not that." She looked down at the floor.

"Then what is it?"

She turned to face him. "I'm … not good with people, okay?"
"What are you talking about?" he asked.
"People," she repeated. "I'm not good with people. I freeze up. I get nervous."
"Not with you," she protested, with surprising vehemence, "not now. But that's because I've known you for two years, I work with you every day. Think about how I was when I first started!"

Hunter thought back. Now that he was remembering, Kirsten hadn't been particularly talkative at all when she first started, often keeping to herself and speaking only when asked a question. He'd initially been deeply impressed by her focus, her ability to tie herself to her computer for hours on end working on a project, never losing her concentration and often not breaking even for meals. He'd thought that was simply because she was a disciplined person, but …. "I figured you were just learning the ropes. New job's always scary."
"It was a little bit of that, but mostly … talking to people just petrifies me. I never know what to say, and when I can think of something, I'm always afraid it'll sound stupid."
"I guess I can't say I exactly know how you feel," Hunter answered, thinking. "Being afraid of sounding stupid has never been my problem."
"Believe me, I know." Her lips quirked in a smile.
"Har har."

After a moment's silence, she continued. "Honestly, Hunter, if you hadn't made so much effort to talk to me, I'd probably still clam up a lot at the office. I really appreciate that."
Hunter shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "I … honestly, I wasn't trying to help you or anything. I mean, I'm glad I did, but … I was just being me." It made him feel stupid, realizing how little he'd actually known about the person he worked with every day. He'd blithely assumed that she was cheeky and outgoing because she was that way around him. He waited for her to say something, but she didn't, so he finally asked a question, keeping his voice soft. "Would you like to leave?"
"Hmm?" she asked, surprised by the request.
"Well, being here must be pretty hard, with you not being comfortable with people and all. That's why you've been so nervous all night, right?"
She nodded.
"So what do you say we get out of here?"
"But what about Mel Maddox?" she asked, looking at him with concern. "What about finding an alternate funding stream for the firm?"
Hunter shrugged, suddenly not caring about that. "It can wait."
Kirsten's eyes unfocused, and she looked as if she was seriously considering his offer. Her tongue came to rest inside her right cheek. Then: "Let's stick around."
Hunter raised an eyebrow. "You sure? Don't feel like you owe it to me or the firm or anything like that -- you work plenty hard, and it's top notch work. A conversation with Mel Maddox isn't worth making yourself sick inside over."
She locked eyes with him, and her own spoke of certainty. "I'm sure. It is scary, I won't deny that. But it's also worth it."
"Oh?" he asked."Why's that?"
Her eyes immediately dropped from his, fell to the floor, and the nervous energy that she had shed at some point in their conversation suddenly returned.
"Kirsten?" he asked.
"There's something I need to tell you," she answered quietly, still not looking up at him.
"Okay," he answered, confused. "What's that?"
She started to look up, but before she could say anything, a high, piercing noise issued from behind them, and then another. Both their heads turned immediately in the direction of the noise -- it was coming from the women's restroom.
Hunter raised an eyebrow as Kirsten turned back to face him. "You wanna check it out?"
Kirsten looked caught off guard by the request. "Uh -- me?" she asked hesitantly. "I mean -- remember how I'm not good with people, and all?"
"So think of it as a learning exercise." Hunter smiled warmly at her. "Besides, do you think it's a really good idea for me to be going into the women's restroom?"
This actually got a laugh. "Yeah, probably not. All right, I'll do it."

--

Kirsten felt an odd mix of relief, guilt, and apprehension as she slid through the door to the women's room and closed it behind her: relief, because the unknown noises had averted what would probably have been a very uncomfortable conversation with Hunter that might have even cost her her job; guilt, because she hated that she was so afraid of embarrassing herself and of being fired that she couldn't get up the nerve to have that conversation; apprehension, because she had no idea what had made the noises she and Hunter had heard, and was more than a little nervous about who or what she might find.
What she found, in fact, was a young woman, surely not yet twenty, pacing back and forth across the bathroom floor. She was dressed fancily, clearly an attendee at the gala, and as she turned to face Kirsten and spread her arms flamboyantly, Kirsten realized that she knew the other woman.
"Sabrina?" she asked. The question alerted the girl that she was not alone in the room, and she looked over in surprise.
"Sabrina? Do you remember me? We've met before."
Sabrina calmed suddenly, her face going from alarmed to curious in a heartbeat. "We have?"
"Yes," Kirsten nodded at her. "I work for Hunter Gamble."
"Ooooh," Sabrina said, and Kirsten could see recognition dawn in her eyes. "Right -- you were the quiet, mousy one."
I see Hunter wasn't wrong about her personality. "Err … yeah. That's me," she said, feeling even more awkward than when she walked in. "Umm … what are you doing in here?"
"Rehearsing," answered Sabrina, as if this were entirely obvious.
She hated feeding the girl's sense of superiority, but … "Rehearsing?" Kirsten asked, confused.
"Yeah, I'm an actress, remember? Whole reason my Dad had to hire you guys to begin with?"
"Oh, right, of course," Kirsten answered, irritation welling up inside of her. "Right, cause that boy saw you rehearsing Hamlet --"
"Macbeth," Sabrina corrected her imperiously.
"Right, that, and he thought you were a witch," Kirsten finished. She was now firmly of the opinion that Sabrina was not someone that a socially anxious person wanted for a friend.
"Yeah, pretty ridiculous, huh?" Sabrina snorted.
"Yeah, I guess," Kirsten said. "So … uh … what are you rehearsing for now?" She wasn't sure why she had asked the question since, now that she knew no one was hurt or needed help,
she badly wanted to get away from the annoying young woman. But, having asked, she waited for an answer.

"Wicked," Sabrina answered, her eyes gleaming with pride, a note of satisfaction in her voice.

"What's that?" Kirsten asked.

Sabrina gave Kirsten a look that suggested that she thought the older woman must be stupid. "It's a musical about an alternate history of the witches of Oz. An origin story -- have you noticed that those are very popular these days?"

Kirsten shrugged. "Yeah, I guess," she answered, not having really given the matter much thought one way or the other.

"Anyway, I play Elphaba, who will later grow up to be the Wicked Witch of the West. Can you believe it? I finally got a lead!" She looked as if she might burst from excitement. "I've been waiting years to get one -- and in a musical, too."

But Kirsten had a different thought. "You seem to like playing witches."

Sabrina's smile slipped a little. "Excuse me?" Kirsten felt a moment of half-guilty satisfaction at having apparently knocked the young woman off her stride.

"Well, you were a witch in Macbeth, and now you're Elphaba, and she's a witch, and … for someone who says she's not a witch, you sure seem fascinated with them."

Sabrina looked even more caught off guard. "I just audition for the plays," she shrugged. "I can't help where they cast me. Anyway," she continued, her face returning to its chipper expression in an instant, "wanna hear me sing?"

"Huh?" Kirsten asked.

"I said it was a musical. I'm practicing one of the songs. Wanna hear?" Sabrina asked, looking at Kirsten eagerly, her lips turning upward in an eager smile.

"Uh, sure," Kirsten answered.

Sabrina took a moment to visibly compose herself, then took a deep breath, looking a little nervous herself as she did. It amused Kirsten that the normally pompous, imperious girl was not immune to stage fright, even with an audience of one. When she started to sing, however, Kirsten had to admit that, in this area at least, Sabrina had the talent to match her ego. Kirsten was not musically trained, but she could recognize an exceptional voice when she heard it, and Sabrina had one. The girl might even have a professional career ahead of her, if she was serious about that ambition. Kirsten was surprised to find that she actually relaxed somewhat as she listened.

Then it happened.

Sabrina was coming to the end of her song, an inspirational ballad about taking chances and standing up for what you believe in despite the risks. She took a deep breath and spread her arms as her voice rose to a crescendo. "So if you care to find me, look to the Western sky," she sang, "As someone told me lately, everyone deserves a chance to fly --"

And with that, she did.

Kirsten yelped in surprised fright and ducked as Sabrina's feet suddenly left the ground and she went careening through the air, her body sailing through the space where Kirsten's head had been just a moment before. Kirsten looked behind her just in time to see Sabrina go flying through the bathroom door, shattering it into pieces as she did.

Chapter 5
Sabrina's impromptu display of magical ability put an abrupt end to the gala. The museum staff quickly announced that it was closing early and herded the patrons out into the parking lot. Hunter had intended to leave immediately, but catching sight of Sabrina's terrified face convinced him to stay with her in the parking lot while they waited for the police to arrive. Though he found the girl annoying, he knew that it was difficult for anyone to come to grips with their new life as an arcane, and she didn't need to face a prosecution on top of everything else. Kirsten, who felt her evening had been quite exciting enough already, opted to take a cab home.

The police arrived ten minutes later, and Hunter found it relatively simple to convince them that there were probably better uses for police time than prosecuting a seventeen year old girl over a momentary loss of control. Sabrina, still looking stricken, heaved a great sigh of relief and threw her arms around Hunter, catching him off guard. He'd never seen Sabrina be affectionate before -- but then, he'd never seen her terrified before, either. Hunter did notice that, throughout the process, Mr. Orr stood several yards away, his back against a wall, watching them with a stern expression.

With all the activity, Hunter did not get home until almost midnight, and when he did, he promptly fell into bed. Given that Hunter tended to be an early riser, he was still quite tired when he showed up at work the next morning. "Hey, Kirsten," he called, waving to her as he passed her office.

"Morning, Hunter," she called back.

He dropped a stack of papers for an upcoming case onto his desk, then turned and walked back toward Kirsten's office. "So," he began, standing in her doorway, "hopefully most of our nights won't be that interesting, huh?"

Kirsten's lips quirked upward in a smile. "That would be nice," she answered. "You clear things up for Sabrina?"

"Yeah, I convinced the police not to press charges. I felt bad for her," Hunter said. "Nobody deserves to go to jail for doing something they didn't even know they could do."

Kirsten nodded. "Yeah." And then a thought struck her, and with a playful grin on her face, she continued, "Just think, Hunter. Now she may become a regular client."

Hunter looked alarmed at the prospect. "Oh God, I hope not."

"Well, you are an arcane defense lawyer." She grinned.

"Yes, I am, but that woman isn't just an arcane. She's also really damn annoying. I'd be just fine never having to see her again as long as I live." As Hunter spoke, he could hear the door behind him open, and he saw Kirsten cover her mouth to stifle a giggle. "What?" he asked, unaware he'd said anything funny.

"I don't think you're gonna get your wish on that one," Kirsten answered, pointing to something beyond Hunter. Hunter turned to see what she was talking about.

In the doorway stood Sabrina Orr, tear tracks streaking down her face.

"The whole way home he wouldn't even talk to me," Sabrina explained as she, Hunter, and Kirsten sat around the conference room table in the law office. Sabrina was visibly distraught, and Kirsten left the conference room for a moment to find her a Kleenex box. Sabrina accepted it
gratefully, grabbing a tissue and blowing her nose before continuing. "He just had this … this horrible expression on his face.

Hunter nodded, his expression thoughtful. "What happened after you got home?" He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"He … he made me sit at the kitchen table while he went and got Mom. It was a few minutes before he came back -- I guess he was telling her what had happened, or whatever. Anyway, he came back with Mom, who looked like I'd just killed her pet dog or something. And he started saying all these … these terrible things."

"Like what?" Hunter asked.

"He -- he said he couldn't even stand to look at me anymore," Sabrina told him, visibly forcing herself to keep talking, "that he'd never been so ashamed of anyone in his life. He said if he'd known what I was gonna turn out to be, he would have encouraged Mom to --" She stopped there as fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

Hunter didn't know what Sabrina had been about to say, and was about to ask when Kirsten supplied the next word for him. "Abort."

Sabrina nodded, rubbing at her eyes. "He even tore up some pictures of us together."

"And then he threw you out of the house?" Hunter asked, and Sabrina nodded again.

"Your mom didn't stop him?" Hunter asked, and Sabrina shook her head. "Not a word. She just stood there next to him."

"What would you like us to do?" Hunter regarded her evenly.

"I -- I don't even know," Sabrina answered. "I just -- I couldn't think where else to go."

Something occurred to Kirsten. "Where did you sleep last night, Sabrina?"

"Best friend's," Sabrina answered. "But that family's got three kids and there's no room for me. I can't stay there again."

"Well, you're seventeen, right? We could go to family court -- you're not eighteen, so your dad still has a legal obligation to support you."

Sabrina's expression grew terrified at the thought of being sent back home, and Hunter saw it. "Kirsten?"

"Hm?" She turned to face him.

"Can I talk to you in my office, please?"

For a moment, Kirsten looked back and forth between Hunter and Sabrina, as if she was reluctant to leave the younger woman by herself. Then, finally, she nodded, said, "Sure," and followed Hunter out of the room.

"I think one of us should take her in for a while," Hunter told Kirsten when they reached his office. "I nominate you."

Kirsten's eyes went wide. "Excuse me?"

"You've got a spare bedroom at your apartment, don't you?"

"Yes, but I don't think it's appropriate for me to --"

"Why not?" Hunter knew he was pressing, but the terror on Sabrina's face had left a lasting imprint on his mind. "She's not our client anymore, we won't get in any trouble if we give her a hand."

"She might be our client if we're going to family court on her behalf," Kirsten pointed out.

"Did you see her face in there?" Hunter asked, giving his colleague a meaningful look.

"She's terrified of being sent home. Besides, even if we got the court to order her parents to take her back, who's to say they wouldn't just kick her out again a week later? Or she could run away."
"Believe me, I feel for her, but I don't think it's a good idea for me to be taking on a roommate right now," Kirsten said.
"Why not?" Hunter raised an eyebrow at her.
"Remember the part from last night about how I'm not good with people?" Kirsten asked.
"So it'll be another learning experience," Hunter smiled wryly.
"Don't you think I should learn with someone a little less … umm … obnoxious?"
"Think of it this way," Hunter responded. "If you can learn to deal with her comfortably, then all the people who don't have heads the size of Texas? They'll be a cinch."
Kirsten chuckled, but she still didn't seem quite convinced. "Why don't you do it?"
"Because you're a girl," he said.
Kirsten stiffened and put her hands on her hips. "What's that supposed to mean?"
"Hey, easy, easy!" Hunter raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I just meant that she'd probably be more comfortable with you, that's all."
"And also, you don't like her," Kirsten added.
"That has nothing to do with it."
Kirsten shot him a disbelieving glare.
"Well, okay, maybe that has a little bit to do with it," Hunter conceded. "Look, I can't make you do this, obviously -- it's well outside the bounds of your job description. But --"
"No," Kirsten shook her head. "I'll do it. For a little while, at least. But can I ask you a question, Hunter?"
Hunter's expression invited her to do so.
"Why is this so important to you?" she said. "You just said you don't like her much, and it's not like she's the only homeless arcane out there …."
For a moment, Hunter considered telling her that he wanted to help Sabrina out of his own sense of good fortune. That he wanted to do it because, much as he and his father locked horns, he had never for a moment wondered if he might end up on the street, unsure where he would sleep or what he would eat that night. What he actually said, however, was, "There are a lot of homeless arcanes out there, you're right. But we're lawyers. We take the case in front of us."
Then he turned, and headed back toward the conference room.
"All right, Sabrina, tell you what," Hunter said as he pushed open the conference room door. Her eyes fixed on him. "Kirsten's agreed to let you stay with her for a little bit, just until we can find something more permanent for you. Okay?"
Sabrina's face immediately filled with relief and gratitude. Then she frowned. "I -- I don't think I can impose on you that way."
Hunter regarded her skeptically. "Would you rather sleep in the street?"
"No, of course not," Sabrina said in a rush, "but … I wasn't raised to be a freeloader. You carry your own weight, I was taught."
"Well, I have a few succinct opinions right now about how your parents raised you, but that's for another time," Hunter said. "For now, let's focus on getting you out of the ranks of the homeless."
Sabrina nodded, but she still looked uneasy.
Hunter thought for a long moment. "Well, I'm sure Kirsten would appreciate any help you felt like giving her with keeping the place clean."
"Or she could work here," Kirsten said.
Hunter whirled around so quickly he almost fell down. "What?" he asked, eyes wide.
"She could work here," Kirsten repeated, "for a few hours every day after school. Her salary could go to help with my rent."

"I, uh --" Hunter squirmed, "I'm not sure this is the best time to be taking on a new person ...."

"Think of it as a learning experience," Kirsten said icily, giving him a significant look.

Hunter gave her an answering look that suggested he was contemplating the most painful method by which to kill her, but pressed his lips together and turned back to Sabrina. "This sound like a plan to you?"

Sabina nodded. "I could handle doing that. Not like homework takes up very much time." Her tone gave a clear idea of how challenging she found her homework.

"All right. You know anything about legal stuff?" Hunter asked.

Sabrina shrugged. "I was cast as Demi Moore's character in a production of A Few Good Men once."

Hunter sighed again. "I can see this is going to go brilliantly. Okay, we'll give you the tour of the office today, and you can start tomorrow after school's out. All right?"

Sabrina nodded. "Yes. Thank you." The gratitude in her eyes seemed entirely sincere.

"Don't mention it," Hunter answered. Mentally, he added: Please. Ever again.

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It was after dark when Kirsten pulled her car onto the street where she lived, Sabrina in the seat next to her. She slowed down as she passed her apartment complex, and swore under her breath. Sabrina turned to her. "What's wrong?"

"No parking," Kirsten muttered. As usual.

Sabrina looked out the window. "Is this where you live?" she asked.

Kirsten nodded. "That apartment complex right there." She pointed to a brightly lit high-rise apartment complex. Sabrina gave her a surprised look. "What?"

"Well, it's just, from dealing with Mr. Gamble, I expected you'd be more .... "

"What?" Kirsten arched an eyebrow at Sabrina.

"Poor," Sabrina said candidly, without embarrassment.

Nothing fazes her, does it? "You don't think Hunter's a good lawyer?" Kirsten asked, resisting the urge to point out that it was rude to imply that the person who'd just taken you in was not professionally successful.

Sabrina shrugged. "He's all right, I guess. He handled my case okay. But he ... I guess he doesn't seem to take it very seriously."

Now Kirsten was the surprised one. "What makes you say that?" she asked, pulling into a parking space several blocks from her apartment building. The meters didn't run this late, so she didn't need to worry about getting a parking ticket.

"Well, like, the first time I met him," Sabrina said, "he showed up dressed in clothes like you're wearing now." She pointed to Kirsten's green Tulane sweatshirt. "He looked more like one of my dad's poker buddies than a successful attorney."

Kirsten laughed knowingly. "Yeah, that's Hunter. He hates dressing up -- or anything else that smacks of taking himself too seriously."

"Doesn't that cost him clients?"

Kirsten raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so. Why would it?"
"Appearance is three fourths of reality. That's something my Dad always -- " she broke off, her expression growing somber for a moment. "Anyway, don't they end up thinking he's a … well, a slob, and leave?"

"A few of them might," Kirsten said, "but you don't have to know Hunter long to see that while he may not take himself very seriously, he takes his clients' lives and rights very seriously. This job is like a mission to him, or a crusade, and most of them find out pretty quickly that they'll never find a more dedicated or harder-working lawyer."

Sabrina regarded Kirsten closely enough that she began to feel uncomfortable. "You certainly think highly of him," she commented.

Oh boy. This conversation was rapidly heading in a direction that Kirsten didn't like. She shrugged, hoping casual indifference would make Sabrina lose interest in the subject "He's my first employer," she said. "He gave me my start. Come on, let's get your bag out of the trunk."

She got out of the car without giving Sabrina the chance to say another word. She walked to her trunk, popped it open and slung Sabrina's duffel bag over her shoulder. Inside, according to Sabrina, was everything the young woman had been allowed to pack before her parents had thrown her out. It was surprisingly light.

"Come on," she said, beckoning the younger woman to get out of the car and follow.

Kirsten didn't initially give much thought to the two large men in hooded sweatshirts that approached them as they walked, coming from the opposite direction. It was quite common in Austin for people to walk the streets long after the sun set, especially when the university was in session. But when one of them catcalled, "Look at the little witchy!" from two blocks away, Kirsten took notice.

"Where's your pointy hat?" crowed the other one.

Kirsten didn't look at Sabrina as she whispered, "Just walk on past them."

Sabrina's face showed the barest traces of fear, but she nodded, pressing forward. She and Kirsten walked side by side, acting as if they hadn't even heard the calls. But when they were within arm's reach, the man on the left reached out suddenly, grabbing Sabrina by the forearms. "Now," he said, voice frighteningly calm, and slammed her roughly against the wall of the nearest building. "Let's see if witches squeal when they die."

Sabrina cried out as her back hit the wall. Her eyes went wide, and she trembled slightly in her attacker's grasp.

"Let her GO!" Kirsten shrieked, taking a defiant step toward Sabrina's attackers as the wheels in her brain turned furiously. Adrenaline coursed through her as her survival instinct screamed at her to run away, far away, as fast as she could. She forced herself not to listen.

The other man tsked at Kirsten, wagging his finger at her. "Now, now, honey, no need for you to get involved." A combination of the hood over the man's head and the night sky made his face invisible, but somehow, Kirsten could tell he was smirking. "This is between us and the little witch over there -- unless you guys travel in packs?"

The man holding Sabrina snarled, pulled back one arm, and before Kirsten could even react, punched Sabrina in the gut. "Dirty little whore." She doubled over, and he spat in her hair.

"Freaks like you got no place in this world!"

"Stop it!" Kirsten grabbed the man's arm at the elbow as he pulled it back to punch Sabrina again. The man threw Kirsten backward, and she landed on the concrete as Sabrina took advantage of the distraction to claw free of him and scurry away.

"You stickin' up for this freak show?" asked the man Kirsten had just attacked as he rounded on her, radiating menace. "The hell kinda traitor are you?"
The other man stalked toward Kirsten. "I'll take care of 'er." He drew a pocketknife. A knot formed painfully in Kirsten's gut, and Sabrina looked almost nauseous. The man stopped in front of Kirsten, leaning downward and thrusting the knife toward Kirsten, not even particularly aiming, but simply trying to hit any part of her that he could. And as he did, she let her reflexes take over, her leg lashing out and striking at her would-be assailant.

Kirsten was aiming for his crotch -- the classic move -- but she missed, striking him in the gut instead. He still doubled over, his pocket knife clattering to the concrete as his hands flew involuntarily to his gut. As he gasped, trying to recover the wind her kick had knocked out of him, Kirsten screamed "Go!", shooting a desperate look at Sabrina, who needed no telling twice. Sabrina took off running toward Kirsten's apartment building, and Kirsten quickly scooped up the fallen pocket knife and followed.

"Come on!" Kirsten heard one of the men scream. "You wanna get aced by a goddamn witch? We gotta finish this!" She didn't even look behind her, just continued to run, picking up speed.

Sabrina reached the front door of Kirsten's building first, and made no attempt at subtlety, flinging the door open and running through it to the elevator. "Which floor are you on??" Sabrina called desperately to Kirsten, her finger jabbing the "up" button repeatedly.

"The fifth!" When no elevator had arrived by the time she reached Sabrina, Kirsten grabbed the younger woman by one arm and took off for the stairs. Their pursuers couldn't be far behind.

Sure enough, one of the men called out "There they are!" a moment later.

Kirsten and Sabrina scrambled down a side hallway, flinging open the door at the end of it. Sabrina bounded effortlessly up the stairs, but somewhere in the run, Kirsten's shoelace had come untied. She tripped and fell forward, dropping the pocket knife as her face impacted painfully against the stairs. Before she had a chance to pick herself up, she felt hands grabbing her arms, hauling her to her feet, pressing her roughly against the wall.

One of the hooded goons picked up the knife she'd dropped while the other held an identical weapon mere inches from her stomach. In the light, with him standing this close to her, Kirsten could see white skin, stubble, cold grey eyes. His companion joined him, holding his own knife in a threatening gesture toward Kirsten, leering at her beneath his hood.

"Where the hell do race traitor rats like you get off, sidin' with unnatural scum against your own kind?"

"For all you know I'm one of them," Kirsten answered, voice trembling in a way she was sure her attackers could hear. "I'm a witch just like her. I'll cast a spell on you!"

"Uh huh," said the man, his tone making clear exactly how seriously he took that threat. He moved closer to her, leaving their bodies only centimeters apart, and she could feel the edge of his knife against her sweatshirt. "Well, why don't you do it, then?" he taunted. "Go on, hex us."

A moment passed in silence. Nothing happened. They'd called her bluff, and she knew it.

"Only question to me," sneered the other man, looking Kirsten up and down with a leering glare, "is whether we just kill her, or have a little fun first."

Tears welled in Kirsten's eyes. "Please ..." she whispered, not even trying to conceal the hint of a plea in her voice.

One of the hooded men looked at the other. "How many of our kind d'you suppose sounded like that right before they got sucked dry of blood?"

"Good question," the other one smirked.

The questioner turned his pitiless eyes to Kirsten. "I hear it's a slow process. Slow and painful. I think we oughta show you what that feels like."
The other man nodded. "Turnabout is fair play, and all," he said. He put his knife to the neckline of her sweatshirt and began to cut it open.

"Please," Kirsten repeated, a tear falling down one cheek as the man began to cut into her sweatshirt ….

And then he disappeared.

It took Kirsten a moment to realize what had happened. At first, it seemed that her tormentor had simply vanished, disappeared into thin air. It was only when Kirsten heard a low "Ribbit!" at her feet that she looked downward -- and saw a small, dark green frog there. The other man apparently heard it too, looked down, saw the frog, looked back up at Kirsten in anger …

And before he could do or say anything more, she punched him in the face.

The man staggered backward, moaning in pain. Then, visibly frightened by the unexpected reversal of fortune, he turned and ran away at top speed. When he was gone, Kirsten ran up the stairs to where Sabrina stood, an embarrassed look on her face. "Sorry," the younger woman blurted out.

"Sorry?" Kirsten asked, incredulous. "For what? You probably saved my life."

"I did the spell wrong," Sabrina muttered. "I was trying to say 'toe of frog,' not 'turn to frog.'"

Kirsten actually laughed, in spite of herself. "You're forgiven," she told the younger woman dryly.

"So, where'd you learn to kick like that?" Sabrina asked, looking impressed.

"I'm a five-foot-four woman," Kirsten shrugged. "You think I've never taken a self-defense class in my life?"

Both women laughed.

Then there was a moment's silence.

And then they threw their arms around each other, each unbidden but both at the same time. Kirsten and Sabrina stood there like that for several long minutes, tears rolling down their cheeks.

Chapter 6

Hunter barely even stopped for red lights on the way to Kirsten's apartment. Kirsten had been close to hysterical when she'd called him, so much so that all he could make of what she was saying was that there had been some sort of emergency and that he needed to come over right away. In two years of knowing Kirsten, the closest he'd seen her come to losing her composure was at the museum gala, and this was clearly far worse than that.

So he was already more than a little worried when he knocked on the door, and the sobbing he could hear through it didn't help. It took a moment for her to answer the door, and in that moment, he could hear sobbing from behind it. Then the door swung open, to reveal Kirsten standing in the doorway, dressed in a tank top and jeans. She wasn't crying, but her face was flushed and tear tracks were streaked down her cheeks. Beyond her, Hunter could see Sabrina curled into a ball on Kirsten's couch, her head on her knees, sobbing.

He looked back and forth between them for a moment and asked, "What happened?"

"Salvation Alliance," Kirsten croaked out, voice practically a whisper. "They were waiting … I think … they …"
"You were attacked?" Hunter asked, eyes widening in shock and horror. Then he noticed the marks on Kirsten's bare upper arms. Angry red blobs, with a few splotches of purple and black. It took Hunter a moment to realize what they were. Hand prints. The fingers of his left hand clenched into a fist so tight that the fingernails pressed painfully into the palm, but Hunter didn't care. He stepped closer to Kirsten, taking one arm gingerly in both hands and examining it. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Kirsten shook her head. "I'm -- I'm all right," she said slowly. "More shaken than anything." "I bet you are." Without even thinking about it, he pulled Kirsten into an embrace, and they held for a long moment before she spoke again, voice just above a whisper.

"Sabrina's worse," she said.

Hunter looked over and realized that, in his concern for Kirsten, he'd completely forgotten about the young woman curled into a ball on the couch. His usual irritation with the girl did not even enter his thoughts as he walked over and sat down next to her. "Sabrina?" he spoke to her quietly. She did not immediately respond.

"Sabrina?" he tried again.

She looked up, though she didn't seem to actually see him. Her eyes merely looked ahead as she said, "They … the way they acted … it was like I was some kind of … like I was an animal … "

"I know." Hunter reached out and tentatively put a hand on her shoulder. She recoiled, and he removed it immediately.

"What did I ever … what did I ever … " she said, her face flushed bright red and her eyes still unfocused.

"You didn't do anything, you didn't do anything," he said softly, soothingly. "Some people are just … well … bullies," he finished, the words sounding pathetic and lame even to his own ears. They did nothing to change the look on Sabrina's face.

Hunter's mind cast about desperately for something he could do or say to bring the girl a measure of peace. Unable to think of anything, he scooted away from Sabrina on the couch and beckoned for Kirsten to come sit between them. She did, and when she put an arm around Sabrina, the younger woman did not reject it, instead leaning against Kirsten for support. An unpleasant feeling stirred in Hunter's gut, and it took him a moment to recognize it as jealousy.

That doesn't make sense. Sabrina was a pain -- why should he care if she liked Kirsten better than him?

Shame burned in his gut, replacing his confusion. His closest colleague and a former client had been attacked, and he was indulging petty jealousies? What was wrong with him? And yet he could think of nothing useful to say, so he sat there in silence while Kirsten held Sabrina, stroking the girl's hair and trying to calm her. Not that he felt like he was doing anything particularly useful, but Kirsten clearly wanted him here, so he stayed.

Finally, Sabrina fell asleep, still leaning on Kirsten, and Kirsten gently eased the younger woman off of her, then put a hand on Hunter's arm with a grateful look. "Thank you for coming. I'm sorry I dragged you over here on a Friday night."

"I'd be mad at you if you hadn't." Hunter smiled at her warmly. "I'm just glad you're okay. And that she is." He looked down at Sabrina for a moment, and it struck him that the girl's sleeping face held an innocence that belied her recent experiences. He glanced back up at Kirsten. "You think you'll get any sleep tonight?"

Kirsten shrugged. "No idea. I hope so, but … " She didn't need to finish the sentence -- he'd still be shaken too, in her shoes.
"Well, hopefully you'll be fresh in the morning."
"Why?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him. "You want me to work?" She did not sound particularly upset at the prospect of having to work on Saturday right after having been attacked. It was typical Kirsten, and that brought Hunter some relief from the evening's tension.

But working on Saturday wasn't what he had in mind. "No," he said, setting his jaw. "I want you to come with me. We're gonna go see Chief Garrison."

--

The next morning, Hunter found Jolene Garrison sitting behind the desk in her office, red hair tied back in a bun above her uniform. She had a pen between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, and it hovered an inch above a stack of papers, but her blue eyes were fixed on the small television sitting on a stand against the opposite wall of her office. Hunter glanced at the television -- it showed a podium on a set of stairs, in front of what looked like the House of Representatives. No one yet stood behind the podium, but there was a gaggle of reporters in front of it. Must be a press conference soon, Hunter thought.

Hunter knocked softly on the door, smiling at her when she looked up. "Break in the action?" It was common for defense lawyers to have poor relationships with the police, for obvious reasons, but Hunter and Garrison had always gotten along quite well.

Garrison turned to look at him as he spoke. "'lo, Hunter," she said, only the barest hint of a smile crossing her face. Someone who didn't know her might have taken Garrison for rude or snobby, but Hunter knew better. Being Chief of Police was not a job that encouraged warmth or sentimentality in a person. "Staying out of trouble?"

"Legal trouble, anyway," Hunter said, "but I'm afraid she's not. You know my associate Kirsten Harper?" he asked, gesturing at Kirsten with a thumb as the two crossed the distance to the Chief's desk.

"Of course I do," Garrison responded, giving Kirsten the same slight smile. "How do you do?"

Kirsten simply nodded in greeting, extending a hand and shaking the Chief's own. Hunter now recognized this as her public posture, the one he'd last seen at the museum gala. It meant that she wasn't in her element, that she didn't feel entirely comfortable. And that discomfort was no doubt enhanced by what they'd come to talk to Chief Garrison about.

"So what brings you here?" Garrison asked.

"You mean your charming conversation isn't enough?" Hunter asked, giving her his best winning smile.

Garrison's only reply was a Look.

Hunter let the playful grin fade away. "Last night, Kirsten was … attacked."


"Two men in hoodies attacked her and a --" he paused briefly "a friend of ours outside her apartment complex." He inwardly winced at referring to Sabrina as a friend.

The Chief turned her attention to Kirsten. "This true, Ms. Harper?"

Kirsten simply nodded, looking hesitant.

"Come on now, Ms. Harper," Garrison said, her voice so sharp that Hunter had to bite back an instinctive protest. "if you want me to do anything about this, I'm gonna need details. This is no time to be bashful. Tell me what happened."
Hunter could see unease playing across Kirsten's features at the idea of giving details about her experience. But Chief Garrison was unlikely to soften her approach, and he could see that Kirsten understood that. Finally, Kirsten drew a breath and spoke up. "They … they accosted me and the young woman who's staying with me a couple of blocks from my apartment building. They chased us into the building with pocket knives and -- and they jumped me in the stairwell."

"Mmhmm," Chief Garrison murmured, taking scrupulous notes on a legal pad as Kirsten spoke. "And what exactly did these two men look like?"

"They were … tall," Kirsten said, looking distant. "Maybe a couple of inches shorter than Hunter. They had identical dark blue hoodies and wore dirty, faded jeans with holes in them. I -- I didn't get really good looks at their faces," she admitted, a slight flush rising to her cheeks.

Garrison started to give Kirsten a "that's not good enough" look, but Hunter headed it off at the pass. "Ah -- but we have one of them with us."

He had the pleasure of actually seeing Chief Garrison look surprised. "You apprehended one?"

"Well, not me," Hunter shook his head. "Kirsten and her roommate did."

"And he's, what? Tied up out in your car?"

"No, ma'am," Hunter answered. "You see -- Kirsten's roommate -- well --" he stammered. Then, seeing Garrison's impatience rising, he brought his other hand around from behind his back. In it was a small cage --

And in the cage was a dark green frog.

Garrison shot up from her chair. "What the hell kinda joke is this, Gamble?"

"It's not, Chief," Hunter said, waving his hands helplessly "it's just --"

"My roommate's a witch," Kirsten finished for him.

The outrage abruptly drained from Garrison's face. "Oh," she answered, "oh, I see."

"She's not very good at controlling her powers yet, and -- she doesn't know how to reverse the spell." The last few words were almost lost as Kirsten looked down at the floor.

Garrison nodded. "Leave it -- him -- on my desk. We've got a consultant on staff who specializes in that sort of thing."

Hunter deposited the cage on Garrison's desk, happy to be rid of it.

"So, you think they were Salvation Alliance."

"Well, they didn't exactly have it stamped on their foreheads or anything," Hunter answered, "but I don't see who else it could be."

"Why don't we hear from your colleague on this one, Hunter, seeing how she's the one who was attacked and all?" Garrison's voice was mild, but Hunter pressed his lips together at the reprimand anyway.

"I -- I think so. Probably," Kirsten said.

Garrison sat down heavily. "I can investigate, and having this --" she shot a derisive look at the frog, "man to question will certainly help. But even if I find anything, Hunter, I doubt Boyer will do anything about it." Hunter knew she was referring to Ellis Boyer, the county's district attorney.

"Why not?" Hunter asked, confused.

"Because," Garrison started to respond, but before she could get further than that, there was a burst of noise from the television. Camera flashes exploded across the screen like fireworks as a man mounted the podium. His dark brown hair, impeccably trimmed, was flecked with gray, a sign of his age that was matched by the lines in his face and the crow's feet around his eyes. He wore a suit with a plain red tie, an American flag pin affixed to his lapel. The words "HOYT
"Why do you watch this garbage?" Hunter asked.

"Shhh!" the Chief said, putting a finger to her lips. "I've been waiting to hear this."

Hunter regarded Garrison with surprise. The two never discussed their personal politics or viewpoints -- Hunter wasn't even entirely sure that the Chief voted --, but he knew Garrison to be an essentially tolerant person with a strong sense of fairness, and he could not believe that she would take well to Boone's particular brand of race-baiting.

"Good morning," Boone greeted the reporters crisply as a new round of camera flashes exploded in his face. "Thank you all for coming. As everyone here is aware, for weeks now I've been talking about what I see as one of the most urgent problems facing our nation right now -- the need for our laws to catch up with the new shape of American life. Even a dozen years after the Unveiling, the sad reality is that many of the laws that govern our society remain woefully ill-equipped to deal with the realities of open co-existence with supernaturals."

"Arcanes," Hunter muttered, and was promptly shushed again by the Chief.

"The Congresses of the past had a perfectly valid excuse for this -- it's difficult to legislate for a situation you're unaware of. Who could have foreseen the Great Depression, or Pearl Harbor, or the September 11th attacks? But ladies and gentlemen, it's now been a dozen years since the Unveiling opened our eyes, and so I submit to you that what was understandable looking back is inexcusable going forward!" He lifted a hand for emphasis, bringing a fresh round of camera flashes and, to Hunter's disgust, even some applause. So much for journalistic objectivity.

"Now, since I know there are some who will try to distort my words to mean something that they don't, let me be clear: mages, vampires, werewolves and the rest are an important part of the fabric of American society, and we as lawmakers must keep in mind the crucial role they play in our families, our business communities, and even our political system as we deal with this issue," Boone continued.

"Don't you love how he compares arcanes to Pearl Harbor and 9/11 in one breath, and then talks about how important they are in the next breath?" Hunter whispered, to a glare from Garrison.

"You know the meaning of the word 'quiet,' Hunter?" the Chief asked.

"Though many supernaturals are well-meaning, law-abiding, and even generous," Boone continued, "it is undeniable that due to factors beyond their control, they present a unique set of challenges to our public health and safety. There is absolute consensus among the scientific community -- and even agreement by vampires themselves -- that the Hunger is not always within their control. It can strike suddenly, and with such power that it is physically impossible for a vampire to resist. Surely we can all agree that there is no blame in this," Boone said, and Hunter thought that he sounded roughly as sincere as a used car salesman, "but surely every parent can also agree that the idea of their child falling prey to a vampire in the thralls of the Hunger is among their worst nightmares. No doubt we can also agree that while no werewolf asks to become an irrational killing machine every month, no husband should have to take the phone call telling him that his wife was killed by such a creature. Such incidents, all-too-common since the Unveiling, have a profound impact not only on the families of the victims, but also on the supernaturals whose lives are forever transformed by the guilt of becoming involuntary killers."
The Chief looked more intent on Boone's speech than ever, and so Hunter did not voice his opinion of what Boone was saying. Inwardly, however, he rolled his eyes, and as he looked over at Kirsten, her face suggested that she had similar feelings about the speech.

"Therefore, it is in that spirit," Boone continued, drawing a deep breath as he plunged into the climax of his speech, "that I am introducing the Post Unveiling Tort Reform Act, or PUTRA, on the floor of the House today. This law will take long-overdue steps to protect our human population while also being compassionate and fair to our supernatural neighbors. I know full well that its road to passage will be long and hard, not least because there are some on the other side of the aisle who have well-intentioned but misplaced concerns about discrimination and profiling. But I have tremendous faith that, just as we always have before, we can find a path to agreement and doing what's in the best interest of all Americans. That said, I'll be happy to take your questions."

"That's why," Garrison said as Boone fell silent. She turned toward Hunter.

"That's why what?" Hunter asked. In his disgust at Boone's speech, he had entirely forgotten what they had been talking about minutes earlier.

"That's why Boyer won't do anything about what happened to Kirsten even if I made arrests," Garrison said, a note of regret coloring her voice.

Hunter was confused. "He won't prosecute them because of Boone?" he asked. "I don't understand -- what control does a Congressman have over a district attorney?"

Garrison shook her head. "That's not it," she told him, giving him a significant look, "he's running."


"Yup," the Chief answered, returning her eyes to her paperwork, "which means you're wasting your time, I'm sorry to say."

The Chief seemed to consider this an explanation, but it certainly didn't clarify anything for Hunter. "I don't understand. Why would prosecuting a clear-cut aggravated battery case hurt his chances at getting elected?"

Garrison looked at Hunter in incredulity. "Are you really that stupid?"

"Um," Hunter said, extremely taken aback, "apparently?"

"It's not just an aggravated battery case, Hunter, it's an aggravated battery case against a member of the Salvation Alliance, and one of the targets was a witch."

"I don't know Boyer that well, but I haven't heard he's a bigot, and he's criticized the Salvation Alliance before."

"All the more reason he can't prosecute them now," Garrison said. "I don't think you realize how many people actually agree with the Salvation Alliance. They may not like their methods, but their goals? Those they're on board with. If they'd tone down the zealotry a notch or two, probably seventy percent of the people in Austin would be card-carrying members. Boyer prosecutes these two goons, and the entire hard Right will be tellin' everybody that he's 'more interested in protecting bloodsuckers than your children."

Hunter shrugged. "So? The hard Right's not voting for him anyway."

"No," Garrison agreed, "but the people who might vote for him will listen. If they hear it enough times, they'll start believing it. And then he's done."

"So Kirsten gets hurt and her attackers just get away with it?" Hunter seethed inside at the apparent implications of what Garrison was saying.

"'Fraid so," the Chief nodded. "I mean, we'll interrogate the one you brought us, definitely. But, honestly, Hunter … yeah, they probably get away with it."
"Well, then Boyer can expect a phone call from me," Hunter answered, cold rage saturating his voice. He turned and started to leave.

"Feel free," Garrison called to his retreating back. "It won't change anything."

"Then I'll keep calling until it does," Hunter answered. Then he stopped, considering for a moment, and turned back to her once more. "Do you?" he asked.

"Do I what?" she returned.

"Agree with them? The Salvation Alliance, I mean."

Garrison blew out a long breath, leaning back in her chair and looking pensive -- looking pensive for entirely too long, as far as Hunter was concerned. This should not be a difficult question. "No," she finally answered, her voice soft and with a hint of tiredness in it, "no, I don't. They make no sense to me."

"Then how can you just let this happen?" It was rare for Hunter to show anger toward Chief Garrison, and probably not a great idea from a career standpoint, but he couldn't help it. "This woman -- this innocent woman was attacked by two of their goons last night because she had the gall to take in a kid whose parents threw her out. A seventeen year old kid," Hunter emphasized, actually raising his voice slightly. "How can you be so -- so blasé about that? It's like it's just another day to you!"

He fully expected a sharp, immediate rebuke from the Chief, and privately, Hunter knew that he deserved it. But Garrison did not scold Hunter. Instead, she simply stood there for a moment, staring into space, looking profoundly tired. When she did speak, her voice was quiet and perfectly calm. "Hunter, two nights ago I answered a domestic disturbance call about eight o'clock at night. Wife calls us screaming and crying, saying her husband's beatin' her all to hell, so we rush a couple of squad cars out there. We get there, and realize it's not the first time -- this was the third call we'd gotten about her. She's shaken and crying and obviously traumatized -- but we have to tell her we can't help her."

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Why?" he asked, concerned and curious about where the Chief was going with this.

"Because we tried to help her the first and second times," Garrison told him. "See, this guy's not like the abusers you see on the crime dramas on TV -- the ones that leave their victims bloody on the floor in a pool of their own vomit. No -- it'd probably be easier to help her if he was like that." The Chief's tone did not change at all as she spoke, and yet the bitterness she felt at that irony was obvious, somehow. "This guy's a clever one -- he knows how to hurt people without ever leavin' a mark, and he never does. So even though her story's always consistent, even though our officers will and do testify every time about what she was like when we found her, an' even though the first call we got on her wasn't even from her, it was from a neighbor who heard all the screamin' and freaked out -- in spite of all that, Hunter, the judge didn't give us a restraining order. Either time."

A sick feeling took hold in Hunter's gut. "Because there's no physical evidence?" he asked quietly, voice laced with horror.

"That's right," she nodded, face grim. "And every time we go to court to get a restraining order, we just make her look crazier and crazier."

"It's not about making sense, Hunter. It's about power, and who has it, and who doesn't. That's what decides who gets justice. Now I like you, and I like Kirsten, and believe me when I say that I feel terrible that she got attacked, and I feel even worse that there's nothing I can do about it. If I'm not quite as emotional about it as you are, it's because I can't be," she told him, sternness creeping into her voice. "If I got as worked up as you are right now about every
horrible injustice that came across my desk, I'd have put a gun to my temple and pulled the trigger inside the first week on this job, Hunter, I swear to God I would have."

Hunter was speechless in the wake of her explanation. He felt like a hurricane or tornado had just swept through the room, and he, the Chief, and Kirsten were standing there, surveying the damage. Maybe this was how the Chief felt after every such incident. "If you really believe that, then why do this job?" he finally asked, not really sure why he was asking even as he spoke.

"Because," Garrison finally answered, "most days, I can go home believing I've made things make a little more sense. Like I've brought the world a little closer to justice, even if we'll never get anywhere really close to it."

Hunter thought about that for a moment. "I think we can do better than that," he said, and turned and strode determinedly from the room. 

Chapter 7

Hunter was just pulling open the front door to his apartment to head for work on Monday morning when someone knocked. Hunter stopped, his fingers closed around the doorknob, and said, "Who is it?"

"It's your father."

That caught Hunter's attention -- Weldon rarely came to see Hunter personally. He opened the door, pasting a perfunctory smile on his face. "Hey, Dad -- listen, I'd love to talk to you, but I was just on my way to work. Maybe we can grab dinner tonight?"

"Off to defend more arcanes?" Weldon Gamble asked, and Hunter's hackles immediately went up.

"Dad, this really isn't the time to have this argument," Hunter said, barely resisting the impulse to close the door back in his face.

"I don't want to argue," Weldon told him, looking his son in the eyes. "I just came to suggest that perhaps you put a little more effort into defending yourself."

Frustration welled up in Hunter. "How, Dad? By taking a job with three times the pay and benefits? By giving up a life I'm happy with to defend insurance companies all day? Is that how I should 'defend' myself?"

"Nope," Weldon Gamble shook his head. "I was thinking you should hire some private security for your office. I'll even pay for it if McClain won't."

"Wait, what?" Hunter's eyebrows shot skyward. "Security?"

The older man nodded. "Yes, security. And maybe take some self-defense classes, too."

Now Hunter got it. "You heard about the attack."

"Yes," he said, and swept into the apartment.

"How?" Hunter closed the door behind Weldon and turned to follow his father. "I didn't tell you. Hell, I didn't even tell Claus!"

"That's true, you didn't, and as much as it warms my heart to know that my own son won't even tell me when someone tries to kill him --"

"Nobody tried to kill me, Dad, I wasn't even the one who got attacked, it was Kirsten and Sabrina, the girl we just hired as a secretary. And that still doesn't explain how you knew about it."

"You're not the only one who drops in on Jolene from time to time."

"Jo -- you mean Chief Garrison?" Hunter asked.
"The same. I got a phone call from her on Saturday morning that you'd dropped by to report an attack on your associates. Salvation Alliance?"

"We think so," Hunter said, and then something occurred to him. "Wait a minute -- I only went to see the Chief on Saturday morning. Are you telling me she called you right after I left her office?"

Weldon shrugged. "I don't know what time you went to her office."

"I didn't know the Austin Police Chief reported to you."

"There's a lot you don't know, son," his father answered, his tone irritatingly smug.

"Look, Dad, believe it or not, I really appreciate this. You stopping over, offering to pay for security for the office, all of it, but can we talk about this tonight? It looks like it'll be a light day at the office -- I can come down for dinner. Honestly, I could probably even leave early. I do want to talk about this, but I've got a meeting this morning that I really don't want to miss."

"I'd like you to reconsider my offer."

"What offer?" Hunter asked, disconcerted by the rapid topic change.

"Come work for my firm. You can bring Ms. Harper with you, if you'd like -- I checked with our accounting department, we have more than enough money to pay both your salaries, and business is booming right now, so there's plenty for you both to do. We could probably even find a place for this new assistant. What was her name? Sabrina?"

Disgust exploded inside Hunter. "I should have known," he said. "You can't just be concerned for me, can you? Everything -- everything -- you turn into an excuse to try to tell me how bad a job I'm doing of living my life!"

"Son --"

"The person I work with every day just almost got killed, Dad! Someone I care about! Can you please have the common decency to not try to use that to convince me that I'm throwing my life away? Please?"

"It was a mistake to come here." Weldon Gamble turned and strode toward the door.

"It didn't have to be, Dad," Hunter said ruefully.

At that, Weldon Gamble stopped in his tracks and spoke, his back still to his son. "Do you remember the final scene in To Kill A Mockingbird?"

"That's my favorite book, Dad, of course I remember it," Hunter said, full of fresh annoyance.

"When Jem and Scout almost got killed, it was Boo Radley that saved them. And he did it by killing a man."

"I remember the scene, Dad. What's the point?"

Gamble turned his head to his son. "Sometimes the best way to help people is by doing distasteful things."

Then he was gone, closing the door behind him.

--

The knock set Kirsten instantly on edge, and for a moment she thought she might hyperventilate. She was buried deep in her work, as always, and so she had more or less tuned out the rest of the world. She knew Hunter loved to startle her at such times as a prank, and generally she could take it in stride, but not today. "Hunter, seriously, after what happened on Friday this is really not the --"

"What happened on Friday?" came an unexpected voice.
Kirsten looked up -- and was startled to see Sam, and not Hunter, in her doorway. She felt her face heating. "Oh, Sam, I'm sorry!" she said. "It's just, Hunter likes to surprise me and I thought you were -- and after what happened to me and Sabrina -- well -- what can I do for you?" she finished miserably.

"That's okay, I was looking to talk to Hunter about the lobbying stuff," Sam answered, looking at her with concern. "What happened to you? And who's Sabrina?"

"Sabrina's my roommate, and …" She chewed on her lower lip as she mulled whether to tell him about the attack. She was initially inclined not to: she was a private person by nature, and re-telling it would mean re-living it, which was something she had spent the whole weekend trying to avoid doing. And yet ….

"I was attacked outside my apartment," she began, moved by an impulse she didn't completely understand. Perhaps she felt that, as a zombie, he would know what it was to be a target of the Salvation Alliance, or perhaps it was simply gratitude to him for helping her with the Harrell case. Either way, something inside her said that this man could be trusted. "I -- I took in a former client after her parents found out she was an arcane and threw her out of the house. I guess the Salvation Alliance found out about it or something, because they jumped us as we got out of the car."

As she spoke, Sam walked toward her desk, concern and horror mingling in his face. He sat down across the desk from her, giving her a look that invited her to continue.

She drew a breath, her composure starting to waver. "They -- they chased us up the stairs, and I tripped, and they -- they pushed me against the wall, and --"

Sam was aghast. "Are you -- are you hurt?"

Kirsten shook her head. "Not really. Sabrina stopped them before they could do any real damage. Turns out the Salvation Alliance isn't as willing to pick fights when the arcane in question can fight back."

"Funny how that works."

Kirsten wiped at her eyes to get rid of the tears threatening to form in them. "Yeah. So anyway, that's what happened."

"I wish I could say that didn't sound familiar."

Kirsten raised an eyebrow. "How did you die, anyway? I mean, if you don't mind my asking."

Sam shrugged. "I pried into your life -- it's only fair you get to pry into my death." He grinned, but it faded quickly. "I died because … because I was stupid. I went to law school, like you probably guessed from my last visit. Got all the way through, too. I was on track to graduate magna cum laude, and I had a job all lined up for after the bar, too. Now they won't even let me take the bar."

She frowned. "What happened?"

"I ... I was always such a straight laced guy, you know," Sam said, and now his own composure looked threatened. "My friends used to give me crap about it all the time. So the night we finished finals, I figured, why not? It was my last chance to have a little fun, right? So I tried things. Drugs. Too many of them, as it turned out."

"Overdose," Kirsten guessed. She felt an inward twinge at the thought that a man on such a promising track had been completely knocked off of it by one reckless mistake.

Sam apparently got the wrong idea, because he rushed to explain himself. "It was the only time I'd ever done anything like that, seriously! I guess I just … wanted to take a risk for a change. That probably sounds stupid to you."
"Not so much." She smiled, shaking her head. "I'm not very good at the risk-taking thing either."
"Yeah, well, I don't recommend it. Not the way I did it, anyway."
Kirsten nodded. "So how -- who did the spell? To bring you back?"
"My dad," Sam said. "He couldn't stand it that I was gone. He normally isn't big on using his powers -- he's really involved in the community and doesn't like to rock the boat by reminding people he's a mage. But … my mom says when he saw my body, he didn't even think twice."
"I'll bet he didn't," Kirsten said with more force than she'd intended.
Sam didn't seem to notice."Yeah," he said, mouth twisting strangely. "I just -- I feel like I let him down, you know?"
"You're still his son. For the good ones, that's all that really matters."
Sam looked at her properly now and beamed. He had a nice smile, one she really wouldn't mind seeing more often. "That's what he said, too. Almost exactly."
"Great minds?"
They laughed together, and then Kirsten asked, "So the Salvation Alliance found out about your little re-birthday party?"
"Huh?"
"You said the attack on me sounded familiar."
"Oh, that! No, that was just your average every day mob of angry shoppers -- they realized what I was and chased me out of Barton Creek Mall a few months back." He stopped for a moment, and then actually laughed. "Imagine, a horde of humans chasing a zombie through a shopping mall -- that's a twist on the old movies, huh?"
"How do you do that?" she asked.
"What?"
"Have a sense of humor about being treated like -- like that. Like you're an animal."
"Because there's two ways to deal with idiots." He leaned back in his chair. "You can either laugh at them, or you can work yourself into a frenzy every time they do something stupid. I find the first one's better for my blood pressure," he told her, then paused and made a face. "Or, at least, back when I had a blood pressure, that's what I thought."
They both laughed again, and Kirsten was startled to feel herself physically relax in a way she hadn't since the attack, her muscles unclenching and releasing a tension she hadn't even realized she'd been holding in. A curious warmth spread through her gut as the two of them sat there, talking and laughing for quite a while.

--

Kirsten knocked on the door of Sabrina's room -- really, her own spare room -- that evening. "Come in!" called the younger woman, and Kirsten turned the doorknob to find Sabrina pacing back and forth across her small room, her eyes fixed on a copy of the Wicked script in her right hand. She was not surprised to find Sabrina practicing -- she'd heard the younger woman talking and muttering to herself as she approached. "Hey," Sabrina said, dropping the book on her bed.
"I was thinking about popping some popcorn and putting in a movie," Kirsten told her.
"Wanna join me?"
"Sure. As long as it's not Harry Potter."
Kirsten laughed. "Tired of witches?"
Sabrina shook her head vehemently. "Pissed off at Emma Watson. The tramp stole my part!"
"I … see," Kirsten said slowly, trying very hard not to laugh. "Well, I was thinking more of an action movie anyway, so it won't be a problem."
"Fair enough. I'm in." Sabrina followed Kirsten into her apartment's small kitchen, where the older woman pulled the popcorn maker from one of her cabinets and plugged it in. As she hunted for a bag of popcorn, Kirsten couldn't help but notice Sabrina giving her a curious look.
"What?"
"I hear we had a visitor at work this morning," Sabrina said, a mischievous look on her face.
"Yeah," Kirsten answered, unsure what Sabrina was driving at. "A representative from ABLE. They want to work with Hunter on a lobbying campaign against that arcane tort reform law that's being debated in the Legislature."
"I hear he stuck around for quite a while," Sabrina prodded, the troublemaking grin on her face widening.
Oh, so that's where this was going. Kirsten willed her own expression to remain deadpan.
"Yeah, what of it?"
"Is that causing you great emotional angst?" Sabrina asked, heaving a theatrical sigh and punctuating it with an overdone gesture.
Yes, Kirsten definitely knew where this was going. She tried to tell herself that she should be annoyed at Sabrina's prying, but really, she couldn't help but be amused by the girl's nerve.
"No," she answered. "Why would it?"
"Certain tall, irritating bosses come to mind." Sabrina smirked. "Bosses you'd have to give up on if you went for this guy."
"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about." But Kirsten felt a flush coming over her cheeks.
"Oh, come on," Sabrina said. "Have you even told him yet?"
"Told him what?" Kirsten sounded increasingly unconvincing even to her own ears.
Sabrina's look said "Oh, please," better than any words possibly could.
Kirsten sighed. "Is it that obvious?"
"I'm an actress, remember?" Sabrina said. "I'm trained to read people's cues. Have you told him yet?"
"Hunter? Yeah, right."
"Well, why in hell not?" Sabrina asked. Kirsten opened her mouth to respond, but Sabrina cut her off before she could get a word out. Propping her head on one arm and fixing Kirsten with an insistent glare, she said, "You're the smartest person in Austin by a long-shot, you're gorgeous, and you clearly have superb taste in roommates. So what's stopping you?"
Kirsten laughed softly. "I don't know."
This earned her another pointed glare.
"Not all of us are quite as … forthright as you are, okay?"
"Well, you'd better hurry up and get forthright, because right now? He thinks you're looking the complete opposite direction."
Her heart caught in her throat. "You mean he's looking in my direction? He told you that?"
Sabrina shook her head. "Not so much, no. But he did tell me you were looking fairly gaga over the guy from ABLE."
This did nothing to ease Kirsten's mind. "He said that?"
"How do you think I found out about it?"
Kirsten buried her head in her hands. "My boss is gossiping with my roommate," she said. "Just what I needed."

"Hey, I'm a seventeen year old girl. Gossip is what I do."
That drew another giggle out of Kirsten, but she sobered quickly. "Yeah, well, what I do is keep my mouth shut about stuff like that. Or anything else that doesn't involve legal research. People aren't my strong suit." Not that she was bitter.

"So you're the Cowardly Lion," Sabrina mused.
"Huh?"
"The Cowardly Lion. You need courage."
Kirsten thought about that for a moment, then laughed. "Yeah, I guess so. I don't think the real world has a Wizard of Oz, though."
Sabrina shrugged. "He was the bad guy anyway. But you've come to the right place."
"Oh?" Kirsten raised a curious eyebrow.
"Sure." Sabrina grinned. "Who better to teach you how to be someone you're not than an actress? I do it all the time!"
"Wait, wait a minute," Kirsten held up her hands, trying to ward off the oncoming catastrophe. "Are you offering to coach me on how to ask out Hunter?"
"Right in one." The girl beamed at her. "It'll be great, too! By the time I'm done with you, you won't remember ever being shy." Kirsten could see the wheels already turning in Sabrina's head.

For a moment Kirsten was tempted to point out that she might not want Sabrina to become her unasked for tutor, but a more immediate question occurred to her. "Why do you care so much about this?"
"Because you're my best friend," Sabrina told her earnestly. "I want you to be happy."
That took Kirsten completely by surprise. "Best friend? But you barely knew me until four days ago!"
"Yeah, well," Sabrina said, her eager smile giving way to a sober expression, her gaze dropping to the floor as she spoke. "You don't exactly have a lot of competition."
Kirsten winced. "Nobody wants to hang around with a witch, huh?"
Sabrina started to nod, but then stopped. She looked back up at Kirsten, her face completely devoid of its usual arrogance. Her expression contained an openness that seemed almost like a plea. "Honestly," she said slowly, with obvious effort, "I didn't have many friends even before my little … coming-out party."
Kirsten nodded. She should have guessed. "You don't sound very happy about that."
"Duh."
"Hey, as you said, you're an actress -- you do a good job of pretending not to care what people think," Kirsten said. Then, hesitating slightly, she added, "Honestly, I'm a little jealous."
Sabrina's lips immediately turned upward in a smile. "Thanks. Though I guess it doesn't matter."
"What do you mean?"
"You're quiet," Sabrina said, "I'm loud. We're both lonely."
"Yeah. Never thought about it like that." Kirsten tapped her fingers on the bedpost. "Well, maybe we can find a way to --" Her phone ringing jolted her out of her thoughts. Fishing it out of her pocket, she flipped it open. "This is Kirsten."
As the familiar voice on the other end of the line talked, she could feel her expression shifting between surprise and horror. "I'll be right there," she said, voice trembling. "Should I bring Sabrina?"

Sabrina perked up at hearing her name mentioned. "Bring me where?" she whispered, but Kirsten held up a finger, signaling her to wait. A moment later, Kirsten hung up the phone.

"I gotta go." She put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Can you hold down the fort?"

"Yeah, sure," Sabrina nodded. "What happened?"

"That was Hunter," Kirsten said, quickly gathering her things. "I have to meet him at the jail."

Sabrina's eyes widened. "Hunter got arrested?" She looked as if she found that prospect hilarious.

But Kirsten shook her head. "No. Sam did."

"Who?" Sabrina asked.

"The guy from ABLE." With that, Kirsten bolted out the door, closing it behind her.

Chapter 8

A police officer escorted Hunter and Kirsten into the jail's meeting room, closing the door behind them. The room was bathed in soft light from the flourescent bulbs overhead. Sam was sitting on the far side of the only table in the room, looking very different in the orange jumpsuit than he had in the suit he'd worn to the office this morning. His handcuffed wrists rested on the table as the light from the room's emphasized the pale quality of his skin.

Hunter and Kirsten immediately took seats at the opposite end of the table from him. "Sam?" Hunter said, keeping his voice low and gentle. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Sam looked bewildered and shaken -- he was probably in shock. "Nothing happened."

"All right, all right," Hunter nodded, signaling to Sam that he believed the younger man. "What do they think happened?"

"I -- they picked me up at home about an hour ago," Sam said. "They said -- they said that Molly's dead, and they think … they think I…"

For a moment Hunter found it odd to see Sam obviously sobbing, and yet shedding no tears. And then he remembered -- of course Sam wasn't crying, zombie tear ducts didn't work. The young man couldn't cry.

"Who's Molly?" Kirsten asked.

"Molly Trent. She's a -- sort of a friend," Sam corrected himself, still recovering his composure. "She was -- we used to be really close, but we had a falling-out after --"

"After you Changed," Kirsten said, to a nod from Sam.

"So she ends up dead and they blame you? Is that all there is to it?" Hunter asked, the beginnings of real anger, rather than sympathetic horror, stirring inside him.

Sam shook his head. "Not quite all. I'd been trying to mend fences with her ever since it happened. For months, she blew me off, and then … I finally got her to talk to me."

"And that was tonight," Hunter said, guessing where this was going.

"They think I did it in the grip of the Hunger," Sam told him, starting that strange dry-sobbing again. "They say her head was --"
There was a moment of total silence in the room as Sam composed himself again. "What really happened?" Hunter said into the vacuum.

"Nothing," Sam repeated. "I went over to her house about … about six. We talked for, oh, it must have been an hour and a half. She … she told me that she still wasn't totally comfortable with the whole 'zombie' thing, but that we'd been too close for too long to just throw that away. She said she'd… that she'd give me a chance. We hugged. I went home. Next thing I know, I'm getting picked up by the police."

Hunter considered. "Can anyone else confirm how the conversation went? Was anyone with you at the time?"

"No one. It was just her and me. It … wasn't anyone else's business, really."

Kirsten turned to Hunter. Was it just him, or did she look unusually shaky? "They're gonna say he and Molly argued -- that whatever she said to him got him angry, and he gave in to the Hunger in the grip of that anger."

"Yeah, but that's still not 'beyond a reasonable doubt,'" Hunter answered. "Assuming his lawyers can get a jury pool that doesn't have too much anti-arcane bias, they should be able to get him off. I hope ABLE is paying for some good lawyers for you?"

"That's just it," Sam said. "I want you to be my lawyers."

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Us?"

"Sure -- you're the best arcane defense lawyers in town, right?"

"We're about the only arcane defense lawyers in town," Hunter said. "And there are people with way more experience in defending murder cases. I can count the number we've done on one hand and still have two or three fingers left over. Are you sure you want --"

"I'm sure," Sam answered, a steely expression on his face. Hunter recognized that look -- it was the same one Kirsten got when she wanted him to include a piece of evidence he thought was irrelevant in one of his briefs. She usually got her way.

Hunter nodded. "All right. I think we can help you out. Is ABLE footing the bill?"

"I think so. If not, I've got some savings … or I can call Dad … we'll find a way to pay you, Mr. Gamble, don't worry."

"I'm not worried." He smiled, patting Sam's arm comfortingly as he got up from the table. "And call me Hunter."


There was an almost palpable energy about the McClain & Gamble office the next morning as Kirsten and Hunter set about making early preparations for the new case. They were the only people in the office for much of the day, since Sabrina did not start work until she got home from school.

"Kirsten!" Hunter's bellowing voice issued from his office, and she could hear the tap-tap-tap of his fingers flying over the keyboard. Or maybe that was just the sound her own fingers were making as she typed. "Is the general denial almost ready? I'm working on the motion to dismiss!"

"Yeah!" Kirsten didn't move or even take her eyes from her screen as she spoke. "I also think we should do a motion to transfer venue!"

"On what grounds? You think he can't get a fair trial here?"
"Read the e-mail I'm sending you," Kirsten found the link she'd been looking for, the one for the homepage of the Austin-American Statesman, and clicked Send. "Then tell me if you think he can."

There were a few moments of silence. Then, "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"Toldja so.

"The Salvation Alliance?" Hunter appeared in Kirsten's office doorway, glowering.

"Apparently they see the trial as 'a chance from God' to prove we're on the right path as a country when it comes to arcanes," Kirsten said, disgusted. "They're gonna do protests every day from tomorrow 'till the verdict."

"But the trial doesn't even start for months," said Hunter, looking confused.

"Exactly. By the time we actually get around to jury selection, you think there'll be anyone in Austin who hasn't heard about the case?"

Kirsten was sure that Hunter set a world record for how fast a person's face could fall.

"Probably not," he said.

"No way we'll be able to get twelve people who don't already believe he's a killer zombie."

Hunter rubbed his temples. "All right, I'll get started on that as soon as I finish the motion to dismiss -- although you realize the Salvation Alliance is likely to make this trial a national issue, right? And that if they don't, Hoyt Boone and his allies in Congress might just do it for them?"

"Boone? What's he got to do with this?"

"He's gotta stand for re-election next year -- arcane bashing is a great campaign issue," Hunter said. "Besides, the public panic that will come with Molly Trent's murder might give him just the leverage he needs to get PUTRA passed."

Kirsten was unable to contain her disgust. "You know, whatever happened to her, that was a real young woman that died last night -- what kind of person makes her into some sort of political bargaining chip?"

"I know. But there's nothing we can do about Boone or the Salvation Alliance. All we can do is make sure that there aren't two needless murders instead of one."

Kirsten smiled slightly. Hunter's optimism always had a way of cheering her up. "I can do that."

Hunter nodded and turned to walk out of her office. Just shy of the door, he stopped, turned back. "Hey, are you gonna be okay? Doing this case, I mean?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, I know you and Sam -- I mean, not to pry, but you seemed to be getting along, and --"

"It's fine, Hunter."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. He's somebody I'd never met before yesterday and one conversation doesn't equal true love. And besides --" She stopped there. She was this close to telling him -- but she found that she couldn't do it. Not yet.

"What?" Hunter asked.

"Nothing. I'll be fine." The words came too fast.

Apparently Hunter thought so too, for he stood there for a long moment looking as if he didn't believe her. Finally, though, he nodded again, and walked out of her office.
Kirsten knew the instant Sabrina walked in the door to the law office that afternoon, because Hunter promptly started giving her orders. "Sabrina!"

"Yeah??" Kirsten heard the girl call back.

"I need you to call the local ABLE office and find out if there's any word on whether they're footing the bill for Sam Pollard's defense or not. If there is, then I need you to start drafting a fee agreement -- you've never done that before, right?"

"Duh. I've worked here all of a day."

Kirsten laughed, continuing to type correspondence to some of the medical experts they were planning to use. She found it hard to concentrate, however, as the back-and-forth continued.

"I don't have time for your mouth today, Sabrina!" Hunter called. "Get Kirsten to show you how to do a fee agreement, but only if we know for sure ABLE is footing the bill! If they're not footing the bill, then your next job is to draft a letter to Boyer's office letting them know that we're Pollard's attorneys and that all correspondence to him should be directed through us, and then --"

"Any chance you could write all this down?"

"That's what I pay you for!" Hunter shouted back.

Kirsten chuckled, then opened a drawer on the right side of her desk and fished out a pair of earphones. Sticking them in her ears to blot out the noise, she returned to her typing. This all worked very well until her computer alerted her that she had an e-mail. She clicked the e-mail icon. It was from Sabrina.

WHAT CRAWLED UP HIS ASS AND DIED?

For a moment, Kirsten was ready to be annoyed, but then she remembered: Sabrina did not know the full extent of the situation with Sam. Kirsten had come home from the jail the previous night to find Sabrina fast asleep, and thus had not had an opportunity to tell the girl about the murder charges. Laughing lightly to herself, she composed a brief reply.

Sam charged with murder. We're his lawyers. Hunter's just stressed.

After that, there were no snarky e-mails. And when Hunter shouted something at Sabrina for her to do, there was no talk back. For the rest of the day, the frenzy of preparation proceeded unabated. The trio worked until almost eight p.m.

It wasn't until the car ride home that Kirsten began to suspect that there might be something wrong with Sabrina, who spent the whole ride in silence. At first Kirsten thought she might simply be tired, but the look of consternation on her face said it was more than that. Finally, when they were a few blocks from home, Kirsten broached the subject. "What's up?"

"You were right about him," Sabrina said in an oddly reflective tone, not looking at Kirsten. "Hmm?"

"Hunter. You said he takes his clients seriously, just not himself. You were right."

"Oh," Kirsten said, remembering their conversation on the car ride home before the attack. "Yeah." She grinned slightly.

"Was he that way before my trial?" Sabrina asked.

"Sort of. Your case was a lot less complicated. A lot easier to win. So there weren't as many preparations to make. But he was just as --"

"Gung ho?"
"Yeah." Kirsten's smile widened.  
"He's a good man."
"Yeah," Kirsten could feel a stupid smile covering her face.  
"He reminds me of me, in a lot of ways."
Kirsten couldn't help laughing at this. Apparently the girl's self-absorption was immutable.  
"What?" Sabrina shot her a hurt look. "He does."
"Nothing, I believe you."
But then Sabrina surprised her. "Except … I wish I could be more like him."
"What?" Kirsten did a double-take at hearing this.  
"I wish I could be more like him," Sabrina's face took on a thoughtful expression. "I've been thinking about … well, about everything … since I found out I was a witch, and …"
"And?" Kirsten gently prompted her to continue.
"Well, I know why people don't like me now -- they think I'm a paranormal freak," Sabrina said without apparent irony, and Kirsten resisted the urge to remind her that she had very recently held similar opinions of arcanes. Kirsten wanted to know where she was going with this.  
"But … well, I told you last night that I was never the most popular person around, but I was never completely sure why. I mean, being an actress isn't the way to get popular in high school, I know that, and I'm not shy with my opinions, but …" she stopped there, her expression clouded. Kirsten waited silently for her to continue.
"I dunno … my parents always expected a lot of me in school and I always expected a lot of me on stage and I feel like I never learned how to … to not be gung-ho, you know? Like there's a switch inside me that's permanently flipped on."
Kirsten nodded.  
"Can … can I ask you something?" Sabrina asked.  
"Of course."
"Am … am I bossy?"
Kirsten did not laugh. Instead, she answered the question in the spirit in which it was asked.
"Honestly? Yes, sometimes."
Sabrina shut her eyes, and for a moment Kirsten was afraid she might start crying. But she didn't. Instead, she opened them a moment later, and nodded slowly. "Does it bother you?"
_As long as I'm being honest … "It used to, but …"_ Kirsten paused, shrugged, "everybody has flaws. Would you rather be a doormat like me?" She gave a self-deprecating laugh.
Sabrina frowned. "You're not a doormat."
"Tell that to Hunter."
"Hunter doesn't think so either."
"Then he doesn't know me very well," said Kirsten.
Sabrina fell silent at this, apparently lost in thought. She remained silent even as Kirsten found a parking space near her apartment and pulled the car into it. Finally, once she'd turned the car off, Kirsten turned to the girl and said, "You all right?"
Sabrina turned her eyes back to Kirsten, and they held a questioning look. "Does he really hate me?"
"Who? Hunter?"
Sabrina nodded.  
"I -- no, I don't think so," Kirsten told her. "You may irritate him sometimes, but I don't think he hates you."
"Do … do you think he'd teach me?" Sabrina asked. "How to be less … you know … gung ho?"

Now Kirsten couldn't resist laughing. "You want Hunter to teach you?"

"Yeah! I mean, it's like on stage, right? You only improve your technique by learning from people better than you. So that's what I'll do."

Kirsten grinned, impressed. "Fair enough. So you're learning from him and I'm learning from you -- how did I end up lowest on the totem pole?"

"You didn't. I've been learning from you since we became roommates," Sabrina said. Kirsten blushed at this, but Sabrina either didn't notice or chose not to mention it. "Come on. This time I know how to hex them if they attack us."

Chapter 9

Hunter knew Ellis Boyer's face. As district attorney, the man was in the paper often enough, and so Hunter had seen his picture many times. When Boyer walked into the McClain & Gamble offices, therefore, Hunter recognized the tall, slim figure, the dark skin, the neatly-trimmed goatee. He was less prepared for the easy, relaxed stride, the beaming smile, and the apparently-genuine warmth the man showed as he introduced himself to Sabrina and shook her hand, treating her like an equal even though there was surely twenty years age difference between them. Those things didn't show up in a photograph.

But what most surprised Hunter was that the district attorney was in his lobby. It took Hunter a moment to compose himself enough to walk out of his office and shake the man's hand. "Mr. Boyer," he said, not entirely concealing his surprise, "to what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Well, well, Hunter Gamble," Boyer said in a thick Georgian drawl as he flashed Hunter a disarming smile. "Heard a lot about you. Good to finally make your acquaintance."

"Likewise. What brings you to our part of the world?"

"Oh, shop talk, Hunter. I got your letter about representin' Samuel Pollard, thought we might talk about the case a bit. I'm sure you'll be fine. Certainly if you're anything like your father…"

This piqued Hunter's interest. "You know my father?"

"Only by reputation," Boyer said. "But a hell of a reputation it is."

"He's a very good lawyer," was Hunter's guarded reply.

"Understatement of the year," said Boyer, with another pleasant chuckle. "But let's talk about this case. I'm assumin' you wanna try and get a plea?"

"Depends on the plea. What are you willing to offer?"
"Life in prison, no possibility of parole," was the quick, ready reply.

*Let the bargaining begin,* Hunter thought. The concept of plea bargaining still rankled him -- more than once, he'd seen a client he believed was innocent serve time simply because of fear of losing at trial. In such cases, Hunter's instinct was always to fight it out, to roll the dice. But it was his client's life and future, not his, that were on the line. Thus, Hunter bargained -- reluctantly. In this case, Sam had given him instructions to bring any offer of twenty-five years or less to him, and reject anything more. So Hunter opened with, "Involuntary manslaughter, two years."

"No, Hunter." Boyer chuckled.

Hunter had expected that -- opening offers were never accepted. They usually weren't even meant seriously. "Second-degree murder, seven to ten?"

"No, Hunter, you don't understand," Boyer said, his voice never deviating from the pleasant, conversational tone he'd used to introduce himself. "I'm not authorized to accept anything less than life without parole. And if we go to trial, I intend to seek the death penalty."

"You're not auth -- you're the district attorney. Who could overrule you?" Hunter said.

In answer, Boyer simply sat there in silence, a puzzling look on his face.

And then Hunter got it. He should have known right away. "No one could overrule you. You want to put this kid away for life."

Boyer shrugged, the ghost of a pleasant smile still on his lips. Hunter was beginning to find his unflappable good humor annoying rather than endearing.

"Have you seen the evidence in this kid's case?" Hunter asked.

"I sure have."

"It's all circumstantial! There's no evidence, *none,* that directly contradicts Sam's story that he went over for a talk, left peacefully, went home, and went to sleep!"

"Except the dead girl."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Hunter felt his frustration with his immovable opponent growing. "If this girl had been shot in the head instead of having her brain removed, this case would be laughed out of court and you know it!"

"Probably. There's a big difference, though."

Hunter knew where this was going, and he felt anger flaring in him. He stayed silent for several moments as he forced calm upon himself. A certain amount of anger at this injustice would play well with the jury, but it would do Sam no favors in here. "The difference being that Sam's a zombie," Hunter supplied. "Mr. Boyer, I'm confused."

"Why?"

"My understanding was that you were a supporter of arcane rights."

"I am."

Hunter's confusion increased exponentially. Boyer's answer had knocked him so thoroughly off his stride that it took him almost a half-minute to respond. "How does sending this kid -- my client … how does sending him to jail for life, or beheading him, do anything for arcane rights?"

After the Unveiling, beheading had been brought back as a method of capital punishment when it became clear that lethal injection did not work on vampires and zombies. ABLE had made grumpy noises about beheading constituting cruel and unusual punishment, but the Supreme Court had yet to take up the case.

"It doesn't," said Boyer. Hunter was about to fire back when Boyer continued, "but passin' the tort reform law doesn't either."

Now *that* was a curve ball. "PUTRA? What's that got to do with this case?"
"You got any idea what your client getting off would do for its chances?" Boyer asked, an ominous undertone creeping into his Georgian drawl. "The Salvation Alliance is making this case into a national issue, Hunter. I bring back anything less than life in prison and they'll start howlin', I promise you. There's probably two dozen 'no' votes on PUTRA in Congress that would have to change to 'yes' votes to avoid losin' their seats. The law passes then, Hunter. I promise you it does."

Hunter was incredulous. "You can't be serious…"

Boyer raised an eyebrow at him. "You don't think so? Honestly, Hunter, you should ask your client if he believes in arcane rights. If he does, takin' life in prison is probably the best thing he could do for 'em."

"You smug son of a --" Hunter cut himself off as something else occurred to him. "This isn't about Sam, is it? It's not even about PUTRA. It's about you -- you want to go to Congress yourself. You want to unseat Boone."

Boyer shrugged again. He wasn't exactly smiling now, though he remained perfectly calm. "You don't think arcanes would be better off with me in that seat than Hoyt Boone?"

"After the little conversation we've just had, I've really gotta wonder."

Boyer sat there in silence for a moment, his face inscrutable. Then he flashed another winning smile at Hunter, stood up, and said, "I can see why you're such a well-regarded lawyer, Hunter. Pass my offer on to your client, would you please?"

Without even waiting for an answer, he turned and walked out of Hunter's office.

--

"Life in prison?" Sam asked, and Hunter thought he saw the young man's cheeks pale. A moment later, he realized he must have been imagining it -- there was no blood circulation in a zombie's body. Sam, Hunter, Kirsten, and Sam's father Michael Pollard all sat around the Pollards' kitchen table, Sam's father having paid his bail.

"Yes, and I don't think you should take it." Hunter said. He could hear the leftover anger from his conversation with Boyer in his voice. "The DA's letting the Salvation Alliance push him around. He's more interested in a seat in Congress than he is in a fair trial for you. I say we report him for misconduct." Hunter clenched a fist.

"But we might not be up against this DA, right?" Michael Pollard asked. "I mean, didn't you say you filed a motion to … to … to get the case outta here, anyway?"

Hunter laughed. "It's called a motion to transfer venue, and yes, I filed one, but we drew Judge Gilliam, so it got rejected."

Sam looked shocked. "Without a hearing?"

"No, we had a hearing. It was just long enough to make sure Gilliam's decision won't get reversed on appeal. Which is how everything with this case is going to be -- Gilliam's a known arcanophobe. He's spoken publicly in support of the Salvation Alliance before."

The look of shock increased, and Sam raised an eyebrow. "Can he do that?"

"It's ethically questionable," Kirsten said, "but good luck getting him thrown off the bench."

"So we're done?" Michael asked, looking horrified. "My son's gotta go to jail for life, or …"

He stopped there, unable to name the other possibility.

"We're not 'done,'" Kirsten countered. "The jury decides the verdict, not the judge. But the judge can make our lives a lot harder."

"So it's an uphill fight," said Michael.
"Yes, but it was always going to be," said Kirsten. "I don't think there's any way the evidence itself goes beyond a reasonable doubt, but --"

"There's the prejudice to consider," Sam said.
"Yeah."
Sam looked from Kirsten to Hunter. "You say go to trial?"
"Damn right," Hunter answered.
Sam nodded, then turned to his father. "What do you think?"
Michael Pollard gave his son's shoulder a squeeze, regarding him with a mixture of pride and empathy. "I think it's your decision, son. If you're willing to roll the dice, I'm with you the whole way. If not -- then I'll visit you once a week for the rest of my life." He grinned at his son while visibly swallowing down a lump in his throat.

Sam nodded, thinking for a moment. "Dad?" he asked, then turned to Hunter. "Hunter? Can I talk to Kirsten alone for a second?"
It was impossible to say which man looked more surprised by this request, and Kirsten herself might have beaten them both. But finally, they acquiesced to it. "Sure, son," said Michael, beckoning Hunter to follow him out of the room. "We'll be just in the next room if you need us."

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Sam and Kirsten sat there in silence for a moment, which he broke by asking, "So, you remember at the office, when you were asking how I kept a sense of humor about ... all this?"
Kirsten nodded, biting her lower lip.
"Would I lose all points with you for saying I'm having a hard time keeping it now?"
She laughed slightly. "No. I'm not sure how anyone could have a sense of humor about this."
But then she straightened up, trying to look and sound professional. Kirsten had a sense of where this was going, and she couldn't afford to let it go there -- at least not yet. Using her best authoritative voice, she said, "But Sam, this shouldn't be about me and what I think of you. Your dad's right -- it's your life on the line. Your future. You should make the decision you want, not the one you think I want."
"Please don't do that," Sam said quietly.
"Do what?"
"I've lost a lot of friends since the Change. Probably even more since the arrest. You're the first one I've made."
Once again Kirsten felt the tug of conflicting emotions, and said nothing.
Sam leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. The light from the bulb overhead cast an eerie glow on his pale cheeks. "You know, I never wanted to be a hero."
"Hmm?"
"A hero. I never wanted to be one. I never wanted to be famous or lead a revolution. I got into law because I love to argue." He laughed, lowering his eyes to lock with Kirsten's. "Dad always said I could out-argue anyone in the world -- the only way you could stop me would be to take away the air supply in the room. I figured I'd try some cases, make some money, maybe find a nice girl to settle down with --"
Here he and Kirsten exchanged a significant glance.
"-- I never wanted to be in the public eye. But here I am -- the new face of the revolution."
He laughed in spite of himself.
Kirsten shot him a wry smile. "Isn't there a saying about how some men are born great and some have greatness thrust upon them?"

"You think this is my moment?" Sam asked.

"Like I said a minute ago, that doesn't matter," she said, but this time she was smiling, her voice was warm, and she leaned across the table and put one of her hands over his. "What matters is, what do you think?"

His lips turned upward in a broad smile. "I think I want to fight," he said, without any hesitation at all. "I think I want to go to trial."

Kirsten could barely conceal her glee, but worry quickly overshadowed it. "Sam, I'm glad, you know I am, but I can't --"

"I know." Sam nodded. "I took ethics in law school too. But I won't be your client forever."

Kirsten's face clouded. "It's … not just that," she said, thinking of Hunter.

Now worry touched his features. "Then what?" he asked.

"There's … something I have to take care of," she told him. But she brightened almost immediately as something occurred to her. "But now, I think I can."

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As Hunter drove himself and Kirsten back to his office, he noticed that she was unusually quiet. At first, he thought nothing of it -- delivering news like that to a client was always hard, and whatever Sam had said to her privately had undoubtedly given her even more to think about.

But as they neared the office, he began to wonder if there might be more to it than that. He wasn't sure what gave him that hunch -- perhaps something in the expression on her face -- but it stayed with him, niggling inside his gut.

Finally, as he pulled into the parking lot, he turned to her and said, "So, I don't mean to pry, but the last time we had a car ride like this, you ran away into the women's restroom and Sabrina turned out to be a witch. Everything all right?"

With a hesitant expression on her face, Kirsten took a breath and replied. "Hunter … you know I'm a professional, right?"

Hunter was confused. "Yeah, of course. Why?"

"I just -- you know I wouldn't do anything that would … anything to jeopardize …" She bit her lip.

Then Hunter got it. "Is this about you and Sam?"

Kirsten nodded, still looking anxious.

Hunter laughed lightly. "Well, it's pretty obvious he likes you, and from where I've been sitting the past week or so, I get the feeling it's mutual, but I trust you. I know you wouldn't do anything that would get you disbarred," he told her. "Is this because I asked if you were okay doing this case the other day?"

"Sort of," she answered, still biting her lip.

"I'm sorry," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I didn't mean it like that. What I meant was that --" he paused for a moment to consider his words. "Well, I know we both get emotionally invested in the cases we take anyway, and when it's somebody you actually care about before they became a client … I just don't want you to burn out, is all."

Kirsten nodded, giving him a weak smile.

"Have you really been walking around for a week with that in your head?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted. "I -- I want your respect."
"And you've got it," he said, without hesitation. "I couldn't ask for a better associate. Honestly, if you're interested, it's long past time you got some courtroom experience, spread your wings a little bit."

Kirsten laughed lightly. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass. There's a reason I haven't asked to get into court -- what I do right now doesn't give me nervous breakdowns on a nightly basis."

Hunter laughed with her and, seeing her mood start to improve, he turned and opened his car door, unbuckling his seat belt to get out.

"Hunter?" Her anxious call stopped him as he was rising to his feet. He sat back down, turned his head to face her.

"Yeah?" he asked, seeing worry reassert itself on her face.

"That's not all," she said, anxiety increasing by the moment.

He felt his smile start to fade. "All right," he said. "What else?"

For a long moment, there was silence. Kirsten's eyes stared straight ahead at nothing, and she bit her lip.

"Kirsten?" he asked, starting to worry now. "Come on, you know you can tell me anything, we've worked together for two years and I was the one you called when --"

"I like you," she blurted out finally, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Oh, well, I like you too. I know we don't see each other much outside of work when you and Sabrina aren't getting attacked by the Salvation Alliance, but you've been a great friend to me in addition to --" Hunter stopped as he realized what she was really saying. A sinking feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. "That wasn't what you meant, was it?"

She shook her head.

"Kirsten ..." he said, caught entirely off-guard by the admission. "I -- honestly, I had no idea, I --"

"It's okay. I don't really expect you to like me back, I honestly don't think it would even be a good idea, but --"

"Yeah, I'm glad, cause ... you're great and all, but I don't think -- wait a minute, what do you mean it's not a good idea?"

"I -- no, I mean, you're great, but I think ... I think it would be like dating my father -- I mean, not that you're old or anything ...." she said, looking horrified at the inadvertent implication.

"We really suck at this, don't we?" Hunter asked with a wry grin.

"Little bit." Kirsten laughed. "But I wasn't kidding when I said you were the first person that got me out of my shell. I -- I don't think I'd ever feel like an equal. Not with you."

Hunter nodded. "Sam?"

"Maybe." Kirsten shrugged. "I don't know. But if I didn't tell you, I think ... I think I'd always be looking over my shoulder. No matter who it was. I'd be wondering. And that's not fair to anybody."

Hunter nodded again. "But it's good now? It'll be good now?" He hoped she caught the subtext of his question, which was: It will be good between us, too, right?

Her answering grin made clear that she understood all of his meaning. "Don't see why not."

"Great." Hunter smiled back at her, getting out of the car now. "Then come on, partner. We've got a case to win."

Chapter 10
Two immense throngs of protestors had gathered in front of the courthouse when Hunter, Kirsten, and Sabrina reached it. It was not difficult to guess what they wanted, with one group holding signs saying things like "OFF WITH HIS HEAD!" and "USE YOUR BRAINS -- SINCE MOLLY CAN'T!" and the other group holding signs that proclaimed "EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW" and "INNOCENT IS INNOCENT -- ZOMBIE OR HUMAN". As they approached the courthouse, Hunter even saw one sign reading "PUTRA IS PUTRID!" While he agreed with the sentiment, he wasn't sure what it had to do with the trial.

Hunter and Kirsten walked in lockstep toward the courthouse, Sabrina lagging a few steps behind them, carrying a small box full of the needed files, papers, and exhibits. It was her school holiday, and so she could join them. Sam and his father were coming separately -- Chief Garrison had arranged a police escort for them out of concern for their safety. As they approached, Hunter immediately knew that she had been wise to do so -- he did not think of himself as a famous person, and was certainly not often in the newspapers or on television, but that didn't stop the crowd from erupting as he and Kirsten approached. Both sides of the crowd went wild: one broke out in cheers and applause, while curses, hissing, and the occasional thrown object came from the other side.

Adrian DeVorr, who stood at the head of the throng demanding Sam's execution, stepped forward just as Hunter reached the entrance to the courthouse, blocking his path. "You fucking race traitor!" The man's cheeks were red and spittle flew from his mouth as he screamed abuse at Hunter. "Why don't you go get yourself Changed? You belong with them!" He jabbed a finger into Hunter's chest.

"Hello, Adrian," Hunter said, perfectly calm. "Decided to pick on someone your own size?" He cast a knowing glance at Sabrina as he spoke.

Traces of worry crept into DeVorr's expression. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," he said, though the tense quality in his voice suggested otherwise.

"I'm sure you don't," Hunter replied with an ironic smile. "Now, would you mind letting me through? As you seem to know already, I've got a case to try inside."

DeVorr crossed his arms in front of his chest petulantly. "No, I don't think I will."

Hunter was about to answer when one of the police maintaining the shaky peace between the two sides stepped forward and ushered DeVorr aside. "Come on," Hunter said, beckoning to Kirsten and Sabrina -- except that when he looked behind him, Sabrina stood frozen in place, her face pale. He walked over to her. "Sabrina?" he asked, touching her shoulder gently. "Come on, they won't hurt you."

But she simply stood there, not moving or speaking.

Hunter was confused for a moment, and then he looked in the direction Sabrina was looking, and saw Melvin Orr. He stood among the ranks of the anti-Sam group, and unlike many of the others, he wasn't screaming or cursing. He merely stood there, his lips set in a hard, cold line, silently glaring right at his daughter. Hunter felt a pang of empathy, knowing from experience that such looks from a father said more than any words. He tapped Kirsten on the shoulder, glancing in Sabrina's direction.

Kirsten caught the hint at once, going and wrapping an arm around Sabrina's shoulders. "Come on, sweetie. He's not the only family you've got here today."

Sabrina looked up at Kirsten and smiled, shakily but warmly, then nodded and turned away from her father. The trio proceeded into the courthouse, Kirsten's arm still around Sabrina's
shoulders. They went through security, and then Hunter and Kirsten faced each other, standing close together but not quite touching.

"You ready?" she asked him, the faintest hint of nervousness in her voice.
"After three months? If I'm not ready, I'm not gonna be."

A moment passed between them in warm silence. "Let's get 'em," said Kirsten.
"Right on," Hunter nodded, and they proceeded to the courtroom. Hunter didn't notice that Sabrina had switched positions until she was at his side, muttering.
"Shoulda snatched her up when you had the chance," she said under her breath, punching him playfully in the arm.

Hunter laughed and pulled the courtroom doors open. His hopes that the trial would not be a circus were shattered as he saw that the room was packed, with every seat full and additional spectators cramming themselves along the side walls. The police were studiously not letting anyone into the well of the courtroom, but the audience section was full to bursting. Elbow room was a joke.

Sam was already there, and Kirsten immediately took the seat next to him. The two started talking, though Hunter could not hear a word of it, and he didn't care. Quite apart from not wanting to invade his friend's privacy, his attention was fixed on the other person standing in the well of the courtroom, arranging some paperwork on the counsel table. Ellis Boyer.

Boyer apparently noticed Hunter, for he ambled over and extended his hand. "Best of luck to ya," he drawled, the usual genial smile lighting his face.

Hunter laughed derisively. "Totally phony," he said, not shaking the offered hand, "exactly what I'd expect from you."

He turned his back on Boyer, going to join Kirsten at the defense counsel table as Sabrina took her place at the front of the audience, just behind them. As he walked, however, he saw another figure enter the courtroom, pushing his way to the front. His father. One of the older-looking police officers in the room forced the crowd to part and make way for him. He took his place in the front row, next to Sabrina.

Hunter walked over to Weldon Gamble. "Come to mock me while I tilt at windmills?" he asked.

But the elder Gamble shook his head emphatically. "This is your big day, son. That makes it important to me, too."

That completely disarmed Hunter. "Thanks, Dad," he said, after a moment's stunned silence. Then he took his seat beside Kirsten.

Just in time. "All rise for His Honor, Judge Phillip Gilliam!" bellowed the bailiff. A gray-haired man with piercing green eyes set in a wrinkled, weasely-looking face emerged from behind a side door, moving swiftly to take his place at the bench. Hunter, Kirsten and Sam rose, as did Boyer. Behind them, the audience rose as well. The silence in the room was thick as the jury filed into the jury box, then said, "Be seated."

"Docket number one-zero-dash-one-zero-four-six-three!" said the bailiff. "People of the State of Texas versus Samuel Pollard, on the charge of first degree murder!"

"Are both sides ready to proceed?" Gilliam asked, a strident quality to his voice. Boyer rose. "Ellis Boyer for the People, Your Honor," he nodded, "we're ready."

Hunter followed suit. "Hunter Gamble for Mr. Pollard, Your Honor. We are too."

Gilliam nodded curtly. "Mr. Boyer, you may proceed with your opening statement," he told the district attorney as Hunter resumed his seat.
Boyer nodded. "May it please the court," he said, voice just loud enough that his words were clear to the jury, while still quite conversational. His brown eyes remained on Judge Gilliam's face until Gilliam nodded, then he turned to Hunter. "Mr. Gamble?"

Hunter nodded as well. He understood what Boyer was doing -- by waiting for the judge to give him permission to proceed, and then asking Hunter's permission as well, he was making a show of his respect for both authority and his opponent. He was putting his courtesy on display, making himself likeable in the eyes of the jury before he'd even started his argument.

"On September 15, 2011," Boyer said, stepping out from behind the counsel table while keeping his gaze fixed on the jury, "Samuel Pollard did something he probably never even dreamed he was capable of: he killed a woman, a young woman, a young woman that he'd once called a friend."

Boyer's words came slowly and his voice was pleasant and conversational, and Hunter had to grudgingly admire his skills. He was especially impressed with the ending triplet-- with each new detail, Boyer had made Molly Trent's murder more horrifying to the jury. He continued to watch, eyes flicking between Boyer and the jurors.

"Now, you'd have to have a heart of stone not to sympathize with Pollard's life story," Boyer said. "He was a good kid, a straight shooter -- made good grades, never got in any trouble, got into a good college, graduated from law school magna cum laude. He was on his way to a bright future. And then, the night after his last law school final exam, he made a decision that I'm sure he'd be the first to tell you he regrets: he went to a graduation party, and let his friends talk him into doing drugs."

"It's a shame," Boyer said, genuine sympathy leaking into his drawl, "it's a shame that those same friends, the ones who were so eager to see Pollard lose some of his straight edges, weren't more careful to teach him about pacing himself. Because Samuel Pollard overdosed that night. His one mistake was literally life-ending, as his family found out the next morning."

"Now, the story of love driving us to do things we have no right to do is timeless. It goes all the way back to the Bible. Remember King David, who took Bathsheba for his own, even though she was married to one of his soldiers, because he just couldn't stand to be without her. Well, in this story, it was not the lustful yearnings of a man for a woman, but the paternal love of a father for his son that drove Pollard's father to reach into God's domain and bring his son back to life -- or rather, that semblance of life bestowed by a Resurrection Spell."

Hunter felt an inward flash of anger as Boyer used the Biblical reference to establish his everyman credentials. He could see the jurors buying it, too -- their eyes were now steady on Boyer as the prosecutor continued his slow walk toward the jury box.

"Things weren't quite the same for Pollard after that. One thing that changed was his friendship with Molly Trent. They'd been close, but once she found out what he was, she was repulsed. More than that, she was scared. Like many in our society since the Unveiling, she'd never been quite comfortable with zombies. And so, for several months, she refused to see him. Until, finally, more than three months later, he talked her into a meeting -- at her apartment."

He paused, taking a breath and leaving the jury to wonder for a moment what he was going to say. He had them hooked, and he clearly knew it.

"It didn't go well," Boyer said, elevating his voice for the first time, then lowering it again for his next words. "He pleaded with her to give him a chance, telling her nothing had changed and she had no reason to be afraid. But she -- she couldn't quite believe it. And his anger over that fact, over her repeated refusals to remain friends with a zombie, drove him into the grip of the Hunger. And in the grip of that Hunger, he seized Molly Trent --" Boyer made a gripping
motion to punctuate his words, "split her skull with his bare hands, and devoured the brain inside. When the police got there, they found a lot of bloody furniture, no signs of forced entry -- and pieces of that girl's skull scattered all across the room."

He let those words hang in the air for a long moment, and the only noise in the room was the sobs of a few in the audience.

"And that, members of the jury, is why you cannot let your sympathy for the Defendant get in the way of your verdict. That is why you cannot forget that under our law, a killing done in the grip of the Hunger is murder, plain and simple. That is why you cannot forget that the Defendant was the only one who could have committed this crime -- not only was he in her apartment just before her death having an emotionally charged discussion with her, not only is there no evidence of anyone else entering or leaving her apartment in the hours before her death, but the lack of forced entry virtually eliminates anyone else as a suspect." A pregnant silence took hold in the room.

"Because a girl is dead."

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The audience erupted in chatter and even some screaming after Boyer's speech concluded, and it took Judge Gilliam several minutes to quiet them down or kick them out. Hunter was glad of it, because it gave him a moment to come up with a solution to the dilemma the prosecutor had just put him in. Hunter's opening speech was good, but Boyer's had been Shakespeare -- if he attempted to follow it, his speech would fall flat and put Sam at a disadvantage before any evidence had even been presented.

Finally, Gilliam had quieted the audience down, and turned his attention to Hunter. "Mr. Gamble, your opening statement?"

"Your Honor," Hunter stood, swallowing and hoping the jury couldn't smell his fear, "the defense would like to reserve its opening statement until the beginning of its case-in-chief."

It wasn't done often, but the rules allowed it. This way, the jury would have a chance to hear Hunter knock down Boyer's witnesses on cross examination. Then they might be more receptive to Hunter's opening. He hoped.

Gilliam regarded Hunter as if the judge found him quite strange, but nodded. "Mr. Boyer, you may call your first witness."

Boyer stood, nodding to the judge. "Your Honor, the State calls Chief Jolene Garrison," he pronounced.

Garrison entered the room escorted by one of her officers, head held high, face set in its usual no-nonsense expression, hair tied back in a bun. She marched to the witness stand, sat down in the chair, and was sworn in by Gilliam.

"Please state your name and current occupation for the record," Boyer said, remaining standing.

"Jolene Ellen Garrison, Chief of Police, Travis County, Texas."

"Chief Garrison," Boyer flashed her one of his winning smiles, "would you please tell us how you came to be involved in this case?"

"On the evening of September fifteenth, at about six-thirty p.m., my office received a 9-1-1 call from one of Molly Trent's neighbors," Garrison said. "The caller was hysterical, and reported finding a headless body in Trent's apartment. She also said the place was covered in blood, and
urged us to get there immediately. So I went myself, along with another officer, a man named Mark Mecklenberg. His badge number is in the police report."

Boyer nodded. "And when you got to her apartment, what did you find?"

"The door was already open. Inside the apartment was a body, just like the caller said -- it was in the living room, in between the couch and the TV. The head had been removed, and it didn't look like it had been done cleanly. The couch, the TV, and the walls were all covered in blood, as was the carpet," Garrison said, not flinching at all as she relayed the gory details. "There were also clumps of skin and bone scattered around the room."

"Did you find any signs of forced entry?"

Hunter rose quickly. "Objection. Leading."

"Are you sure that's the fight you want to pick, counselor?" Judge Gilliam asked, eyeing Hunter as one might eye a bug one was about to squish. Inwardly, Hunter seethed at the unprofessional conduct, but he kept his face placid and his voice calm. "I'm sure, Your Honor," he answered.

"Very well -- Mr. Gamble does have a point, Mr. Boyer," Gilliam said with a reluctant look. "Objection sustained."

"Chief Garrison," Boyer said, not seeming ruffled in the slightest by the interruption, "What, if any, evidence did you and Officer Mecklenberg find as to how Molly's assailant entered her apartment?"

"There were no signs of forced entry. So either her attacker didn't come in through the door, that person had a key, or Molly let the person in."

"What other entrances are there to Molly Trent's apartment?"

"Windows," Garrison said. "One each in the living room, Molly's bedroom, and the kitchen."

"And what, if any, signs did you find that the windows had been forced open?"

"Attacker wouldn't have needed to force the windows open -- none of them were locked when we got there."

Boyer nodded. "Were any of the windows open when you arrived?"

"No," Garrison said.

"How many cases involving Hunger killings would you say you've handled during your tenure as Chief of Police?"

"Beg your pardon?" Garrison asked.

"During the time you've been Chief of Police," Boyer said, "how many calls have you answered involving killings committed by a zombie or a vampire under the influence of the Hunger?"

Garrison squinted, her expression thoughtful. "Oh … I'm not sure exactly. In five years as Chief … maybe two dozen?"

"In your experience, when a being is in the grip of the Hunger, do they think to close windows behind them?"

"Object, leading!" Hunter said, silently noting that Boyer had thus far sidestepped using the terms "arcane" or "supernatural." Further proof that the trial was one long campaign event for Boyer -- by not calling Sam a "supernatural," he wouldn't offend the ABLE supporters, while avoiding the use of "arcane" meant that there would be no charges of "political correctness" from the xenophobes.

"Sustained."

"How much capacity for pre-planning and caution have you seen demonstrated by beings under the influence of the Hunger?" Boyer said, his jovial manner still entirely undisturbed.
Garrison shook her head. "None. I'm not a scientist or anything, but when an arcane is under the Hunger, I really don't think they're rational."

Hunter couldn't suppress a little smile at Garrison's use of the word arcane. One reason he'd always liked her was that she preferred directness over political games, which was a refreshing contrast to Boyer's calculating manner.

"Let's talk about the body itself," Boyer said. "What, if any, fingerprints did you find on the body?"

"No fingerprints."

Boyer reacted as if taken by surprise, though Hunter knew it was for show. "No fingerprints? Then how do you know it was a zombie?"

"That's how," Garrison said. "More than three or four days after the Change, zombies don't leave fingerprints. There's no oils left on their skin."

"Any other evidence that it was a zombie behind the attack?"

"Yes. The brain was missing."

"No further questions, Your Honor," Boyer sat back down.

Gilliam looked to Hunter. "Mr. Gamble?"

Hunter stood, giving Chief Garrison a slight smile that she did not return. Glancing down briefly at his notes, he locked eyes with the Chief and began. "Chief Garrison, there are other reasons besides being a zombie why someone might not leave fingerprints at a crime scene, aren't there?"

"Of course."

"If, for example, someone was wearing gloves, they wouldn't leave fingerprints, right?"

Hunter asked, beginning a slow walk toward the center of the courtroom, trying to emulate Boyer's sedate, relaxed pace. One of the chief rules of cross examination was that the jury's attention should always be on you, not the witness, since they were only telling you what you already knew. The best way to make sure you had the jury's attention was to stand right in their line of vision.

"No, they wouldn't."

"Or a vampire -- they don't leave fingerprints for the same reason as zombies, right?"

"No, vampires don't leave fingerprints."

"And there are certain magic spells that can erase all fingerprints from a given surface, including a person's skin or clothes, right?"

"Yes."

As Garrison answered this question, Hunter reached his stopping point. He came to rest a few feet in front of the witness box, looking unflinchingly at Garrison. He took a deep breath, and then renewed his questioning.

"Do you know how many people own gloves in the city of Austin?"

"No."

"Do you know how many vampires there are in the city of Austin?"

"No."

"Do you know how many mages there are in the city of Austin?"

Garrison laughed. "Of course not, Hunter, don't be preposterous."

"But based solely on the lack of fingerprints, anyone belonging to any of these three groups is just as likely to have killed Molly Trent as is Sam Pollard, isn't that right?"

"Based solely on the lack of fingerprints, yes," Garrison said.
"Turning your attention to the issue of the forced entry, you said none of Molly Trent's windows were locked?"
"That's right."
"So anyone who wanted to could have just climbed on in?"
"No," Chief Garrison answered.
"No?" Hunter arranged his face in a surprised look. "Why not?"
"Molly Trent lived on the fourth story of her apartment building, Hunter," the Chief said. "Ever heard of a levitation spell?" Hunter asked, and Garrison sat there in stony silence. Hunter let the silence hang for a few seconds before continuing. "Or, for that matter, a lock-picking spell for opening the door? Those don't leave signs of forced entry, do they?"
"No, they don't," Garrison said, the first traces of irritation starting to creep into her voice. "And when you interviewed the other residents of Molly Trent's apartment complex, nobody saw Sam leave her apartment, right?"
"What's that?" Garrison asked.
"The other residents -- Sam was seen entering Molly's complex, but not leaving, right?"
"Yes, that's right."
"In your experience, are zombies in the grip of the Hunger very good at being stealthy?"
"No."
Hunter grinned tightly. "Nothing further, Your Honor."
When he sat down at the counsel table, Sam leaned over and whispered. "You got it! We're winning!"
"No," Hunter shot Sam a warning look, "we're even."

Chapter 11

"Ms. Henderson," Boyer addressed the young woman whose testimony began the second day of Sam's trial, "would you explain to the jury how you became involved in this case?"
"Well," Julie Henderson said, and then paused. She was no older than Sam himself and looked extremely out-of-place in the courtroom setting. She even had a pair of overlarge sunglasses atop her head. "I guess it started when I heard them arguing while I was trying to do homework."
"Them?" Boyer asked.
"Yeah -- Molly and Sam."
"And how could you hear them?"
"Molly's my next door neighbor," Julie said, and then a sad look came over her features as she corrected herself, "or at least, she was. We didn't know each other super-well, you know? She was usually busy at the law school and I'm an undergrad, so we didn't see lots of each other, but she was a nice girl."
Boyer waited for Julie to finish, and then nodded. "And you say you could hear them arguing?"
"Yeah. It got so bad that I left the apartment and went to Starbucks to hear myself think."
"What were they saying?"
"Objection!" Hunter bolted to his feet. "Your Honor, there's no way Ms. Henderson can testify to the contents of any argument my client had with the victim -- it's hearsay."
"It's an admission by a party opponent, Your Honor," Boyer said, "statements made by the defendant and overheard by third parties are exempt from the hearsay rule, as Mr. Gamble is well aware."

"Not all statements, Your Honor," Hunter said. "Only admissions by my client that tend to prove Mr. Boyer's claims or disprove Sam's own claims. There's no evidence that anything he allegedly said in the argument that he allegedly had with the victim does either one."

Gilliam made a face as he thought for a moment, and then. "Overruled. I want to hear what Molly Trent had to say, and I think the jury should hear it too."

Hunter sat down, making a note on the legal pad in front of him to argue that ruling on appeal if he lost here. Once again, Gilliam was letting his anti-arcane biases influence his conduct.

"She -- he was pleading with her," Julie said, her face taking on an increasingly haunted look as she recalled the memory, "he said something like, 'We've been friends since grade school and I'm still the same guy. Nothing's really changed.' He said that he'd -- that he'd made a stupid mistake and that he'd paid for it … 'Believe me, I've paid for it,' he said."

"And what was her response?"

"She … she said that in her head she knew that, but that she just didn't feel comfortable with him anymore," Julie said, looking saddened that she had to relay that information. "She said she couldn't help it, that she was just … always nervous when he was around. That she couldn't shake the feeling he was gonna turn on her at any second."

Boyer nodded. "How'd he take that?"

"He … he got very angry. He accused her of listening to her mother too much, or something like that. It … it sort of went downhill from there." There was now a pronounced frown on Julie's face, and her eyes looked downcast.

"You said you went to Starbucks to do homework?"

"Yes."

"What happened when you came back?"

"I -- I noticed Molly's door was open a crack, so I went to ask if everything was all right."

"And when you got to her door?"

"I knocked. When I got no answer, I pushed the door open."

"And what was inside?"

"Her -- her dead body," Julie said, visibly struggling to keep her composure. "Molly's headless dead body."

Boyer reached behind him and grabbed the tissue box that sat on his counsel table, then asked for permission to approach the witness and handed the box to Julie. She accepted it gratefully, blowing her nose and wiping her eyes.

_Bastard has the 'gentleman' act down pat._

"Nothing further, Your Honor," Boyer said after Julie had composed herself.

Hunter rose. "Ms. Henderson," he said in a soft voice, "I'm so very sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," Julie said, still visibly upset and unsure what to make of Hunter's condolences.

"Ms. Henderson, I noticed you never actually gave a name."

"Scuse me?" asked Julie, even more confused now.

"Well, you clearly heard Molly Trent arguing with someone in her apartment -- how do you know it was my client?" He pointed back at Sam as he spoke.

"She -- Molly called him 'Sam,'" Julie said.

"You heard her say 'Sam'?" Hunter asked.
"Yeah -- a bunch of times."
"Did she ever use a last name?"
Julie thought about that for a moment. "No. No, just Sam."
"Did you ever see his face?"
"Whose?"
"The guy Molly was arguing with," Hunter clarified. "Did you ever see his face?"
"No."
"Didn't see him enter the apartment?"
"No."
"Didn't see him leave the apartment?"
"No."
Hunter smiled at Julie. "Thank you, Ms. Henderson, you've been very helpful. I just have one final question. Did you hear any screaming while you were in the apartment?"
"What do you mean?" Julie asked, raising an eyebrow in confusion. "Molly and Sam shouted at each other some, I heard that … ."
"I'm sure that's true, Ms. Henderson, but I more meant … wordless screams. Particularly from Sam. Did he ever sound like he was crying out in rage?"
Julie squinted, appearing to think about this. Finally, she answered, "No. No, not that I can think of. He sounded more desperate than mad. Sad, really."
"No further questions," Hunter nodded to the judge.
"Then we'll adjourn for lunch and resume promptly at one p.m.," Judge Gilliam said as Hunter sat down at the counsel table. "We're adjourned!"
As the spectators and Boyer filed out of the courtroom amid a jumble of conversation, Sam could barely contain himself. "That was brilliant! No way they'll convict at this rate!"
Hunter glared at Sam. "What did I tell you yesterday?" he asked. "Don't get cocky. At best we're tied, and we're probably losing."
"What are you talking about?" Sam asked, face full of shock. "They haven't proved anything yet."
"And they don't have to. Don't you get it yet? None of this matters. The facts, the witnesses, the evidence -- that's all a sideshow. The only thing that matters is whether, when they go back to that deliberation room, the jury sees you more as a human or a zombie. Every time Boyer brings up the Hunger or one of his witnesses talks about how you and Molly had a fight, it tips the jury a little more towards the 'zombie' side of the equation. If I can't change that, it's off with your head. Got it?"
Sam recoiled, both from the reasoning and from Hunter's anger. He turned to Kirsten. "That … that can't be right, can it?" His voice was more than slightly pleading.
Face full of worry, Kirsten took one of Sam's hands and gave it a squeeze. "I'd like to say 'no,' but … I honestly don't know. You know how well I do with people -- I have no idea how that jury is thinking about things. I'd vote to acquit, but … ." She trailed off, lips pressed into a tight, grim line.
Sam's expression changed to despair in an instant. "But … but he can … Boyer can bring up what I am every time he stands up. Every direct, every cross, in his closing ...."
"Why do you think I'm worried?" Hunter asked, his tone softening slightly. "We can't take anything for granted. No matter how well we do, it's not good enough."
Sam visibly stifled a cry of frustration. "Should … should I take the plea bargain? Life in prison?" He and Kirsten exchanged a fearful look. "I don't want to -- especially for something I didn't do, but … I don't wanna die, Hunter. I really, really don't wanna die."

"We're not there yet --" Hunter said, but Kirsten interrupted him by standing up, a look of cold rage on her face. Hunter realized that in two years of working with her, he'd never seen his friend in such a state. In fact, he found it mildly frightening.

"Will you excuse me for a second?" she asked, in a controlled voice.

"Uh -- sure," Hunter answered, still not sure what to make of the fury radiating from the normally-cheerful young woman. "Meet us at the sub shop for lunch?"

Kirsten nodded, and then stalked from the room.

--

"Mister Boyer!" Kirsten's call was loud enough to grab the prosecutor's attention even though he was several yards away and the hallway was full of people. Boyer stopped at the sound, and Kirsten stalked toward him. "Mister Boyer," she repeated, when she reached him, "don't you think it's time you sat down with Hunter and talked about a plea? Something a little better than life in prison?"

Boyer turned, looking Kirsten in the eyes and flashing a wide smile full of perfect white teeth. The gesture had none of its intended effect on Kirsten, who found nothing about the man magnetic or disarming. "Miss Harper," he said, "I don't discuss ongoing cases in public."

"Then let's go in private," she pointed to one of the conference rooms, "because one way or another, you are talking to me." Her glare could have melted steel.

Boyer regarded her silently for a moment. "Come on," he said finally, beckoning for her to follow. He led her to the conference room she'd indicated, held the door open and allowed her to precede him inside, and then closed the door behind them. Once they were out of earshot of the crowd in the hallway, she rounded on him. Boyer crossed his arms over his chest, giving her an even look.

"All right," he said, in his usual tone, "make your case."

"This isn't beyond a reasonable doubt and you know it. If you win at all, it will be because the jury's biased. Do you really want to send a kid to die because of that?"

"Interesting. So you somehow know every question I'm going to ask my remaining witnesses? And to your witnesses on cross? And what I'm going to say in my closing?" Boyer shot back sarcastically. "How did you do it, Ms. Harper? Did you hack my computer and steal my case files, or is your mage office assistant a mind-reader?"

"Don't be flip."

"I'm not," Boyer said. "The trial is in day two, I think it's a little early to be making demands."

"Hunter thinks you're only trying this case to get a seat in Congress."

"Yes, Mr. Gamble has made his opinions of me and my motives very clear, but as I tried to explain to him --"

"Don't give me some bullshit excuse," Kirsten cut him off, "I saw your opening statement. That was a damn campaign speech! You were playing to the cameras, not the jury! Do you have any idea how unethical what you're doing is? Persecuting an innocent man just to get an elected office?"
"Ms. Harper," Boyer said, still utterly calm in the face of her fury, "all speculation about my motives aside, wouldn't you agree with me that a lot of lives will get a lot worse if PUTRA becomes law?"

"I don't care about PUTRA!" Kirsten's cheeks reddened as she got in Boyer's face. "That's not some faceless client in there!"

For a moment Boyer gave her a confused look, and then she saw comprehension dawn in his eyes. "Ahh," he drawled, "so which of us is it that's doing something unethical?"

Kirsten's embarrassment was obvious. "I haven't done anything wrong," she said, and it was technically true.

"Neither have I."

Kirsten sighed. She knew now that her anger was impotent -- Boyer wasn't going to budge. But she couldn't resist trying one last avenue of attack. "Do you think Sam killed Molly Trent?"

"Honestly? No. No, I don't."

Her face full of pleading, she asked, "Then how can you try to get the death penalty for someone you think is innocent?"

"Do you think all your clients are innocent? Have you never had one that you thought probably did what he -- or she -- was accused of doing?"

"Of course I have," Kirsten answered, realizing as she spoke where the prosecutor was going with this. "But my feelings don't matter. That's the system."

"Exactly."

"It's different for a prosecutor, and you know it!"

"Miss Harper, I honestly don't care what you or Mr. Gamble thinks of me," Boyer said, "but whether you believe it or not, I am doing what I honestly believe is best. I'll see you in there."

With that, he turned and was gone, the door closing behind him.
Chapter 12

"Dr. Russo," Boyer addressed the portly gentleman in the white lab coat now sitting on the
witness stand, "you're an arcanobiologist, is that right?"
"Yes."
"What does that mean, exactly?"
"We're a new branch of the medical sciences that has sprung up since the Unveiling. We
study the biology and anatomy of various species of arcana -- vampires, zombies, werewolves,
and mages. Some of us do so purely in an academic capacity, others take on arcana as patients
and make a practice out of healing and caring for them."
"Which are you?"
"The latter," Russo said. "I have a full list of patients of all types. Actually, I'm one of the
few doctors in Austin who will see zombie patients."
Boyer raised an eyebrow. "Why do you suppose that is?"
"Beg your pardon?" Russo asked.
"Why do you suppose more of your fellow doctors won't see zombie patients?"
"Object!" Hunter called, shooting to his feet. "That's speculation, it's also irrelevant."
"I'm inclined to agree, Mr. Boyer," Gilliam said, sounding regretful.
He doesn't even try to hide it. He's just a bigot.
Boyer nodded. "I'll move on, Your Honor." He returned his attention to Russo. "Dr. Russo,
since you do see zombie patients, you have some familiarity with The Hunger, is that right?"
"Yes, though you don't have to work with zombies to know about the Hunger. Vampires are
subject to it, too."
"Well, they didn't teach us much about it in law school. Mind explaining it in a way I can
understand?"
"Sure," Russo said. "Like you or me, vampires and zombies have to consume certain
substances in order to survive. For vampires, it's human blood -- unlike in the movies, animal
blood doesn't do it for 'em. For zombies, it's brain matter, or something with a similar chemical
composition."
"All right," Boyer said, gesturing for Russo to continue.
"So the Hunger is like -- you know the pang, the physical pang that a nicotine addict can
feel if he's deprived of cigarettes for too long? It's like that, only times ten thousand. It's called
'the Hunger' because that's what it is -- an insatiable physical urge to consume either human
blood or brain matter, depending on which species of arcane we're talking about."
"Is it possible to resist The Hunger?" Boyer asked.
"Theoretically, yes, but in practice ... in my experience, it would take some pretty
extraordinary willpower. Like I said, the Hunger is basically like an addiction, except it's an
addiction on steroids. It overpowers the conscious thought processes of whoever's in its thrall to
a near-total degree. For all intents and purposes, it turns a thinking, sentient being into a
ravenous animal. And it gets worse."
"How?"
"The Hunger's recursive -- every time an arcane succumbs to it, that makes it more likely
that they'll fall prey again in the future. It lowers their resistance -- I guess you might say it's the
arcane equivalent of a disease that leaves you with a weakened immune system. Permanently, as
far as we can tell."
"Who's we?"
"The Arcanobiologists Society of America," Russo explained, "of which I'm a member. We can't explain how it works yet -- the Hunger being recursive, I mean -- but there's near-consensus in the scientific community that it's the case."

"Last question, Dr. Russo. What triggers the Hunger?"
Russo adjusted his glasses on his face as he answered. "Heightened emotional states, mostly. Anger, panic, fear, things like that. And also the obvious reason -- going too long without food."
"Thank you, Dr. Russo. Your witness," Boyer nodded to Hunter, returning to his seat.
"No questions, Your Honor."
Judge Gilliam shot Boyer a sober look. "Call your next witness," he instructed the prosecutor.
Boyer stood once more. "Your Honor, the State calls Victoria Trent."
The room erupted in whispers and murmurs as the courtroom's double doors opened and a severe-looking woman marched in. Her hair was shoulder-length and black, and her face had enough lines in the cheeks and around the eyes to suggest that she was at least middle age. She wore a black pantsuit and her high-heeled shoes clack-clack-clacked against the floor as she made her way to the witness stand.

Gilliam turned to her as she sat down. "Would you raise your right hand, ma'am?"
Trent did so.
"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"
"I swear."
Gilliam nodded. "Mr. Boyer, you may begin."
"If you'd please state your name for the record, ma'am."
"Vickie Trent," was the woman's curt reply.
"You're Molly Trent's mother, ma'am?"
"I -- yes, I am."
"I'm so very sorry for your loss."
"Thank you."
"Ms. Trent, before this case began, did you know the defendant?" asked Boyer.
"Oh, yes. Known him for years."
"How did you know him?"
"He and my Molly were friends," she said, and then paused. She took a deep breath before continuing. "Good friends. She -- she once told me that she thought of him like a brother."
Vickie Trent closed her eyes against moisture that began to form in them, falling silent.
"If you need a moment, Ms. Trent," Boyer intoned, "I'm sure everyone here will understand."
"No," she shook her head, visibly composing herself. "No, I'm all right."
"If you need me to pause at any point, Ms. Trent, just say so," Boyer offered.
"Thank you."
"Were you aware that your daughter and the defendant had fallen out?" Boyer asked.
"Yes."
"How did you know that?"
"Molly told me. She called me the day he showed back up after she thought he'd ... after she thought he'd died."
"To tell you the good news? To celebrate that her adopted brother was alive after all?"
"No," Trent said, grey eyes fixed on Boyer's face. "No, she called me all upset. She didn't know what to do and she wanted my advice. We were like that -- very close. A lot of parents'
relationships with their children end at age fifteen, you know. Molly and I were both proud that
that didn't happen with us. We talked about everything. We --" she stopped again as a tear rolled
down her right cheek, wiping it away quickly. "I'm sorry, do I have to talk about this? I'm still
not used to ….."

Hunter felt a poke on his arm. He looked over to see Sam writing something on a legal pad
at the counsel table. Looking down at the pad, he saw:

OBJECT?

Hunter quickly picked up a pen and scrawled a reply:

NO. NOT GOOD TO BE RUDE TO GRIEVING MOTHER.

Hunter then returned his attention to Boyer and Ms. Trent as the prosecutor continued. "Just
a little more, Ms. Trent. I need to know what she wanted your advice about."

"Whether to stay friends with Sam Pollard or not. Whether to give him another chance."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her she shouldn't," Ms. Trent answered unapologetically. "I told her that anyone who
would go and get himself killed doing something that stupid and cause her that much grief didn't
deserve her for a friend."

Boyer nodded. "Did Molly take your advice, Ms. Trent?"

"She tried to," Ms. Trent shot a scowl at Sam.

Boyer raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean, she 'tried to'?"

"I mean," Ms. Trent said, her voice rising with each word, "that goddamn monster --" she
stopped there, choking on the last word.

Now Hunter did rise. "Objection!" he called. "Do I even need to say how prejudicial the
witness's characterization of my client is, Your Honor?"

"No, you do not," Gilliam said. "The witness's answer is stricken from the record, and Ms.
Trent, while I sympathize with your loss, I would ask you to answer counsel's questions as
calmly as possible and without vilifying the defendant."

Vickie Trent did not answer for a long moment. The look on her face was blank, almost as if
she had just woken up in a strange place and hadn't the first idea where she was.

"Mrs. Trent?" Judge Gilliam prodded her.

"Huh?" she asked, snapping out of it. "Oh -- yes. Yes, I understand."

Judge Gilliam nodded. "Proceed, Mr. Boyer."

Boyer nodded, and addressed Ms. Trent once more. "What do you mean when you say
Molly 'tried' to take your advice, Ms. Trent?"

"I mean that that --" she stopped herself mid-sentence, taking a breath before continuing, "I
mean that Sam kept calling her, even after she told him she didn't want to know him anymore."

"How do you know that, Ms. Trent?"

"Because she told me so."

"When you say, 'she told you so,' how do you mean?" Boyer asked.

"I mean she called me more than once to tell me that Sam had left her a message
begging her to talk to him, to let him explain. He -- he wanted a chance to prove he was still
human."

The look on Victoria Trent's face made plain what she thought of Sam's humanity.
"Over the course of the four months between the defendant's Change and Molly's death, about how many times would you say the defendant called your daughter?"

"Oh … I don't know exactly," she said, looking thoughtful. "Eight? Ten? Somewhere in there."

"Did you know the defendant was planning to come visit your daughter in person to discuss the issue?"

"I -- yes. She told me that. To this day, I still can't figure out why she agreed."

"When Molly told you she'd agreed to meet with the defendant, how did you react?"

"I told her not to do it," Vickie Trent replied. "I told her he didn't deserve a second chance, and besides which, a meeting like that, with emotions running high -- just the sort of thing that would bring on the Hunger."

"Ms. Trent, did your daughter have any other arcane friends?"

"No. Not that she told me about, anyway -- and Molly would have told me about them, Mr. Boyer. She would have."

Boyer nodded. "I believe you, Ms. Trent," he said, "Is there any doubt in your mind that the defendant killed your daughter?"

"No!" Ms. Trent said, glaring at Sam, "No doubt at all. Not a bit."

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"Your witness," Judge Gilliam nodded to Hunter.

Hunter took a deep breath before standing. Boyer had made a mistake, Hunter knew, in calling Ms. Trent to the stand -- perhaps his first mistake of the trial. She contributed little of substance to his case, and he'd called her mainly to put the image of a grieving mother in the jury's mind. Hunter could exploit that mistake -- but it would require a delicate tap dance on cross examination. He needed to make Ms. Trent look like a bigot -- and therefore a less credible witness -- without appearing to be persecuting her. Boyer was probably counting on Hunter being unable to take advantage of Ms. Trent's weaknesses as a witness because of the need to treat her kindly. If he could find a way to make her appear unreliable while appearing sympathetic to her loss, he would seriously blunt the emotional impact of her testimony.

It was all well and good in theory. In practice, however, this plan had two serious problems. The first was that Hunter was not at all sure he could walk that tightrope without falling off. The second was that he wasn't sure he wanted to.

The memory of something Weldon had said to him came unbidden to his mind: Sometimes the best way to help people is by doing distasteful things.

Forcing the uneasy feeling down, he opened his mouth. "Ms. Trent," he began, voice carefully gentle, "your family and the Pollards live in the same neighborhood, is that right?"

"Objection," Boyer rose to his feet. "Your Honor, the defendant and Molly Trent were both adults at the time of the events in question. They lived by themselves. I hardly think that where their families lived is relevant."

"I'm inclined to agree," said Judge Gilliam, as if the whole subject bored him, "but do you have any response, Mr. Gamble?"

"Yes, Your Honor. It was Mr. Boyer who chose to make my client's past history with Molly Trent an issue in the case during his direct examination. I'm just trying to paint a fuller picture of that history for the jury. If you'll allow me just a few more questions, Your Honor, I think the relevance will become clear."
Judge Gilliam squinted skeptically at Hunter, and for a moment Hunter thought Gilliam might sustain the objection. But finally, he said, "I'll allow it for now -- but wherever you're going, Mr. Gamble, you'd best get there quickly."

"Understood, Your Honor," Hunter said, returning his attention to Ms. Trent. "Do you need me to repeat the question, ma'am?"

"No, I got it," she answered. "You wanted to know if our family lived near the Pollards. We do."

"In the same school district, in fact, isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"But Sam and Molly didn't meet until junior high, right?"

"They -- yeah. Sam always went to public school, but I sent Molly to private school through the fifth grade."

"To the Stanton Private Academy?"

Vickie Trent nodded with the first traces of enthusiasm she'd shown since appearing in the courtroom. "Best science and math academy in the state of Texas. She was always such a scientist, my Molly -- even as a kid, she was fascinated by the microscope, used to look in it for hou --" she cut off there, visibly struggling to maintain her composure.

"It is the best science and math academy in the state," Hunter said, "but isn't it true that it's also a school whose stated goal is to educate human children in an environment free from 'unhealthy paranormal influence'?"

The first hints of suspicion crept into her face. "It may be, but that has nothing to do with why we sent her there."

"Were you aware of it?" Hunter said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Were you aware that part of the mission statement of Stanton Private Academy was to --" he picked up a brochure from the counsel table behind him and read, "'to educate children in a wholesome environment free from paranormal and other unhealthy influences'?"

"I think I found out about it while Molly was there, yes," she said. Her tone of voice suggested her suspicion was growing.

"Did it bother you?"

"What?"

"I said, did it bother you that part of Stanton's stated goal was the exclusion of paranormals?"

"I -- honestly, I never thought about it much. My Molly was getting a good education. That was enough for me."

After four years of trial work, Hunter could spot insincerity when he heard it. There was an undertone in Vickie Trent's voice that suggested that she was trying to convince herself of the truth of what she'd just said as much as anyone else. He heard it -- but he wasn't sure the jury had. He needed to press on.

"If you were so happy with the education, Ms. Trent, why pull her out after fifth grade?"

"My -- my husband lost his job. We couldn't afford the tuition anymore."

"So you couldn't keep her there, and you couldn't send her to another private school?"

"That's right."

"So you had to send her to public school?"

"Yes."
Hunter asked his next question to Ms. Trent, but his eyes were on the jury as he spoke. So far he’d been asking questions and letting them infer that Ms. Trent was a bigot -- he was about to say so outright. If they took offense at that ….

"With all those dangerous paranormals?" he asked, heart catching in his throat.
"Object!" Boyer called.
"Sustained," Gilliam said.

Hunter was still nervous -- the jurors' expressions had given few clues as to whether he had offended them. Still, even if he had, he couldn't take it back now. "Ms. Trent, you said on direct examination that you had no doubt that my client had killed your daughter. 'Not a bit,' you said."

"That's right," she said, the suspicion now turning into hints of aggression.
"Suppose -- forgive me, ma'am, but suppose the circumstances were exactly the same, except that Molly had been shot in the forehead instead of what actually happened. Would you have any doubts about my client's guilt in that case, ma'am?"

"That's different."
"How?"
"Plenty of people own guns. A lot less eat brains."
"Actually, Ms. Trent, there's no evidence of what happened to your daughter's brain," Hunter reminded her, feeling dirty inside as he spoke. Since when did helping one unfairly wronged person require making another one relive the gory details of her daughter's murder? "But let's say you're right. That tells you beyond any doubt that it was my client?"

"It does."
"Only my client -- not some other zombie, not a really convincing copycat killer -- just Sam Pollard."
"Yes," she hissed.
"What if I told you there was another zombie living in Molly's apartment complex? One that kept his mental faculties after the bite? Would you still be sure it was Sam?"

"Yes."
"What if I told you that a small band of non-intelligent zombies had been known to camp out under a bridge near the complex? Still just Sam?"

"Yes." Her expression said she was coming unhinged, which told Hunter his strategy was working.

_Got her!_ Hunter hated himself even as he inwardly crowed with impending triumph.

"So even though there are a lot more zombies nearby than just Sam, you're sure beyond any doubt -- _not a bit_, were your exact words, Ms. Trent -- you're _sure_ that only Sam Pollard could possibly have killed your daughter?"

"Yes!" She rose from her chair, and the two glared at each other as Hunter asked his next question.

"If that's the case, Ms. Trent, then I'd like you to turn to the jury, and tell them, remembering that you're under oath, ma'am, tell them there's any basis for that certainty beyond the fact that Sam Pollard is an arcane. Can you do that honestly?"

Her face buckled. "I --"
"Can you?" Hunter asked, a bit more insistently.
"I --"
"Can you?" he demanded.

_He killed her, okay?!_ She erupted at Hunter, tears springing to her eyes as her hands clenched into fists. _Can you stop being a lawyer for ten damn seconds and see what's right in
front of your eyes? He killed her! I told her he was dangerous, I told her not to trust him, but she was always so kind -- she had such a good heart -- and now she's dead because she trusted a paranormal! She trusted that thing and he killed her, and she'd still be alive if she'd listened to what I tried to tell her all along!"

With that, she fell to her knees as her body shook with sobs.

It took several minutes for the bailiff and Judge Gilliam to help her compose herself. The courtroom was abuzz the entire time -- it quieted only when the judge resumed his seat at the bench. When that happened, Vickie Trent looked over -- and saw Hunter still standing there, looking right back at her. "Aren't you done yet?" Her eyes were cold and venomous.

"Not quite," he said. He picked up a piece of paper that looked to have been hastily torn from a spiral notebook. "Permission to approach the witness, Your Honor?"

"Proceed."

Hunter walked to the witness stand and handed Ms. Trent the paper. "Ms. Trent, do you recognize the handwriting on this page?"

She looked down at it. "Yes."

"Whose is it?"

"It's my daughter's. It's Molly's."

"Would you please read for the court what's written on that page?"

"To do list for 9/16/2011," Ms. Trent read. "Apply to job with Hastings Corp., get flu shot … change locks and replace apartment key," she finished, casting a mortified look up at Hunter.

"Ms. Trent, were you aware that your daughter lost her apartment key shortly before she died?"

"No."

"Would knowing that your daughter had to keep her door unlocked to avoid locking herself out of her apartment give you any doubt about who might have killed her?"

"I … I don't know."

"Nothing further, Your Honor."

---

Hunter was sitting in his office, focusing intently on a stack of papers on his desk, when the knock came.

"Sam and his father will be here in a few minutes," said Kirsten.

"Huh?" he looked up with a start. "Oh, yeah, thanks …" He'd been so focused on the papers he was reading -- reports on the Hunger published by various scientific journals -- that he'd completely forgotten that he'd asked Sam and Michael Pollard to come to the office for final preparations.

"So before he gets here," she said, "mind telling me what this meeting is all about?"

"You know what it's about. Boyer rested his case today --"

"Yes, I was there for that, thank you."

"Which means ours starts tomorrow. Michael Pollard is our only witness -- our one chance to make Sam look like a human kid instead of a monster. This has to be perfect."

"And we've been prepping him for three months. He knows his part," Kirsten raised an eyebrow at him. "Do you really think he'll pick up anything in the next hour or two that he hasn't already learned?"
Her insistent look stopped him cold. "All right," he said, leaning back in his chair and massaging his temples, "I have to admit, keeping my mind busy with this helps me not think about what I did earlier."

"What are you talking about? You did a brilliant cross -- maybe a life-saving one." Gratitude flowed through her voice.

"I humiliated an innocent woman," Hunter countered. Tiredness formed a cloud behind his eyes. "in front of the courtroom, and the cameras."

"As opposed to what? Letting Sam die? Is that what you think you should have done?"

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous." Hunter glowered at her, but his face softened quickly. "I just -- she just lost her daughter, Kirsten. Even if she is a bigot … did she really deserve that?"

Kirsten had no answer.

"I keep thinking about something my father told me, back after you and Sabrina were attacked. He said that sometimes, you have to do despicable things to help people. I never thought I'd find myself following his advice," Hunter snorted.

"Ever thought about talking to him about this?"

This caught Hunter so completely by surprise that he was unsure how to respond at first. "What?"

"Well, he's a lawyer, right?"

Hunter nodded.

"And he's been at it for decades. I'm sure he's been in this position once or twice in his career. Ask him how he dealt with it."

That he was actually considering asking his father for advice took Hunter completely by surprise. "I might. Thanks." Hee smiled at her.

"In the meantime," Kirsten said, patting his arm comfortably, "you're saving an innocent life. Put that in your conscience's pipe and smoke it."

They both burst out laughing at that.

"You're right," he said. "Come on -- we'll do a quick review with the Pollards, and go home."

"Now you're talking," she beamed at him

She preceded him out of his office. As he closed the door behind them, it occurred to him that she was right. At the end of the day, he was still helping an innocent person, which was what was most important to him.

Chapter 13

"He fell asleep."

Hunter stood a few feet from the jury box, locking eyes with each juror in turn. He paused, letting those words hang in the air for a moment.

"That's what happened. That's the only reason we're here today. Because Sam Pollard went to Molly Trent's apartment, they talked, and then he went home -- and fell asleep."

"Seems pretty silly, doesn't it? That we could make this giant mountain of a trial out of what was basically a pretty ordinary argument between friends? You know," Hunter chuckled, his lips turning upward in a grin, "I've heard some of those media people call it 'the defining arcane rights case of our time.'"
"But putting aside the penchant of reporters for exaggeration, this case is really pretty simple. You heard Jolene Garrison, Chief of the Austin Police Department, say that actually, there were any number of ways that an intruder could have gotten into Molly Trent's apartment without leaving signs of forced entry. You heard her remind us that vampires don't leave fingerprints, and neither do regular old humans wearing gloves, among other things. And you heard her say that no one in Molly's complex saw Sam leave. Now ask yourself: how sneaky does a being in the grip of the Hunger tend to be?"

Once again he paused, giving the jurors a few seconds to mull that question.

"You then heard Julie Henderson, Molly's next door neighbor, testify that while she heard Molly Trent arguing with someone that Molly called 'Sam,' Julie herself never saw Sam or even heard his last name. That's not much to go on. And while they did argue, Sam remained completely coherent the entire time -- something else that Hunger-driven zombies don't tend to do."

"And finally, and most tragically, you heard from Vickie Trent, Molly's own mother. I'll be the first to say that my heart breaks for Ms. Trent -- we all know in our bones that there's something wrong with the world when a mother has to bury her child. Her grief and even her anger are entirely understandable, but you heard her testimony, ladies and gentlemen. Nothing, not one thing that Ms. Trent said provides any solid evidence that Sam was responsible for what happened to Molly Trent. In short, ladies and gentlemen, they're showing you a zombie and a dead girl and asking you to believe that two plus two equals five. Really simple."

Silence covered the room one final time.

"So that's what I want you to do. Take away all the showmanship and the grandstanding and the back-and-forth that come with every trial, and focus on two things. First of all, they presented no evidence," Hunter told the jury, to a smattering of laughter from the audience, "and second, focus on the testimony you're about to hear from Michael Pollard, Sam's father, who will tell you about Sam's constant fear that he would succumb to the Hunger and the lengths he went to to avoid it. Focus on those two things, ladies and gentlemen, and this case really does become -- very simple."

With that, Hunter sat down.

--

"Mr. Pollard, did your son ever express to you the worry that he might succumb to the Hunger?" Hunter asked.

"Oh yes -- all the time," Mr. Pollard said. "Especially in the first couple of weeks after we brought him back."

"Did he do anything about it?" Hunter asked.

"Yes, he did," Pollard said. "He went and talked to an arcane people's doctor -- I think they're called arcanobiologists?"

"Yes, that's right."

"He talked to an arcanobiologist, who taught him to feel the Hunger coming on."

"What do you mean, 'feel' the Hunger coming on?"

"You know how, when you're really hungry, you know it because your stomach hurts?" Mr. Pollard asked. "Or when you need to use the bathroom, you feel certain pressure? Apparently, the Hunger's like that too, according to Sam. If you know what to watch for, you can tell it's coming before it hits. Before it takes you over."
"So what did Sam do with that information?"
"He would -- any time he felt himself getting really mad or scared or worked up, he'd go lock himself in. He'd lock himself in his apartment."
"How do you know that, sir?"
"Because I saw him do it a few times," Mr. Pollard said.
"How would you have seen him do it?" Hunter regarded the man skeptically. "Sam doesn't live with you and your wife anymore."
"No, he doesn't. But when he was the most afraid, he called us. Of giving in to the Hunger, I mean."
"I don't understand -- I thought he didn't want to hurt anyone he cared about. Why would he deliberately summon two of the people he cares about the most right into a potential death trap?"
"So we could tranq him if he got out of control," the man answered soberly.
"Tranq -- you mean tranquilize?"
"Yeah -- tranq guns got a lot more common after the Unveiling, with everybody worried about runnin' into a pack of dumb zombies or a werewolf at full moon."
Hunter nodded. "Yes, sir, I just … I wouldn't think you'd want to use one of those on your own son. With the potential side effects, and all."
"We didn't want to. Hell, we didn't even want to buy a tranq gun. Sam made us get one -- and he made us promise him we'd use it. If it came to that."
"So your son, my client, was so fearful of hurting someone in the grip of the Hunger that he made you buy a tranquilizer gun and promise to use it on him if all else failed?"
"That's right," Michael Pollard said.
"No further questions," Hunter resumed his seat.
Boyer stood, straightening his jacket. "Mr. Pollard, were you in the courtroom for Dr. Russo's testimony?"
"That was the arcanobiologist?" Pollard asked.
"Yes, sir."
"Yeah, I heard his testimony."
"Did you hear him say that the Hunger was recursive?"
"Yes, I heard that."
"All right. Mr. Pollard, you say your son went to an arcanobiologist who helped him control the Hunger?" Boyer asked.
"Yes."
"And that appointment -- it was on June 3rd of this year, isn't that right?"
"Uhhh," Pollard scratched his head. "Yeah, I think so."
"You know so, don't you, Mr. Pollard?" Boyer asked, just a hint of accusation creeping into his genial drawl.
Hunter was on his feet in an instant. "Object!"
"Sustained," Gilliam answered, without even waiting to hear the reason.
Boyer took a breath. "Mr. Pollard, after graduation from law school, your son applied to take the Texas Bar Exam, is that right?"
"Yes," Pollard said, and Hunter thought he saw a trace of fear touch the man's features.
"And he was denied, wasn't he?"
"Yeah, the Board told him he couldn't do it."
"He believed he was being denied because he was a zombie?"
"It wasn't a belief, it was a fact," said Pollard, but despite the defiant words, there was an anxious quality to his tone that made Hunter nervous.

"Was that what the Board of Law Examiners told you?" Boyer arched an eyebrow.

Mr. Pollard sighed. "No."

"They said it was because of the drug overdose that caused his death, right?"

"Yes."

"And when he was informed of that, he made a very angry phone call to the Board, didn't he?"

"I don't know that, sir," Mr. Pollard said, sounding even more anxious than before.

In that moment, Hunter thought he understood where Boyer was going with this. But it was impossible. Surely Sam or Michael Pollard would have told him if ….

Boyer reached behind him and picked up a CD off the counsel table. "Would you like to listen to a recording of your son's conversation with one of the Board staff?"

"Err -- no, I'll take your word for it."

"After your son got off the phone with the Board, he called you and your wife, didn't he, Mr. Pollard?"

"He called us, yes."

"And he raged at you for several minutes, didn't he?"

"I don't know how long the conversation went, sir."

"But he was very upset, wasn't he, Mr. Pollard?"

"… Yes. He was."

"And he asked you to come to his apartment, didn't he?"

Mr. Pollard was silent.

"Mr. Pollard," Boyer prodded. "When your son called you after finding out he couldn't take the bar, did he or did he not ask you to come to his apartment?"

"Yes," the man said, after some hesitation.

"Because he was about to succumb to the Hunger?"

Michael Pollard looked at his son as if Boyer were holding a gun to his head and forcing him to sign Sam's death warrant. "Yes."

"And when you got there, isn't it true that Sam had already succumbed?"

"Look!" Michael Pollard shot to his feet, face flushing. "Nobody was hurt, it couldn't have lasted more than a couple minutes …."

"Answer the question, Mr. Pollard."

"We put him right out, and he promised to be twice as careful from now on --"

"Mister Pollard!" Boyer stopped the man's explanations in their tracks with a lethal glare.

"Isn't it true that on June 2nd, 2011, your son Sam, the defendant, succumbed to the Hunger."

An eternity passed. Hunter's heart thudded in his ears, a deafening noise against the otherwise silent courtroom.

"Yes," Mr. Pollard finally, quietly answered.

As the crowd rose to its feet, erupting in noise, Hunter knew he'd lost.

--

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" Hunter's cheeks were crimson as he tore into the Pollards. Both Sam and his father sat at the table in the small conference room they'd retreated to when
court had adjourned, while Hunter paced back and forth like a caged tiger. The Pollards' shamefaced expressions did nothing to still Hunter's fury.

"We … we thought it would look bad," said Michael Pollard finally.

"Well, it sure as hell looks bad now!" Hunter threw up his hands in exasperation. "If you'd told me before, we could have done damage control! I could have spun it to the jury so you didn't look like a ticking time bomb waiting to go off!"

"Can't you do that now?" asked Sam.

"Now? No. Now I don't have time to meet with expert witnesses! Now I don't have time to do research on the Hunger! Now I've got a crazy judge who can't wait to send you to the gallows and there's no way he'll give us a continuance! Our whole case was based on the idea that you'd never given in before and were extra-careful not to. And now? You just blew it!"

"Hunter --" Kirsten spoke up.

"Don't stand in front of your boyfriend, Kirsten," Hunter shot her a cold glare, "He screwed me on this one!"

"You wanna say that a little louder?" Kirsten shot back, rising from her seat. "I'm not sure the Ethics Committee heard you!"

"You shouldn't even be on this case!" Hunter shouted. "You're too emotionally involved."

"I'm emotionally involved?" Kirsten answered in the same tone. "You're standing here yelling at a client in a public building, and you're saying I'm emotionally involved??"

Those words struck home, deflating Hunter's anger. He stopped in his tracks, closed his eyes. "You're right," he said, voice softer by degrees. "You're right. I shouldn't have taken it out on you, I'm sorry. I just -- I have to --"

Without saying another word, he turned and walked out the door.

--

"Well, that was uncalled for."

Hunter looked over to see Sabrina standing in his office doorway, hands on hips. He grimaced. "What do you want, Sabrina?"

"To tell you that you owe Kirsten an apology," the teenager said.

"I gave her one --"

"And also, to ask you if it might ever have occurred to you that Sam didn't hide his little outburst from you just to ruin your precious case --"

"It's his case --"

"Maybe he did it 'cause he was scared."

"Manners really aren't your strong suit, are they?" Hunter asked. "And what do you mean, scared?"

"Of how you'd react. Of what you'd think of him."


"Which means what exactly? You may have the job, but you're still human. You know how many doctors will look at a girl with an STD and assume she's a slut?"

"I don't wanna know how you know that."

Sabrina smacked her palm against her forehead. "Not me, you idiot! I'm in a high school, okay? I hear things! Just because someone's not supposed to judge you, doesn't mean they won't."
"Says the girl who was comparing arcanes to child molesters when I first met her?"
The girl's face clouded. "That was different ...."

Hunter smirked. "Yeah. Right. Listen, Sabrina, I wasn't kidding when I said I don't have
time. I have to come up with the closing of my life by Monday morning, or Sam's a dead man."
"Can't you just call some more witnesses or something?"

Hunter shook his head. "Judge won't let us this late in the game since we haven't disclosed it
to Boyer. And he wouldn't give us a continuance to talk to them or prep them at any rate," he
said. "So either I somehow manage to get that jury to like Sam enough to acquit him, or he's
dead."

Sabrina nodded, face sobering. "How's it coming?" she asked, sounding genuinely interested
now.

The tiredness returned behind Hunter's eyes. "Terribly. I can't think of anything."
"What have you got so far?"
Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Are you offering to help?" he asked, at once surprised and
amused by the prospect.

"Well, why not? I'm an actress -- I know something about stagecraft and appealing to
people's emotions."

Hunter started to reject her offer, but stopped himself. He was desperate, he reminded
himself, and there was always the chance the girl might come up with something useful. It was
unlikely, of course, but at the moment he was certain to lose. "I've got ... basically what I said in
my opening," he said. "The State hasn't met its burden, no one saw Sam enter or leave, no one
heard him give in to the Hunger ... that sort of thing."

"That's all true," Sabrina said.

Hunter nodded. "Granted. But now that they know he's given in before, that jury will just
assume he did this time, too. The next-door neighbor -- Henderson-- said she heard them
arguing. That and Boyer's cross of Mr. Pollard will be all they need to know."

There was a long silence, then, with Sabrina looking contemplative as she mulled the
problem. "I'm not surprised."

"Excuse me?"
"That you can't think of anything. I'm not surprised."
Hunter rolled his eyes. "I asked for help, not insults."
"It's not an insult," Sabrina insisted. "I'm just saying, you can't think of anything to say about
Sam because you have no idea who he is."

"What?" Hunter's brows shot skyward. "He's been my client for three months, hasn't he?"
"There's a difference between working for someone and knowing them, Hunter," Sabrina
scolded him. "Think about it, what do you really know about Sam besides that he's a zombie?"

"He works for ABLE, he likes Kirsten ...." Hunter ticked off the points on his fingers -- and
then realized that his knowledge of his client ended there. His face fell.

"Exactly!" Sabrina said. "You're so busy trying to be everyone's hero that you forget to be
their friend. If you want the jury to acquit Sam, you have to make them like him, and they can't
like him unless they know him, and you can't let them know him because you don't know him."

"And I hear you didn't even realize she liked you until she told you so flat out?"
"Hey now, that woman's damn good at hiding what she's thinking."

Sabrina gave him a look that said "Oh, please." "I knew it on approximately my second day
of working here."
"…Really?"
She nodded.
He thought about this for a long moment, an unpleasant feeling settling in the pit of his stomach at the thought that she might be right. And then he laughed. "… Am I really having my character flaws pointed out to me by a seventeen year old girl?"
"Eighteen," Sabrina said. "My birthday was two weeks ago."
Hunter sighed. "I really don't know people, do I?"
"Not so much," she said, but then her normal imperious expression softened into a warm smile, and she added, "but you're awfully good at saving them."
Hunter grinned back. "Thanks," he said -- and then he went silent.
"What?"
"That's it," Hunter whispered.
"What's it? What's what?"
"My closing -- you just gave me an idea," Hunter's grin widened. "Sabrina, I'll never make fun of you again."
"Really?"
"… Well, no. But I'll do it less," he promised. "Call Kirsten, tell her to grab Sam and come to the office. We've got work to do."

Chapter 14

There was a palpable air of excitement in the car on Monday morning as Hunter drove himself, Kirsten, and Sabrina to the courthouse. "So, I don't want to jump the gun," he said as he parked the car a few blocks from the courthouse, "but I think we might actually win this thing."
Neither Kirsten nor Sabrina said anything, or even nodded, but the looks on their faces made their agreement obvious.
When Hunter had parked, Sabrina opened her door. "I'll get the stuff," she said, and then jumped out of the car, closing her door behind her. Kirsten beamed at Hunter. "Thank you. For doing this."
Hunter's face warmed, and he didn't answer. Then something occurred to him. "Hey, do you think your boyfriend would mind if I took you out for a cup of coffee? After our big victory, I mean?" he asked.
Kirsten looked confused and embarrassed. "He's not my boyfriend yet. And I thought you didn't --"
"I don't," he said. "But you're my best friend. That usually means I should see you outside of work."
Kirsten's confusion was replaced by a warm smile. "No," she answered. "I don't think he'd mind at all."
Hunter turned in his seat and locked eyes with her. "Let's do this."
"You got it, boss."
They strode to the courthouse like conquering heroes. The usual mob of protestors waited at the front doors, holding signs and chanting. The police were working overtime trying to keep the two throngs apart, and Hunter noticed that their presence outside the courthouse had increased since the trial had begun. Not that it had been light to begin with.
The anti-Sam faction was particularly loud and raucous, apparently emboldened by Boyer's cross-examination of Mr. Pollard. Sabrina turned to Hunter and Kirsten. "I think they smell blood in the water."

"They shouldn't count their sharks before they hatch," Hunter said, not fazed at all by the screams or signs.

Sabrina raised an eyebrow. "Do sharks hatch?"
"Hell if I know," Hunter said.

The police cleared a path to the courthouse as the trio approached. Hunter stopped for a moment, took a deep breath. "All right. It's show time."

Kirsten's expression suggested absolute confidence. "You've got this."
"Definitely," Sabrina said.

Hunter never saw his attacker as he lunged forward out of the crowd. As he was turning to say something to his companions, Hunter saw Kirsten's eyes go wide, heard her scream "LOOK OUT!" He turned back, saw a blur of color, and then the glint of reflected light --

And then there was a horrible, lancing pain in his chest.

The noises around him -- the crowd's raucous cries, Kirsten and Sabrina shrieking in horror, the police shouting "Get him!" -- all disappeared. At first, his world was nothing but the searing, agonizing pain shooting up and down his torso. He held perfectly still in that first instant, for fear any movement might make the terrible pain worse. And then, he finally mustered the nerve to look down -- and saw the hilt of a knife protruding from his chest. A knife hilt, and a red stain spreading across his white shirt.

His vision was rimmed with red as he fell to his knees. His hands reached for the hilt, to pull it out of him, but before he could bring any force at all to the attempt, the world went black around him.

--

For a long, long time, Hunter's world was blackness. Peaceful, noiseless, uninterrupted blackness. He had no knowledge of where he was, and no memory of how he'd gotten there. He had a vague notion that something painful had happened, but beyond that, there was only the comfortable black.

Until.

"--very lucky man," came a voice. A familiar voice, belonging to a woman. He strained to remember who it was, and finally it came to him: Chief Garrison. Chief Garrison was speaking, though he couldn't see her.

A low male voice answered, but Hunter could not make out the words. Nor could he discern who the voice belonged to.

"You gonna tell Hunter?" Chief Garrison asked again. Hunter's attention piqued at hearing this, for he recognized his own name among the words.

Once again, the man spoke, and once again, Hunter had no idea what he'd said.

"That he owes you his life," said Garrison.

Now Hunter was riveted. He owed someone his life? Who? And what had happened to put his life in danger? Was it related to the vague painful memory at the back of his mind? He strained his ears to hear the man's reply, hoping it would provide some clarity.
For several seconds, the low, male voice spoke, but despite Hunter's best efforts, he still could not discern what the man was saying. Frustration welled up in him as he waited for Chief Garrison's next comment.

But it did not come. Nor did he hear the man's voice again. There was only the quiet, peaceful blackness.

And then -- light intruded on the blackness, stabbing into it at first. "Unnnh," Hunter moaned, as his eyes fluttered open. He was lying on a bed -- not his bed, but one covered with a plain tan blanket. His clothes had been exchanged for a hospital gown, and an IV was inserted in his right arm. The room was sterile, with only a single window for decoration, which looked out on downtown Austin. A television in one corner of the room was turned to a news broadcast, but the sound was off, so Hunter wasn't sure what was being reported. His eyes drifted to his bedside -- and there they stopped.

Sitting in a chair was his father, moisture in his eyes as he saw Hunter come awake. Standing behind him was Claus, who was beaming, and next to Claus was Chief Garrison, her face set in its usual stern, no-nonsense expression.

"Son," said his father, reaching out and putting one of his hands on top of Hunter's own. "Thank God."

"You're a very lucky man, Hunter," said Garrison, smiling ever-so-slightly as she spoke. "You said that already," Hunter murmured. Was it his imagination, or did his father and Garrison exchange a brief, startled look?

"God, Hunter, I was so worried," said Weldon Gamble.


"Salvation Alliance nut job took a knife to your chest, Hunter," Garrison told him. "We had him on the ground within seconds."

"The doctors say a couple of centimeters to the left, and it'd have pierced your heart, son," his father told him gravely.

"Not exactly how I wanted to end my big case," Hunter smirked, and then it hit him full-force. "The case! Oh, God, I'm supposed to give Sam's closing!" He tried to get up, to scurry away from the bed, and felt the needle in his arm jerk painfully as he did.

"Slow down, son," Weldon calmed him, gently grabbing one arm. "Kirsten and Sabrina are getting a continuance from the judge as we speak."

Hunter lay down again, both because his father's reassurance calmed him and because, with the IV in his arm, he could hardly go anywhere.

"We're holdin' the guy responsible at the correctional facility. Boyer's already said he'll press charges -- attempted murder."

Hunter smirked. "How nice of him."

Weldon Gamble looked back and forth between his son and the police chief. Finally, his eyes came to rest on Garrison's face. "Jolene, could you give us a moment?"

Garrison looked down at him warmly. "Sure," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder briefly. Then she turned and walked out of the room, Claus following her.

"Hunter …," Weldon Gamble began, but trailed off, as if the old man were unsure of what to say. Finally, he settled for simply beaming at Hunter and resting a hand on his son's arm.

"I know, Dad," Hunter replied, with an answering smile. "I'm -- I'm sorry you won't get to see my closing for a few days. It's really something else."

"Your whole case has been something else, son. You did a hell of a job out there," Weldon remarked, looking deeply impressed.
"Really?" Hunter raised an eyebrow disbelievingly. "I was expecting to get an earful from you about what happened with Michael Pollard."

His father laughed dismissively. "You can never really control what a witness will say or do on the stand, son. You can try, but you can never really do it. That wasn't your fault."

Hunter's grin broadened at the unexpected absolution. "Thanks, Dad."

His father's face darkened quickly. "Son, I know you don't want to hear this, but ...."

Hunter grimaced. He knew what was coming. "Dad, not now, please. I just almost died. Can you at least wait until I'm out of the hospital to tell me I'm wasting my life?"

"It's not about that, Hunter," Weldon replied firmly. "It's about the fact that the past few hours nearly ended my life!"

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "... What are you talking about?"

"Jesus God, Hunter, did you miss the part where I was in a panic? I spent most of the morning thinking you were going to die. You have any idea what that would have done to me?"

Hunter sighed. "Believe me, I'm not thrilled about it either, but --"

"So do something else, dammit!" Weldon's composure faltered momentarily. "Something where I don't have to worry every day that some fanatic is gonna try and kill you!"

Hunter was staggered -- only rarely had he seen his father come close to tears. He wasn't sure he'd seen it at all since his own mother died. It took him a few moments to recover enough to speak. "Every day? This is the first time anyone's ever --"

"The first time it's happened in reality," Weldon said, and tapped his right temple. "But in here? It's happened at least once a day for the last four years."

Hunter was struck silent. He had no idea how to answer that.

"Please, son."

All the nagging, and the derision ... and some of it was out of fear for Hunter's safety?

Hunter suddenly found it very difficult to breathe, for reasons that had nothing to do with the stab wound. "Dad ... I'll think about it, okay?" was all he could think to say.

Weldon nodded, but before he could say more, Kirsten rushed into the room, Sabrina hot on her heels. "Hunter, thank God, you're awake!" Kirsten said, reaching down to hug him.

He held up a hand to forestall her doing so. "I -- I don't think my rib cage could take any pressure just now," he smiled up at her. "But it's good to see you, too."

"Right, right," Kirsten answered, embarrassed.

"I offered to do a healing spell and wake you up right away," Sabrina said, "but the doctors had some concerns about your spleen exploding if I did it wrong ...."

Hunter's eyes widened with alarm. "Right ... uh, thanks for the thought, anyway," he smiled at Sabrina, and then turned his attention back to Kirsten. "So, when do we finish up the trial?"

Kirsten frowned. "Tomorrow morning."

"What?"

"Gilliam wouldn't give us a continuance. He only adjourned for the day 'cause we weren't sure you'd make it," she told him, visibly anxious.

"But how does he expect --"

"Sam Pollard is represented by McClain & Gamble," Sabrina recited, puckering up her face in imitation of Judge Gilliam. "McClain & Gamble still has two healthy, able-bodied attorneys. Therefore the trial can and will continue. 8 a.m. tomorrow morning, on the dot!"

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Two? He thinks we're gonna call McClain back from wherever-in-Europe he's vacationing at the moment and bring him up to speed on the case by the morning?"
"I pointed that out," Kirsten said. "He said it wasn't his problem."
Hunter rolled his eyes. "What a guy. I guess there's only one thing to do, then."
Kirsten gave him a questioning look.
"You'll have to close."
Kirsten paled. "What? But I -- you know me and … and anything in public."
"Think of it as a learning experience," Hunter gave his friend a wry grin.
"But … but I saw your speech. I saw you practice it! I could never give that speech!"
"You're right," Hunter nodded in agreement. "You can't give my speech. But you can give yours."
"But I -- but -- no, Hunter, I can't."
"Well I'm hardly in a position to do it," Hunter gestured to indicate his current state.
"Besides, somebody told me recently that the best way to help the jury know Sam is to know him yourself." He gave Sabrina a pointed look. "You know him a lot better than I do."
Slowly, Kirsten nodded. "All right," she finally said. "All right. I'll do it. It's not like we have a lot of other choices."
Hunter grinned. "I knew you could."
Kirsten's face was taut. "That makes one of us."

The evening, Kirsten sat at her kitchen table in her apartment, a legal pad in front of her, writing and writing. Or rather, writing, crossing out what she'd written, writing some more, crossing that out, and finally tearing out the page and starting again in frustration. At the fifth fresh page, an electric tingle ran through her fingers as Sam slid his hand on top of hers.

She looked up at him, sitting across the table, and exhilaration mixed with terror in her gut.
"I'm sorry," she said.
He looked confused. "What for?"
"Because it -- it can't be very encouraging, knowing this is your last hope, sitting there and watching me screw up over and over again. I mean --"

Sam smiled, giving her hand a squeeze. If he was scared, it didn't show. "The worse the dress rehearsal, the better the performance," he said, actually chuckling.
"You're really not worried?"
"I wouldn't say that," Sam said. "I'm not worried about you and what you'll do tomorrow. If anyone can make that jury overlook their prejudices, you can. I'm just not sure anyone can."
Kirsten smiled back at him. "I don't know why you have so much faith in me."
Sam shrugged. "If you can't put your faith in the people you love, who can you?"
A silence passed between them as they both realized what he'd just said. Kirsten felt her face warm. Sam's cheeks did not flush, but she was sure they would have if he were still physically capable of it.
"I'm … sorry," he said.
But she shook her head emphatically. "No. I just … I wish I deserved it."
Sam shrugged again. "My father loved me when I didn't deserve it. That's what love is about, I think -- believing in people's best even when they're at their worst."

The two sat there for a moment in a comfortable silence, as Kirsten tried to let herself believe that. And as she mulled the words -- that was when inspiration came.
Chapter 15

Kirsten was scarcely aware of the drive to the courthouse the next morning. It wasn't that her mind was intensely focused on the argument she was going to make or the things she was going to say. Rather, her mind was full of a deafening buzzing noise that drowned out all else, as if a whole hive of bees had taken up residence between her ears and the noises they made were amplified by a surround sound stereo system.

She didn't remember parking, but she must have, for all of a sudden, she was out of the car, walking to the courthouse. She didn't remember telling Sabrina to bring the box of stuff they carried to the courthouse every day, but she must have done that, too, for when she looked behind her, the young woman was there, lugging the box. She wasn't aware of passing the screaming mobs or pulling open the courthouse doors, she simply looked around one moment and saw that she was walking down the corridor toward her courtroom.

"Feel ready?" Sam whispered in her ear. Oh, she was sitting next to him at the counsel table now. Right.

"I wouldn't bet on it," she whispered, throat suddenly very dry.

The next thing she knew, Boyer was on his feet. The words of his closing were completely lost on her, but she did get a good look at the jurors' faces. They looked engaged and responsive, which only served to make her more nervous. Boyer was a career trial lawyer, a gifted speaker, and a skilled tactician. She ran for the bathroom to avoid social interaction at museum galas. What chance did she have against him?

"Miss Harper!" Judge Gilliam cut into her thoughts.

She spun to face him. "Huh -- yes, Your Honor?"

"It's time to make your closing argument."

Both the jurors and the audience laughed. If only I could melt into the chair.... She stood, and walked slowly to what she hoped was a good distance from the jury box. She swallowed, and it sounded to her as if a gun were going off between her ears.

And then, silence. An endless, terrible silence.

"He's making a lot of assumptions," Kirsten said, wondering if the words sounded as lame to the jurors' ears as they did to her own. She swallowed again, and then continued.

"Sam Pollard's a zombie, he'd had a previous episode of the Hunger, he and Molly got into an argument, therefore he must have killed her. Quod erat demonstrandum. Never mind the fact that there's not a single scrap of physical evidence to support that conclusion. Never mind the fact that nobody can even be sure that Sam was still at Molly Trent's apartment at the time of her death. A lot of assumptions."

The jurors' faces were maddeningly inscrutable. But they weren't laughing anymore, and their eyes were fixed on her, so she kept going.

"And let's be honest: any decision you make in this case will involve lots of assumptions: about whether a witness is believable or not, about whether an argument made by us or by Mr. Boyer is accurate or not. But underlying them all is one fundamental assumption, made by our entire justice system in every case: that you, as jurors, can somehow detach your emotions from the decision you have to make, and reduce the taking of a person's freedom -- or sometimes his life -- to a mechanical calculus of facts and figures, charges and countercharges."

She paused for a moment to let that sink in.
"Pretty ridiculous, huh? Maybe more than any other group, juries can fundamentally alter the course of people's lives. We give you that awesome responsibility and somehow you're supposed to act like robots as you discharge it. Absurd. Ludicrous. Because you're not robots. You're human beings. And so is Sam Pollard."

Kirsten found that she was becoming more comfortable as she went on. She was getting into the flow of what she was saying, which helped distract from her anxiety. She took a breath and forged ahead.

"There are a lot of angry people outside who'd like you to believe otherwise. There may be some people in the courtroom today who'd like you to believe otherwise. But as uncomfortable as it may be, there's one assumption you must make because it is simply and undeniably the truth. That man sitting there --" she pointed at Sam, "is a person, a human person, with a human character and a distinctly human set of experiences."

"Sam is a person whose father loved him so much that he brought his son back from the dead because he just couldn't stand to lose him. He's a person who was so aware, even as a young man, of the sacrifices his parents had made on his behalf, that he came home from school every day and went straight to his homework. He woke up early even on weekends so that he could spend a few hours studying before playing with his friends. Adolescence is usually a selfish age, but not for Sam -- he spent his ten years determined to repay the debt that he knew he owed. He felt it in his bones. And his parents got their money back, with interest -- Sam graduated valedictorian of his high school class, and went on to college and law school."

"He's a strong man, and a good one, but not a perfect one, not immune to the lure of temptation or to making mistakes. You've already heard about the biggest one: the graduation party. Everyone cuts loose at some point. For most of us, it involves wild, drunken parties our first year of college, when we finally escape from our parents' houses and can taste freedom for the first time. For some of us, those parties include not just alcohol, but dope. And some of us experiment with even stronger things. But Sam had that sense of indebtedness as his constant companion, the internal balance sheet that he could never quite work out in his favor. So Sam restrained himself through college and law school, determined to make good on the gifts others had given him."

"Which meant that when he finally got around to experimenting, he didn't know when to quit. He had no sense of his own limitations or the potency of what he was putting inside of himself."

"After Michael Pollard revived Sam, his attitude toward the outside world never changed. He never lost that simple, unbending optimism and friendliness. The stubborn belief that there is an Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road, that his efforts now would bear fruit later. It was in that spirit that, after he was told he couldn't even sit for the bar exam, ending a career dream he'd had since boyhood, he picked himself up, dusted himself off, and started applying for other jobs. He chose to see good fortune in his renewed lease on life, instead of the stigma and limitations that new life carried with it. He sees the best in things, and in people."

"Including Molly Trent."

She stopped there. Summoning her nerve, she continued, pushing past the blush she felt rising in her cheeks. "You know, I've been a shy person all my life. Most young lawyers can't wait to get into court -- you couldn't keep me far enough away from it. I have to admit, if one of my friends had ... if I'd lost someone the way Sam lost Molly Trent, I probably would have given up. I would have spent a few days crying, and then a lot longer wishing that I was outgoing enough to meet new people to take her place. Sam didn't do that. He kept trying to mend fences.
He kept trying because he believed in Molly Trent -- believed in her ability to see past his pale skin and cold hands to what was in his head and in his heart.

"Someone told me that love is the ability to believe in someone's best even when they're at their worst, their lowest point," she said, smiling at the fond memory. "That's what Sam Pollard felt for Molly Trent. That's what he hoped she could do. For months, it looked like she couldn't, and then, finally, she agreed to talk to him. So, Sam being Sam, he went. What else could he do?"

"The story I've just told you is about a man. Not a monster, but a man. So when you go back in that deliberation room, ask yourselves: would the man I've just described take any chances with the Hunger? Would a man who was already deathly afraid of succumbing to it -- so afraid that he made his parents buy a tranq gun specifically to use on him -- really stick around if he felt it starting to cloud his mind?"

She took one final pause, arranging her face into the most sober expression she could manage, and then delivered her final words. "Sam Pollard's life is in your hands. Which assumptions will you make?"

When she sat down, no one was laughing.

--

Sam Pollard left the courtroom that afternoon already feeling like a free man, though no verdict had been rendered yet and Judge Gilliam had warned that it might be days before one was. Sam knew better. He'd seen the looks on the jurors' faces -- a few had even been close to tears.

He and Kirsten went first to see Hunter, who reacted with the same jubilation Sam himself felt. "I saw you on TV!" Hunter gestured wildly to punctuate his excitement. "You were amazing! Best closing I've ever heard in my life!" He wrapped her in a huge hug.

"I'm not sure," Kirsten answered as they released. "I couldn't tell what the jurors were thinking."

"You had them," he said.

"You think so?"

"I've done enough trials that I can tell when you had them," Hunter said, his expression radiating absolute confidence. "You had them."

When she still looked uncertain, Hunter looked to Sam himself. "Sam! Tell your gi --" he stopped himself. Sam and Kirsten both blushed at what he'd been about to say. Sabrina, who sat in a chair by Hunter's bedside reading a book, couldn't suppress a giggle. "Tell Kirsten she was fabulous."

"I'm with him," Sam said, pointing at Hunter.

"I'm just glad I got through it without passing out," Kirsten shrugged.

Sam and Hunter exchanged a look. "Get used to it," Hunter said. "She never gives herself any credit."

"I do too!" she rounded on Hunter. "Just for, you know, not-talking-in-front-of-people stuff."

"Yeah, well, as soon as I'm out of here, we're hiring somebody new to do all the research. You're going to court, young lady."

Kirsten glowered. "If you tell me to think of it as a learning experience, Hunter, I swear to God I'm shoving that tray down your throat." She pointed to the tray of food that lay discarded at his bedside.
Hunter frowned. "How'd you know?"
"Lucky guess."
"You're still going to court," Hunter said, and his eyes suggested he wasn't kidding. "But for now, go do something that isn't thinking about the case. Believe me when I say, waiting for a jury to come back is bad for your mental health."
Kirsten nodded to him, then looked over at Sabrina. "What about you, kiddo? Wanna get out of here for a while?"
Sam saw Sabrina's eyes glance meaningfully between himself and Kirsten. "No thanks. I don't think Hunter could get by without me," she said, a little too dramatically.
"But you don't even like Hunter --"
Sam laughed quietly and touched Kirsten's arm. "Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."
She looked back and forth between Sabrina and him, and finally appeared to get it. Her cheeks reddened slightly. "Oh," she said, looking back at Sabrina. "Right then. Take good care of him."
Sabrina smiled. "You can count on me!"
Sam felt a charge running through him as they walked, side by side, to her car. When they'd taken their respective seats, he turned to her and said, "That closing really was something else."
"I'm glad you liked it."
"So, any ideas how a guy might go about repaying the debt he owes you?" A smile played about his lips.
"I might," she answered, in the same tone, "if I knew anybody who owed me any debts."
"I'm pretty sure there's a zombie in this car that owes you his life." He reached over and slid one of his hands over one of hers.
"There's no verdict yet," she said, and to Sam's ears, it sounded as though she was trying to convince herself of that as much as him. "We shouldn't jump the gun."
"I disagree. I think jumping the gun is exactly what we should do. I think someone in this car has earned herself a movie and a giant bag of extra-buttery popcorn."
Kirsten grinned coyly. "I see you've learned a few of my secret weaknesses," she said, then sobered. "But what about --"
"What about what? It's just a movie -- nothing in the rules against that. Plus, who do you think's gonna get you disbarred? Me?"
She laughed. "Well ...."
"You said it yourself," Sam reminded her. "Everybody's gotta cut loose sometime."
"As I recall, cutting loose got you killed last time," she teased.
"Which worked out okay for you, didn't it? Besides, it's not like the popcorn butter can give me a heart attack anymore ...." His voice dropped, and he leaned in slightly.
She did likewise. "Sam Pollard -- always seeing the glass as half full."
He reached up, his fingers brushed her cheek. "Do me a favor," he said, voice just above a whisper, leaning in still more.
"Hmm?" Their faces were centimeters apart now.
"Your closing was amazing. But for the rest of the night, let's pretend I'm not 'the defendant,' okay?"
"I think I can manage that." She reached for his neck, pulled him in, and kissed him.
It was three full minutes later that the car started.
They arrived at the theater, walked through the parking lot and up the sidewalk hand in hand. A few feet from the theater something occurred to Sam. "Hey, we forgot something," he said, stopping and turning to Kirsten.

"Eh?"
"We never picked what we're seeing."
She grinned. "Your choice, Mr. Soon-To-Be-Free Man."
"I'm flexible," he said. "Anything but a zombie movie."
That got a chuckle. "That really never leaves you, does it?"
"What?" he asked.
"The sense of humor."
"Oh," he said. "Yeah, I guess not." It had never struck him as being particularly special.
"Good," she smiled wider, leaning in and kissing him.

They had not yet pulled apart when the noise erupted in Sam's ears. A horrible, deafening noise. He started, pulling away from Kirsten briefly, his head jerking about in all directions to identify its source. If his heart could still beat, Sam was sure it would have been racing.

He'd just seen a blurry figure taking off at top speed across a nearby rooftop when he realized that Kirsten had gone limp in his arms. He looked back to her.

Her face was pale, mouth still open slightly, blue eyes wide and staring behind the glasses. "Kirsten," he whispered, shaking her slightly. "Come on, whatever it was, there's no reason to --"
He stopped as he felt something sticky spread over the fingers of the hand in her hair.

He pulled it back, and he saw a glob of blood trickling down his fingers. He felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. "No," he whispered. "Oh, no no -- Kirsten!" he yelled, shaking her hard now.

"HELP!" he screamed, "SOMEBODY HELP!"

The noise -- a gunshot, he now realized -- had already stopped several people in their tracks. Now their eyes riveted to him.

The crowd on the sidewalk degenerated quickly into a mass of people screaming and running in different directions. He heard the words "the police" among the screams several times, so he hoped that meant someone was calling them, or already had. But Sam's own attention was entirely focused on Kirsten as he laid her down on the sidewalk, where several drops of her blood had already spattered, picked up one limp wrist, and checked for a pulse. Nothing.

"No no no no -- come on, baby, don't quit now ... don't leave me ..."

He checked her other wrist, then reached into his pocket and frantically fumbled for his cell phone. It slipped from his hands as he pulled it out, clattering to the ground. He picked it up again, and managed to drop it a second time before managing to close his fingers around it. He unthinkingly punched in "9-1-1."

He did not hear the phone ringing. Instead, he felt a terrible, painful sensation inside of him. In addition to his panic, there was a physically painful feeling, an ache, a need for something that felt just beyond his reach. It started as a pang, then blossomed across his brain, spreading and expanding until finally it seized Sam Pollard in its claws.

"9-1-1 Emergency," said the voice on the other end.
The phone crashed to the ground.
"Hello?" repeated the operator. "Hello?"
Chapter 16

"Ever thought about becoming a lawyer?" Hunter asked Sabrina. They had taken his IV out, but wanted him to stay another night at the hospital for observation.

Sabrina looked up from the book she was reading. "A lawyer? Me?"

Hunter nodded. "Sure -- like you said, half of trial work is theater anyway, and you're smart enough, and stubborn as a bull," he grinned at her, "and ... remarkably perceptive, for a seven -- sorry, eighteen-year-old."

Her expression suggested that she was considering the idea. "But could you stand to work with me?"

Hunter shrugged. "Texas is a big state. No reason you'd have to work in my firm," he told her.

Sabrina actually smiled slightly. "I might. Thanks."

Hunter opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, the television screen arrested his attention. The soap opera that had been playing disappeared, replaced by the words "SPECIAL REPORT" in large letters. The screen then showed a female reporter standing in front of an empty podium, speaking into a microphone.

"Huh," Hunter murmured. "Wonder what's going on."

"Maybe Boyer's announcing he's running." Sabrina snorted.

Hunter raised an eyebrow at her. "Before the verdict's even back? You'd think he'd want to declare while the guilty verdict was ringing in people's ears."

"Unless he doesn't think there's gonna be a guilty verdict," Sabrina said. "Maybe he thought the same thing we did about Kirsten's closing."

The speculation ended as they both saw Chief Garrison mount the podium. The gaggle of reporters standing in front of it snapped pictures.

"What's she doing there?" Sabrina asked Hunter, who had just been wondering the same thing.

"Can you turn it up a little?"

Sabrina looked up at the television, which hung from the ceiling in one corner of the room, then looked over at Hunter and rolled his eyes. "You think I can reach that high?"

"You're a witch!"

"Oh," Sabrina looked embarrassed, "right." She flicked a finger at the television, and the volume went up.

"-shooting at the movie theater on South Lamar Boulevard," Garrison was saying. "At this time, we can confirm at least one fatality. We can also confirm that we have quarantined the theater to contain a zombie who was on site when the shooting occurred. The zombie is contained, but is also in the grip of the Hunger, so Austin residents are advised to steer clear until further notice."

Hunter gave Sabrina a knowing look. "If they take the zombie alive, Boyer can add another feather to his cap."

But Sabrina frowned. "Something's wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure," she said, not taking her eyes off the screen, "but ..."

"Can you confirm the identity of the victim?" asked one of the reporters.

Garrison nodded. "We have made contact with the next of kin, and are authorized to confirm at this point that the victim is a woman named Kirsten Harper."
Hunter felt as though his stomach had abruptly fallen out of his body. In the chair at his bedside, Sabrina paled. "No..." she whispered, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. She got up and threw her arms around his neck, sobbing into his hospital gown. He wrapped his arms around her robotically, unable to move or even think. He didn't even notice that he, too, was crying.

Another reporter's voice penetrated the fog that had covered his brain. "Chief Garrison, can you confirm that the zombie you have quarantined in the theater is Sam Pollard, the defendant in the much-talked-about murder trial?"

Garrison shook her head. "We're not discussing that information at this time."

But Hunter knew. "... God, Sabrina," he said, shaking himself out of his tears as the urgency of the situation struck him. "It must be Sam."

"Huh?" she asked, looking up, face flush.

"The zombie in the theater. It's gotta be Sam."

Sabrina raised an eyebrow. "You think so?"

"If Kirsten's dead, who else would it be?"

She was silent.

"You have to get me there," Hunter said, gently dislodging himself from the hug and standing up.

"What?"

"We have to get him out of the Hunger before Garrison takes him down."

"Hunter ... he'll kill us. If he's in the Hunger, he'll kill us. If Garrison doesn't do it first."

He found it very difficult to care. "We're the only people who might be able to bring him out of it. What do you think Kirsten would want?"

That seemed to snap Sabrina out of her grief a bit. She nodded. "All right," she said, closing her eyes.

A moment later, the two disappeared from the hospital room.

--

In four years of knowing her, Hunter had never seen Jolene Garrison caught by surprise. The police chief had a knack for appearing to be in control of herself and the situation at all times. When he and Sabrina blinked into existence at Garrison's side, Hunter knew from her face that there was, indeed, a first time for everything.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked, once she'd recovered from her shock. And then, noticing that he was still in the hospital gown, she added, "And couldn't you have bothered to change first?"

The three of them stood just behind a barricade the police had set up around the movie theater. Behind them were a half dozen parked police cars, bathing the area in alternating blue-and-red light, radios squawking constantly.

Hunter didn't respond to the comment about his attire. "You know what we're doing here. We're here to help with the Sam situation."

"Never said it was Sam," Garrison said, as the radio at her hip chirped. "And even if it was, I'm not sure what you could do to help. Now, if you'll excuse me." She put the radio to her mouth.

"We can talk him down so you don't have to shoot him."
Garrison dropped her radio, fixing Hunter with a stern glare. "Are you kidding?" she asked, anger in her voice. "You already almost got yourself killed once, you're not even recovered from that, and now you want to try and make nice with a zombie in the Hunger? What the hell's gotten into you?" She grabbed his arm and led him roughly away from the theater.

"Well, I just lost my best friend, so you can understand why I might not want to see anyone else get shot today, I hope?"

The chief stopped. Her grip on Hunter's arm loosened, and her stern expression relaxed slightly. "Hunter, I know you and the girl were both close to Kirsten, and my heart breaks for you, believe me, but sending you into that theater would just make an already messy situation worse. In addition to being a breach of protocol that could cost me my job. So please, take your young friend and go on home."

Hunter shook his head.

Garrison sighed. "Fine, stay. But I'm not sending you in there."

"All right," Hunter said, looking to Sabrina. "Don't send me."

"What --" she went silent as comprehension dawned. "Hunter, no."

Hunter walked over to Sabrina. "Coming or staying?"

"Coming," Sabrina said without hesitation.

"Hunter, I swear to God --"

Hunter held up a hand to stop her. "Chief, I know you're a woman of your word. So why don't you not say what you'll do to me if I go in, so that when I come back out, you won't have to do it?"

Garrison shot him a peevish look as Sabrina closed her eyes. A moment later, the two were gone again.

They reappeared in the movie theater lobby, which was completely empty. It would have looked simply deserted, except that the glass display case at the concession stand was splattered with blood. Hunter saw that and felt momentarily sick. "I'm thinking Kirsten wasn't the only --"

he choked on the word "death."

But Sabrina knew anyway. "Boyer'll be itching to put him on death row now."

"Let's get him out of here alive first. Then we'll worry about the next thing."

Sabrina nodded, and they moved on. Turning left, they entered a corridor lined with theaters. A large, stand-up advertisement for an upcoming film lay across the floor, several bloody shoeprints decorating it. Several overhead lights had been ripped out, and wires hung loose from holes in the ceiling, sending occasional sparks down to the ground. Along the walls there were also occasional blood stains.

And then Hunter heard it. It sounded like speech, coming from the other side of one of the doors. He stopped in his tracks, listening intently. Sabrina stopped next to him, shooting him a curious look, but he ignored her for the moment. It didn't sound like the groaning and barking noises usually made by a zombie when in the Hunger, but if it was Sam, he wanted to be ready.

No, there were definitely multiple voices, which meant that this place had not been evacuated, or at least not completely. "There's people in there," he pointed. "How many can you take at a time?"

"You mean teleport?" Sabrina asked, looking alarmed. "I -- I dunno. I've never tried more than one other person."

"Up for an experiment? That way we make sure they don't run into Sam on the way out."

She nodded tersely.
Hunter walked to the door, opened it -- and was immediately greeted by a shriek. A small group of twenty-somethings huddled together in the center of the theater, and they literally jumped out of their seats as the door opened. Behind them, the movie screen read "Please Visit The Concession Stand!" Hunter ignored it, focusing on the people.

"It's okay!" he called. "I'm not a zombie! My name is Hunter Gamble. I'm gonna get you out of here."

A portly young woman with black hair raised a skeptical eyebrow, not seeming to relax in the slightest. "You don't look like police."

"I'm not," he said. "But I can get you out of here."

"How?" a gangly young man asked, looking petrified. "There's a psycho zombie out there, and from the sounds of things, he made a few more for company."

Hunter grimaced inwardly. If Sam had Changed someone -- or someones --, that would make things much more complicated for Hunter. He pointed to Sabrina. "This is Sabrina, she can take you right out to the police. They're waiting outside to take you home."

"How can she do that?" asked another young man.

"Teleport," Sabrina said, and the group noticeably flinched.

"You mean --"

"You mean you're a --"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Hunter sighed. "Yes, she's a witch, but she's one of us, she's on our side!"

One of the crowd members yelled "FREAK!" and threw a soda cup at her. Several more tried to hide under chairs. And one turned in the opposite direction and ran screaming for the side door.

Hunter gave another sigh. "Can you handle yourself in here?"

Sabrina nodded. "I can always teleport out if need be."

Hunter nodded, then took off at a run after the fleeing youth. He hadn't even reached the door yet when he heard an animalistic roar from just outside, followed by a very-human-sounding scream. He bolted through the door and found Sam in the corridor outside, clutching the fleeing moviegoer's arms.

Sam looked little like the person that Hunter had represented for the last three months. Veins now formed an intricate network spreading over his cheeks and forehead. His eyes were bulging and bloodshot, with the pupils almost nonexistent. He gripped his intended victim's arms with fingers caked with blood, and as he opened his mouth to bite the young man, Hunter saw that his teeth were stained with red, too.

_I guess he's killed someone, then. Hopefully they're just dead, and not Changed._

Hunter leapt at Sam, pushing him to the ground so that Sam released the man, who took off running in the opposite direction, screaming all the way. Hunter had no time to worry about that as he tackled Sam to the ground, and the young man roared and hissed at him as they rolled around, struggling for dominance. His bulging eyes glared at Hunter, laced with mania. Foamy saliva landed on Hunter's clothes as his former client clacked his teeth, leaning in for a bite.

Hunter just barely shifted out of the way before Sam's teeth ripped a chunk out of his shoulder, but the zombie's clawlike hands had him in a firm grip, giving him little room to maneuver. "Sam!" Hunter locked eyes with the young man. "Sam, it's me, it's Hunter!"

The zombie didn't even hesitate, foamy saliva flying from his mouth as he hissed, then leaned in to bite Hunter's chest. Hunter knew there would be no wiggling out of that one, so he
did the only thing he could think of -- he jerked his own head forward to collide with Sam's, praying that the younger man's teeth didn't take a bite out of his cheek or nose in the process.

Sam gave an animalistic yowl of pain as Hunter's forehead struck his own. Hunter used the moment of surprise that move bought him to fling the zombie off of him and scramble to his feet. No sooner was Hunter upright than Sam charged him, but this time, Hunter was ready. As Sam came at him, he grabbed the younger man by the arms and *flung* him around, slamming him against the nearest wall. He kept a firm grip on Sam as the younger man thrashed, holding him just out of biting reach.

"*SAM! You've got to SNAP OUT OF IT!*"

The only response was more growling, thrashing, and spitting. Foamy saliva rained on Hunter's shirt, neck, and cheeks, but he ignored it.

"*Sam! Listen to me! I can still get you out of this, but you've got to come back to me before you hurt anyone else! Do you hear me? Do you understand?*"

The zombie lunged again, lashing out to bite at Hunter, but Hunter held him just out of reach. "I know what happened to Kirsten," he said. "I know what they did to her. But this isn't what she'd want for you, do you hear me?"

Sam abruptly stopped thrashing, and Hunter dared to hope that something in the young man had heard him.

"She wouldn't want this for you. She'd want you to go on and live! As a man, not a mindless monster!"

Sam stayed still, and the roars were replaced now by softer mewling.

"Remember what she said about you, Sam? At the closing?" Hunter allowed himself to calm slightly, now that Sam seemed placated. "She said you always looked for the best in life -- no matter what happened, you kept your faith in things. Remember that? She'd want you to do that now. Just like you did after you couldn't take the bar, remember? She said it. She loved you. Come back for her. Please."

The zombie was still and silent. And then, abruptly, its face softened. Its mouth closed. Its whole expression changed, and it seemed to Hunter that Sam had awakened, that he'd retaken control.

"Sam?" he asked, in a whisper.

For a long moment, the young man simply stared at him.

It happened in an instant. Sam lunged forward with a terrific burst of strength, throwing Hunter off of him and knocking him against the opposite wall. With a terrible roar, the zombie leapt forward, bloodshot eyes gleaming murderously as the scarlet-tinged maw opened. Hunter saw him coming, but being thrown against the wall had knocked the wind out of him, and he could not move quickly enough to get away. He could only hope that he would simply die, and not join Sam as a mindless monster. He braced himself …

And then, with a terrific *BAM!* Sam's head exploded, showering Hunter and the corridor in blood. The decapitated corpse fell to the floor, smoke still drifting upward from the neck. Hunter's head jerked in the direction the noise had come from -- and he saw two men and a woman in Kevlar vests labeled "SWAT," with Chief Garrison trailing behind them.

Hunter sputtered. "Fancy meeting you here."

"I wasn't gonna let you die, Hunter," Garrison said, "even if you are an idiot."

As the SWAT team members picked up Sam's body and carried it away, Chief Garrison turned to Hunter. In a day full of shocks, she added another one by putting a gentle hand on his shoulder and giving him a warm, sympathetic smile.
"Some people just can't be saved, son," she said. "No matter how hard you try."

--

Ellis Boyer was watching coverage of the standoff on a television in his office when a knock came at the door. "Come in," he said quietly.

His secretary opened the door. "Sir, I guess it doesn't matter anymore, but I thought you'd like to know that the jurors just came back with a verdict."

Boyer regarded her curiously. "What was it?"
She hesitated. "Not guilty, sir."
Boyer nodded slowly. "Make sure to include that in my notes for the press conference," he told her.

She looked surprised. "But sir, if you really are gonna run for Congress, won't that be a bad start to your campaign?"
"Yes," he said. "Include it anyway."
She was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, sir," she said, then closed the door behind her.

Boyer leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Chapter 17

A week later, Hunter stood in the offices of McClain and Gamble, P.C., which were now a maze of boxes, most of them filled and taped shut. Only one room remained to pack -- Kirsten's office. Hunter took a step toward the room, intending to get it over with … and then abruptly stopped. He found he could not make himself go further.

"I hope you didn't call me here to help, son," Weldon Gamble's voice snapped him out of his reverie. "My back cries out at the very thought of moving those boxes."

Hunter turned to find his father standing just behind him, wearing a dark overcoat atop his business suit. The older man grinned wryly, and Hunter smiled in answer. "Not today, Dad, don't worry. I was hoping we could talk a little business."

"Go on."

Hunter took a deep breath. "I was hoping your offer to find me a place at your firm still stood."

The elder Gamble raised an eyebrow. "You sent McClain your resignation?"
Hunter nodded.
"How'd he take it?"
"He hasn't responded yet," Hunter answered, picking up a roll of masking tape from atop one of the boxes. "And frankly, I don't plan on waiting for him to."

Weldon nodded, hesitating for a moment before speaking. "Are you sure this is the right move? Joining the rat race?"

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Dad, you've been begging me to do this for years."
"And you've been saying 'no' for years."
"I'm --" he said, then found himself momentarily unable to speak. "I'm sure," he finished, with a nod.
His father grinned widely. "Then there's an office waiting for you, son. I'll have my office manager order some supplies, you can start as soon as you're ready."

Hunter nodded. Silence reigned.

Finally, Hunter spoke, his voice weak. "Where'd I go wrong?"

"Son ...."

"I figured I'd lose some cases, and all, that happens to every lawyer. Maybe even some death penalty cases. But even if some of my clients got hurt, it wasn't --" he stopped at a sudden burning sensation in his throat. "It wasn't supposed to be my family."

Another silence hung between them, which Weldon finally broke.

"You didn't have a Boo Radley."

"What?"

"Boo Radley. He was the one who saved those kids, not Atticus."

"Dad, you know I love that book, but what's it got to do with this?" Hunter asked.

"Everything. Nobody in that town ever stopped to ask whether they would have been attacked at all if Atticus Finch hadn't taken that case. It's a lot easier to be a hero when you have nothing to lose."

Hunter swallowed hard. "You're saying it's my fault Kirsten's dead?" asked Hunter, resentment welling up in him at the implication.

"I'm saying Atticus wasn't as morally pure as he's cracked up to be," Weldon said, putting a gentle hand on his son's arm. "Virtue almost always comes with a price, son, and you can't always predict what the price will be. You've spent your whole life discharging your responsibilities to your conscience, and you've done a helluva job," Weldon grinned admiringly, "but those aren't your only responsibilities."

Hunter nodded slowly. "That's what you've been trying to tell me all along, isn't it?"

"Part of it."

"I'm sorry I didn't listen, Dad. I --" he stopped, blinking back the tears that were forming in his eyes.

"Everybody learns in their own time. And their own way. I sure as hell did."

Hunter didn't bother asking his father what the old man meant by that. Instead, he hugged Weldon tightly, and the older man wrapped his arm around his son's shoulders. The two stood there like that for a long moment, not speaking, as Hunter sobbed.

When they pulled back, a thought occurred to Hunter. "Dad?"

"Mmm?"

"I actually have one more favor to ask ...."

--

"But why can't I stay with you?" Sabrina whined, sounding uncharacteristically adolescent.

Hunter paused for a moment, realizing that her tone surprised him. It was only right that she sound like a teenager, since she was one. "I told you, I can't take care of anyone right now. Probably not for a good long time."

"I think you just don't like me."

Hunter laughed softly. "It's not that," he said. "It's the new job. Gamble, Mullen, Wilkins & Kane is a big firm, with all the long hours and weekend work that comes with that. And my father's putting me on partner track. So you'd basically see about as much of me as you're going to anyway."
"So you're putting me in the foster system?"
"The foster system?" Hunter raised an eyebrow at her. "Who said anything about that?"
"Well, you said you'd found a place for me to live …" 
"That's right, we did. My Dad found you an apartment you can lease through the summer. You're going off to college in the fall anyway, right?"
"Assuming I get in anywhere."
"Pssh, you'll get in lots of places, don't worry about that." He grinned. "Anyway, Dad's already paid your rent through the summer. I'm gonna help move you in before I start the new job."
"You mean … my own place?"
"That's right. You'll be the envy of all your classmates. And you're eighteen now, so legally, there's not a thing your parents can do about it."
Sabrina nodded, but her expression was decidedly morose. "Sabrina?" Hunter asked gently. "Can … can I stay here for a night or two? Before we move me in? I'm … I don't think I'm ready to be alone yet."
Hunter looked down at her for a moment, then nodded. "Sure," he said.
And then, as he had done with Weldon, Sabrina ran to him, threw her arms around him, and sobbed into his shirt. He held her, silently, for a long time, until he finally realized that she had fallen asleep. Slowly, tenderly, he picked her up and carried her to the couch, laying her down and putting a blanket over her sleeping form.
There was something he'd meant to do, but Hunter found that he had utterly forgotten what it was. So instead, he went to the armchair next to the couch and sat down, watching Sabrina sleep. He barely noticed as he became lost in his own thoughts.
He would be in that room all night, and he would be there when Sabrina woke up in the morning.

Extra Goodies

Friends -- after that little downer of an ending, we at On The Bird thought that some of you might be in need of a pick-me-up. So, we thought we'd share with you some of the titles we rejected for this novel before settling on *Atticus for the Undead*.

Enjoy!

And don't forget to follow John online!
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