

FROM THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES AND GLOBE AND MAIL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KELLEY ARMSTRONG BETRAYALS



WELCOME TO
GAINSVILLE

One

I woke to the sound of horses. It took a moment for me to remember where I was—in the forest behind the Saints' clubhouse. I'd gone for a walk with Ricky which had turned into a chase that turned into victory sex and an exhausted drop into sleep on the forest floor.

I reached for him. When my fingers thumped down on cold earth, I scrambled up.

“Ricky?”

Don't panic.

He wouldn't have wandered off. That was our pact after the last time I woke up alone in these woods, when Ricky had been lured away and nearly killed.

As I yanked on my clothing, a hound's baying cut through the night. I spun and caught a flicker of distant fire.

A scream sounded deep in the forest. A man's scream. I yanked my switchblade from my pocket and—

“Liv?”

Ricky's groggy voice. Then his hand on my calf, and I looked down to see him on the ground where we'd been sleeping.

“You weren't there,” I said, he knew exactly what I meant, rising with a curse as he reached for his jeans.

When a low growl reverberated through the air, I strained but saw nothing.

“Is that a hound?” I whispered. “A Cŵn?”

One glance at Ricky's face told me he hadn't heard anything.

“I heard a man scream,” I said. “And now growling. There was baying earlier. It think it's one of the—”

A snarl. Then another cry, and I turned fast, catching a glint of red eyes and the faint outline of a giant black dog.

“Over there,” I whispered. “It’s—”

Ricky was gone.

“Goddamn it, *no*.”

Something crashed through undergrowth, running away, but I blocked it out, squeezed my eyes shut and focused. “Ricky.”

“Here.” Warm fingers clasped my hand and lifted it. “Hold hands for safety. Just like in kindergarten.”

I told him what I was seeing and hearing. Pinpointing the source was impossible—it would come from the north, then the south-east, then the west.

“I think someone’s been cornered by the hound.”

And then nothing. The woods had gone silent. Eerily silent. I clutched Ricky’s hand.

“I’m still here,” he said. “Oh, and when we went out for lunch yesterday, you said your brownie tasted like it’d been dredged in sawdust, so I dropped off one from Uppercrust for your afternoon break.”

I smiled—he was proving it was really him I was talking to. “Thanks.”

“Covering all the bases. Was the brownie good?”

“It was awesome.”

“And the dude being menaced by the giant hell-hound?”

“Apparently gone.”

“Huh. Do you want to go grab another brownie?”

“It’s after ten.”

“Is that a challenge? I can find—”

His voice faded, and his figure shimmered against a backdrop of rubble. Except there was no rubble in this forest.

I could still feel his hand, though, so I gripped it tighter, and his figure came clear.

“Did I go somewhere?” he asked.

“You started to.”

“Huh.” He peered out into the night, working it through.

“Still nothing?” he said as I looked around.

I shook my head.

“Well, we know it’s not the actual Hunt. I’d hear it if it was.” Ricky had Cŵn Annwn himself and recognized the sound of them. “It’s a vision, which means you have a message pending. So do you want to get it? Or leave it on vision-mail for a while.”

When I didn’t respond, he said, “I’d rather you got it. I know the fevers are easing off, but I still don’t like you having visions when you’re alone.”

“Just get it over with.”

“Take it slow. Keep hold of my hand. If you can’t hear my voice, come back. And if you can talk, tell me what’s going on so I know everything’s okay.”

I nodded. Then I stared out into the forest, picturing what I’d seen a few minutes ago, rubble amidst the trees, nature reclaiming a human encroachment. Like the abandoned psych hospital. Like Villa Tuscana. Two other places where I’d seen fae visions. Ruined places, rich with fae energy, stolen by humans, then falling to rubble, nature slowly reclaiming what was hers, restoring balance.

When I heard a childish giggle, I turned, expecting to see the little girl who was so often my guide in the visions.

“Are you here?” I asked.

A laugh answered. Still girlish, but different than the first. I looked around. Piles of brick and stone and crushed mortar littered ground already blanketed in moss and vines. When I turned toward Ricky, could see him faintly and feel the pressure of his hand. I told him what I saw as I led him toward those girlish laughs.

“Πού είσαι,” a girl said, and though I didn’t recognize the words, I knew they meant *where are you?*

The other girl answered in the same language, telling her companion that the point of the game was to *find* her, and the first girl let out a victory laugh, hearing her target, who shrieked as she realized she’d given herself away.

I stepped around a half-crumbled wall and saw a campsite—sleeping bags and backpacks, tucked into what remained of a room, the roof mostly intact. When I came closer, I saw more bags, like a squat for the homeless.

The girls laughed again. One darted past. She was in her late teens, older than I expected, given the games and the giggling. Another girl zoomed from a hiding place. She launched herself at the first, and they fell, tumbling together and laughing.

Then they went still. Absolutely, unnaturally still. That youthful joy vanished in a blink, and when I looked into their faces, I remembered two other girls—prostitutes—sitting on a bench. I’d spotted them while searching for an apartment. When they’d looked at me, I’d seen that emptiness in their gaze. These were the same girls, recognizable now only as they presented that soulless gaze to the world. Then that disappeared, the girls looked normal, though still solemn, their eyes dark with worry and concern.

“He’s found us,” the second one said in that foreign tongue.

The first girl made a noise in her throat, an odd rattle, as her sharp gaze darted about. “Go warn the others,” she whispered.

The second one shook her head vehemently. “I won’t leave—”

The first girl spun and grabbed her by the throat, and when she spoke, her words came carried on a hiss. “I said go.” She gave the second one a shove. Still the girl hesitated, but her friend stomped in her direction with an urgent “Go!” and she took off through the trees. The

first one watched her, and whispered, “Be safe, little sister.” Then she turned and, once again, her gaze emptied. She took a step toward the forest.

“I know you’re there,” she said, speaking English now. “I have what you want.” Her voice took on a coy, girlish lilt. “I have everything you want. You need only come and take it.”

The girl stepped toward the forest, her hips swaying, and when my gaze lowered to those hips, I saw her belt. Snakeskin, like she’d been wearing when I’d seen her on that Chicago bench.

The girl walked into the forest, still calling to whoever she sensed there. I hurried after her, but when I stepped into the forest, all that was left was her voice and even that was growing faint.

I stopped to listen hard and—

A scream. A horrible scream.

Like those of the fae. The dying fae on the grounds of Villa Tuscana.

Dragging Ricky, I ran toward the sound. I heard a hiss. I caught a glint of scale and of fang. A man howled. Then he cursed. That scream came again from all around me, and I spun, but there was nothing to see, nothing more to hear, just that terrible scream.

A thump, like a body hitting the ground. An odd rasp, like a death rattle. Silence.

I kept walking, kept listening. Breathing. A soft scrape. A grunt. The whisper of fabric. The smell of blood.

My hand tightened on Ricky’s. A single moonbeam swept the clearing, like a peephole into another world, and I spotted a foot. The girl’s foot. Bare. Her toenails painted red. The beam moved over her supine body. Her leg. Her snakeskin belt. Then her torso, her shirt pushed up, stomach painted as red as her nails, a slash of crimson that split her belly in two. A hand reached into her stomach, and I fell back, as the moonbeam moved up a man’s blood-

stained arm. I could see the girl, dead on the ground, but I focused on him, as that light passed over his shoulder, to his head, fixed on the girl. Then he turned, and I saw the face of a man maybe thirty, fair haired and bearded.

The moonbeam passed on and the scene went dark. I hurried forward, hanging on to Ricky, and found myself in an empty clearing. A sob sounded to my left. Another joined it, rising to a keening cry.

I was back at the ruined building. The dead girl had been laid out in the grass, her ripped stomach covered with a jacket. Four teenaged girls ringed her. All wore those snakeskin belts. They wept and they wailed and they gnashed their teeth and when they did, I saw fangs, growing and retracting, as they cursed the girl's killer in that foreign tongue.

"Why do you wait?" a voice asked, and I turned to see the youngest girl. She was small, and thin, with pupils that kept contracting sideways, into slits.

"Are you talking to me?" I asked.

"Who else is there? You wait and you stall and you play, and we die. They say you do not care. That we cannot expect you to care, and even if you did, you cannot help. You never can. You never do."

"I don't understand."

"Do you try?"

"I'm not good with riddles. You need to be clear."

She pointed at the dead girl. "Is that not clear enough? You stall and you play and you tell yourself this isn't your business, and so we die." Those strange eyes met mine. "Pick a side."

I inhaled sharply. "You mean the fae and the Hunt. I have no idea which one—"

“We don’t care which you pick. Just choose and be done with it. The longer you stall, the more they are distracted and the more of us die. Fae are being murdered.” She waved at the dead girl. “And where are the Cŵn Annwn?”

“I heard them. I know I heard—”

“A half-hearted attempt. They are distracted. By you. The rest of us? We do not matter. Lost girls never matter.”

“Tell me what—” I began, but she disappeared, leaving me standing in a forest, holding tight to Ricky’s hand.

Ricky and I were alone in a back room of the clubhouse as I downed my second shot of scotch.

“So the young girls are fae,” he said. “The same type you saw when you were looking for the apartment. The same two girls.”

“I think so.”

“And they’re associated with snakes—the belts and the hissing and the rattling and the slitted eyes. If we can pinpoint the language, that’ll help.”

He attacked the problem as rationally as if fae themselves *were* a perfectly rational phenomenon. As a child, he’d embraced his grandmother’s stories of the Hunt, in some way recognizing them as stories of his past, his heritage.

“We’ll work on the language,” Ricky continued. “I’m wondering if that’s why they don’t care which side you pick—because they aren’t Welsh fae. As for the Cŵn Annwn being distracted . . . I honestly can’t imagine your situation would distract them so much they’d shirk their duties. I think they’re having trouble catching this guy. Which opens another avenue of investigation. Before all that, though, you need to tell Gabriel. Loop him in. Pronto. Otherwise . . .”

He'll feel slighted.

He already feels slighted.

One would think Ricky'd be happy that I was spending less time with Gabriel. But even before we knew the parts we played in our ancient drama, I would tell him Gabriel had crashed at my place, and he'd only joke that the couch must be more comfortable than it seemed. I'd asked him once, point blank, if my friendship with Gabriel bothered him.

"You were friends with him before you met me."

"I wouldn't exactly say friends . . ."

"You were. And I won't interfere with that, because that's how this all goes to shit, Liv. Arawn and Gwynn and Matilda. When they make Matilda choose, everything goes wrong, for all of them, and we aren't going to do that. It is what it is. I understand that."

"It is what it is?"

He'd shrugged and changed the subject.

I checked my watch. "It's late."

"It's not even midnight. You know he's up, Liv."

"It can wait." I got to my feet. "We're supposed to be here to socialize, and it'll look bad if we're hanging out back here."

He opened his mouth, and I knew he was going to push me to call Gabriel, so I picked up the pace and was out the door before he could say another word.

Two

The choice the fae girl mentioned in the vision was one I'd been putting off because, as I'd told her, I had absolutely no idea which side I would choose. Up until six months ago, I would have laughed my ass off at the very thought of such a choice, so obviously straight out of a fairy tale. Which it was, quite literally.

I was the living embodiment of Matilda of the Hunt. Matilda of the Night. *Mallt-y-nos*. In Welsh myth, Matilda was a noblewoman who refused to give up her love of the hunt, even for her bridegroom, and so was cursed to ride with the *Cŵn Annwn*—the Wild Hunt—forever.

In reality, Matilda was a *dynes hysbys*—a cunning woman or witch—born with blood from both the Huntsmen and Tylwyth Teg, the Welsh fae. The two kingdoms shared the girl, who'd grown up friends with the princes of both, Arawn and Gwynn ap Nudd. To avoid conflict, the young men had agreed not to court her. Arawn kept his word. Gwynn did not. In the fallout, the two made a deal. If Matilda went to Arawn on her wedding day, she'd be his, and the world of the fae closed to her forever. If she stayed with Gwynn, the world of the Hunt would close instead. Of course, neither told Matilda about the pact.

The night before her wedding, she left for one last hunt with her old friend. As she saw the gates to the fae world close, she raced back, only to be consumed by the fiery abyss. Unable to save her, both young men blamed themselves and each other, and their worlds had been at odds ever since.

The story doesn't end there. There was no end, so satisfactory conclusion. So the cycle keeps repeating. New players are born to take over the roles—not reincarnations, but humans from the proper bloodline and with memories of those distant ancestors. Whichever side possesses Matilda will win the battle for survival. Each has its champion: Arawn and Gwynn,

who are supposed to woo her to their side. Ricky is Arawn. And Gwynn in this particular round? That would be Gabriel.

So that's the story, and the direction our lives are supposed to take. The champions do battle for the hand of the maiden, the winning side takes all, gaining the most precious gift for the fae: the power to survive in the modern world.

A nice story . . . for someone else.

We've decided we don't particularly like our roles. Gabriel isn't the jealous and treacherous Gwynn. Ricky isn't the reckless and impetuous Arawn. And I'm sure as hell not the hapless and helpless Matilda.

We've told the Cŵn Annwn and Tylwyth Teg to back the hell off or they're going to make enemies of all three of us. That's how we can stand against them: by sticking together as the original three could not.

The two sides haven't abandoned their hopes. They can't, because their continued existence depends on my eventual choice. As civilization consumes nature and pollutes the elements, the fae lose the natural energy they need to survive. Having a Matilda cleanses their land. But I don't have enough mojo to go around—hence the need to choose. The Tylwyth Teg and Cŵn Annwn have given me half a year to come to terms with both my role and my powers. I had two months left. Then the battle begins.

Now someone was trying to change that time table.

Ricky and I were heading out to spend the night in my Cainsville apartment. We left the clubhouse at one. I was on the back of Ricky's bike, enjoying the buzz from three shots of Scotch and the vibrations from the Harley's motor, my fingers slipping around Ricky and up his thighs, his chuckle rippling through me. He pointed to the countryside whipping past and then at the road ahead. Asking if I wanted to pull over or keep going. I tapped his leg, which

meant it was up to him. He gunned the bike and then moved my hand further down his thigh. In other words, if I was okay with not stopping for sex right away, he'd take a little more of what I'd started.

I smiled, my hand sliding to his crotch, rubbing as he accelerated—

He hit the brakes so fast I lurched, and his hand moved to my leg, steadying me and squeezing in apology. Then I saw what he had—a dark car with its lights off, almost hidden in a tree-shrouded drive.

Ricky would have noticed if it'd been here when we drove in. He was the son of a biker gang leader. A member of that gang. The future leader of that gang. He did not miss anything so near his clubhouse. Sure enough, as we drew near, the car pitched forward. Then lights flashed . . . and Ricky relaxed.

I had to smile at that. In his world, though, if someone was lying in wait on an empty country road, he *hoped* it was the police.

He pulled to the shoulder, and I hopped off the bike, removing my helmet as he did the same. He put up the kickstand and had his ID waiting before the cops even got out of the car.

They were plain-clothes officers, which suggested detectives, as did the unmarked car. I reached into my pocket, fingers hitting buttons on my phone.

The senior partner took Ricky's ID without a word. He examined it and then said, "Had anything to drink tonight, *Richard*?" twisting the name, suggesting he knew full well that wasn't what Ricky went by.

"A beer at eight when we arrived at the clubhouse. Another at about eleven-thirty. I don't think I finished that one, but you're welcome to test me."

Ricky was right about the drinks. His father, Don, had strict rules about drinking and driving, namely because it gave the cops one more reason to hassle them. Ricky kept further

under his limit, even if it meant resorting to tricks like exchanging a half bottle of beer for a fresh one so the guys wouldn't rib him.

"And you?" The officer shone his flashlight full in my face. Ricky tensed, but he only said, "She's a passenger, so her blood alcohol doesn't matter. Yes, she's been drinking. Three shots of scotch since about eleven thirty, which puts her over the legal limit."

"That's dangerous, on the back of a bike."

"She hangs on tight."

I managed not to crack a smile at that and said, "I'm nowhere near the level for public intoxication."

"We'll call an officer to drive you home. We're going to need to speak to your 'date' down at the station."

"She's my girlfriend not my hook-up," Ricky said. "As for leaving . . ." He glanced at me, and I stepped forward, my hand extended. "Olivia Taylor-Jones, I work for Gabriel Walsh, legal representative for Mr. Gallagher."

"Did you say Taylor . . .?"

"Yes. *That* Olivia Taylor-Jones. Formerly Eden Larsen. You mentioned questioning. May I ask what it is in regards to?"

The detective pulled himself up to his full height, which fell below mine. I'm only five-eight, but my boots added extra inches.

"Are you a lawyer?" he asked.

"No," his heretofore-silent younger partner said. "She's a private investigator who works for Walsh. She has a master's degree from Yale. English major, I think. But she got her PI license recently."

The lead gave him a look, and the younger one mumbled, "It was in the papers."

“He’s correct,” I said. “Unless you have a warrant to arrest Ricky, any questioning you need to do can be done at our office . . . after Mr. Walsh arrives.”

“We don’t need—”

“Gabriel?” I said, lifting my phone from my pocket and hitting the speaker button. “Did you get all that?”

“Yes.” His deep voice sounded across the line, the clink of keys telling me he was on his way even before he said, “I’ll meet you there.”

Three

When we arrived, Gabriel was already at the office. He hassled the senior partner—Detective Amos—about the pull-over and the middle-of-the-night questioning. Setting the tone, much as Ricky had. The biker was a reasonable guy; his lawyer was the asshole. That wasn't an act either.

Gabriel is one of the best defense attorneys in Chicago. One of the most infamous, too—blackmail, intimidation and extortion were just a few of the tricks in his bag. A lawyer is supposed to represent his client to the best of his ability, and Gabriel really can, because he doesn't worry about pesky obstacles like ethics and conscience.

If you put them side by side, and asked which was the biker, and most people would guess Gabriel. Yes, he's about six-four and built like a linebacker. But it's more than that. Gabriel is that moment before a storm when everything seems preternaturally calm, but you can feel the electricity in the air, and know you'll get no exact warning when danger and destruction comes. Ricky is as warm and calm as a summer's day, and while there can be storms, you'll get plenty of warning, and it'll be a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder, passing quickly, the sun blazing bright again.

Only when Gabriel decided he'd suitably reprimanded Amos for his missteps did he usher us all into the meeting room.

As soon as we took our seats, Amos slapped down a photo of Ricky in a bar. Someone sat across from him—me, as I recognized by the jacket arm. Amos laid out three more photos. One was of Ricky getting off his bike. One was of him leaving a lecture hall. The last was of him sitting under a tree with me again, my back to the camera.

"It seems someone has my client under surveillance," Gabriel said. "I presume this is your work?"

"No, it's his."

The detective laid down another photo. I took one look at the man in the photo and inhaled involuntarily, catching a sharp look from Gabriel and a confused one from Ricky.

“You know this man, Miss Larsen?” Amos asked.

“It’s Taylor-Jones,” Gabriel rumbled. “And Ms is preferred. Olivia is not the subject of this interview so please do not question her.”

“But . . .” I began. “That’s Matt, isn’t it? The barista down the road?”

Another glimmer of confusion from Ricky. Gabriel, though, understood in a heartbeat. Yes, there was a barista named Matt at our regular coffee shop. Yes, like this guy, he was around thirty, light-haired and bearded. But I’d only made the comment to cover my initial reaction. Gabriel smoothly went on to say that yes, this man resembled our barista but he didn’t think it was. Perhaps Detective Amos could confirm that?

As Amos answered, I had to fight to keep from staring at the picture. Because I did indeed recognize the subject. He was the killer in my vision earlier that evening.

“ . . . name is *Ciro Halloran*,” Amos was saying when I forced my attention back on track.

“And this was the man taking photos of Mr. Gallagher?” Gabriel said.

“That’s right. Halloran disappeared three days ago. A friend suspected foul play, saying Halloran had been investigating someone dangerous. When we went to Halloran’s apartment, we found these.” He waved at the photos. “It became clear who Halloran’s target was.”

“And in what capacity was Mr. Halloran ‘investigating’ my client?” Gabriel asked.

Amos said nothing, which meant he didn’t know.

“You identified Ricky as the person Mr. Halloran feared based solely on the fact you found these photos in his apartment. Is that correct?”

“If you expect me to answer your questions, your client had better be ready to answer mine.”

“So I’ll assume Mr. Halloran’s friend did *not* identify Mr. Gallagher as the man Halloran was worried about. You arrived at that conclusion based solely on finding these photos.” Gabriel’s expression said that flimsy grounds for stopping Ricky and that he was being generous when he finally said, “All right, ask your questions.”

The questions were exactly what one might anticipate. Did Ricky know Ciro Halloran? Did he recognize his picture? Did he know why Halloran would be taking photos of him? As I’m sure Amos expected: the answers were no, no and no. Gabriel had asked him to wrap up the interview when Amos’s phone rang. When the detective got off the call, he said, “That was the judge. The search warrant’s signed. Let’s move this chat to your apartment, Richard.”

Gabriel argued against the search, but not strenuously. Ricky knew better than to keep anything even remotely incriminating in his apartment. If he had needed prescription medicine, he’d keep a copy of the script on file. He didn’t own a gun, legal or otherwise. As for alcohol or cash, the police wouldn’t find more than a six pack of beer in his fridge and a hundred bucks in his sock drawer.

As we left the office, I murmured to Gabriel, “Can I ride with you?”

“Should we both?” Ricky asked, too low for the detectives to hear.

Gabriel shook his head. “Don wouldn’t want you leaving your bike here. We’ll meet you there.”

We climbed into Gabriel’s Jag. The moment he’d reversed onto the road, he said, “Who is Ciro Halloran?” and I told him.

When I finished, he said, “You had a vision tonight?”

I winced. I’d been telling myself Gabriel wouldn’t expect me to call him at midnight to report a vision. I’d been wrong. I knew I’d been wrong. I just . . .

I took a deep breath and said, “I didn’t want to bother you. It was late. I figured it could wait until morning.”

Gabriel said nothing for the rest of the drive.

The detectives had called in officers to help with the search. Too many officers, given that Ricky’s student housing was maybe four hundred square feet. They were being assholes, making a scene where he lived. Except he didn’t really live there. He spent more time at my apartment or his dad’s house. This was just his legal address. We didn’t tell the cops that. We just waited in the living room while they searched.

They’d been at it nearly an hour when Amos slapped down a pile of unopened mail in front of Ricky.

“Care to explain this?” he said.

“I hate paying bills?” Ricky shook his head. “Nah, I have a busy schedule and that’s my triage system. I tackle the stuff I recognize right away—like bills. I toss out the obvious junk mail. If I’m not sure what it is, I pile it up until I can go through it.”

“Go through it now.”

“No,” Gabriel said. “That’s an invasion of privacy. If you saw something in there you’d like to discuss—”

Amos plucked out an envelope and slapped it on top of the pile. It was a personal letter, hand addressed to “Rick Gallagher.” The return address was illegible, the envelope having gotten wet, the ink badly smeared.

“You don’t open *personal* letters?” Amos said.

“People think they can make contact with the club through me. I’ve also been in the papers lately, with Liv, which means even more unwanted mail.”

“That return address isn’t water damaged,” Amos said. “It’s just an ink smear, deliberately done. That’s suspicious, which is grounds for me to ask you to open it.”

Ricky glanced at Gabriel, who gave a reluctant nod. Ricky opened the envelope and took out a single page, also handwritten, unaddressed and unsigned. He read it aloud.

I know what you did. I’ve been watching you. You’re going to screw up, and when you do, I’ll be there to make sure you pay.

Ricky snorted a laugh.

“You find that amusing, Richard?”

“It’s like a bad movie script.” He put the letter down. “I’m sure you’re going to say this is from Halloran. With the part about watching me, it might very well be. So go ahead and do your handwriting analysis or whatever. Even if it’s him, I have no idea what he’s talking about. I’ve never met the guy. Never heard of him.”

“Are you sure?”

Gabriel cut in. “It is not the first time my client has been harassed by a stranger for his membership in the Saints motorcycle club. Citizens looking to exercise a tendency toward violence often focus their attention on perceived lawbreakers, in hopes of provoking a confrontation. Such individuals are almost always in need of psychiatric care. The fact Mr. Halloran has disappeared suggests he is one of them.”

“Or that your client is responsible for his disappearance.”

Gabriel’s voice dropped, dangerously. “Perhaps you should clarify, Detective. If you are accusing Mr. Gallagher of a crime, I would like that stated, so I know where we stand.”

“Are you familiar with the murder of Lucy Madole?”

Gabriel’s blank expression answered for him. At one time, I’m sure he’d tracked every local murder, ready to leap and offer his services when a suspect was arrested. He no longer needed to do that. If a suspect wanted him, they knew his name.

I *was* familiar with the case. Lucy Madole was a doctor, only two years older than me, who had been murdered in a neighborhood where no one should be wandering around at night.

I'd paid attention because the *Post's* articles had pissed me off, suggesting Madole might have been in that neighborhood selling prescription drugs to "former associates." Not because the suburban-raised, Harvard-educated doctor had known gang ties. Rather, the insinuation seemed based solely on the dark tones of her skin.

"I know the case," I said. "As for what it has to do with this letter . . ."

"Dr. Madole left behind a husband."

"Sure. I remember that."

"She didn't take on her husband's name. Women nowadays don't seem to like doing that. Madole was her birth name. Her husband was *Ciro Halloran*."

The vision flashed again in my mind. *Ciro Halloran* carving up a young fae.

Lucy Madole had been beaten and knifed to death.

"I presume there's a point here, Detective?" Gabriel said.

"Oh, I think you see my point, Walsh. Dr. Madole was killed in a part of town she'd never have visited on her own. A part she was obviously lured to. As a doctor, she had access to drugs. Your client sells—"

"If you are going to finish that accusation, you had better be able to support it with evidence."

"We both know he does. His family business does anyway, and the rest is hair-splitting. Dr. Madole was no dope dealer. But she was young, with heavy college debts. And your client? There are a couple young ladies at the precinct who get all giggly when his picture's in the paper. So apparently, he's the kinda young man who might have been able to persuade Dr. Madole to sell him a few pills. The kind who might also get pissy if she feels guilty and

tries to stop selling them to him.” He turned to me. “Wasn’t your fiancé killed a few months ago? Beaten and stabbed to death?”

“Her ex-fiancé, James Morgan, was beaten and strangled,” Gabriel cut in quickly before I could react. “Which I know well, as the one accused of his murder. A charge that was dismissed when the real killer, Tristan Davies, turned himself in. You are very clearly suggesting that my client murdered Dr. Madole. I presume you have the evidence to charge him.”

Amos said nothing.

“No? Then I believe we are done here. Please conclude your search, and if you have further questions for my client, I’ll expect them to come with an arrest warrant.”

The search turned up nothing more. Gabriel left when the police did, and he glanced at me, his mouth tightening when he realized I wasn’t following him. He gave a slight chin jerk, telling me to come along . . . and I looked away. Then I texted, saying I’d tell Ricky about Halloran and work the case tomorrow. If he wanted to talk then, let me know.

He didn’t text back.

I told Ricky that it’d been Halloran in my vision, killing fae.

“Gabriel should be here,” he said as I explained. “We should all be discussing this.”

“He knows. He’s fine.”

“I just think—”

“He’s fine. I’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

Ricky shook his head and picked up a textbook as I settled in at my laptop. He drifted off to sleep shortly after that. When he woke at five, seeing me still at my laptop, he said, “You

do realize there's no point in both you and Gabriel being up all night researching the exact same things.”

“I'm sure he's asleep by now.”

“You know he's not. You two—”

“Tomorrow's Saturday.”

He took a deep breath and then met my gaze. “I'm not saying I'm worried about Amos tying me to this murder, but I'd kinda like both of you working this. Together.”

He held out my phone. I took it.

Waiting Game

Gabriel had been home for an hour now, and for nearly that long, he'd been standing in front of his fifty-fifth floor window, staring out at the city with a tumbler of Scotch. He hadn't touched the drink. He wouldn't, even if he'd never wanted it more in his life.

No, that wasn't true. There'd been one other time he'd wanted it this badly, one other night he'd spent holding a glass, staring out this window. When Olivia left.

She'd only been away for two weeks, and he'd known she was going. It was a motorcycle trip with Ricky, a much-needed vacation after they broke the case against her parents, discovering that Pamela had indeed murdered four people and Todd let himself also be convicted for the crimes, because she'd done it for Olivia, as part of a deal with the Cŵn Annwn to cure Olivia's spina bifida.

It was not surprising that Olivia had needed to get away after that. But it hadn't felt as if she was fleeing Pamela as much as she was fleeing him. Getting him out of her sight after he'd abandoned her when she needed him most.

It was a mistake.

Except it hadn't been. Not really. The mistake had been that he hadn't listened to her messages, and known she was in trouble. But the reason he hadn't been listening? That was no mistake.

Tristan had just told Gabriel that he was Gwynn, and he'd refused to believe it. Matilda's jealous lover? The man who'd betrayed both her and Arawn? Dishonored their friendships? The man who'd brought about Matilda's death because of his own selfishness and blindness and arrogance? Gabriel was *not* that man.

He'd rejected the idea. And then he'd rejected Olivia. He'd laughed at her suggestion that they were friends. Left her standing by the roadside in one of Chicago's worst neighborhoods. Told her not to come into work the next day.

Later, when Ricky had come by the office, trying to set things right, Gabriel had sent him away.

A few nights before that, Olivia had woken from a nightmare vision of being alone and trapped and needing Gabriel and he would not come, and he would said he'd never do that. He would be there for her. Always. And then she called, alone and trapped and needing him, where had he been? In his bed, ignoring her calls, wallowing in a pit of jealousy and selfishness and arrogance.

No, he was not Gwynn at all.

His hand tightened on the glass. He looked down, swirled it, considered. Squeezed his eyes shut and saw Olivia that morning before she left. Showing Lydia her new tattoo. A moon for Ricky. A moon for *Arawn*.

Gabriel had followed her out the door, thought, *I won't let her leave. I'll say something.* Then his gaze had dropped to her ankle, where her boots covered the tattoo.

She's made her choice. Branded it on her skin. And it's the right choice. The one that makes her happy.

The trip had lasted exactly as long as it was supposed to, and when it ended, she'd come back to work with him, as it had been.

Only not as it had been.

He'd started losing her when he'd laughed at the notion they were friends. When he left her on that roadside. Then he'd sealed the loss when she'd called and called, and yes, he did come—came running as soon as he heard her messages—but it'd been too little, too late.

He'd spent the intervening months telling himself it was better this way. What was the alternative? That he keep jealously consuming her time and her attention with no intention of taking more, of *giving* more?

In that moment, at the office, as she'd been leaving and he'd wanted to speak, it wasn't just the tattoo that stopped him. He'd wanted to say "Stay," and nothing more, because he didn't know what more to say.

I don't want you to go. I want . . . I want to try . . .

I want to go back to the beach. Before Tristan came. I want that moment again, and I want more than that. I want you to tell Ricky goodbye. Be free of him so I can try to make this more. But I can't guarantee anything. I can't guarantee it'll work or that I'm capable of more, capable of being anything you need, capable of knowing what you need, of making you happy. I probably can't.

I'll try and I'll make a mess of it, and you'll leave for good, finally say enough and walk out.

Gabriel had never had a relationship with a woman that lasted beyond a night. No person had ever gotten as close to him as Olivia already was, and he'd screwed that up time after time, which proved he really wasn't cut out for more, was deluding himself if he thought otherwise.

But the bigger delusion? The past four months of telling himself this distance was for the best.

He was right to leave her with Ricky. To not interfere. That wasn't easy—Gabriel was accustomed to getting what he wanted, and having admitted that he wanted Olivia, doing nothing about it went against everything in his nature. But if he cared about her, then he could do that. He had to.

If he was being honest, it was not so much selflessness as an exercise in delayed gratification, a concept he was more familiar with: working toward a goal with systematic forethought. He was not saying he'd leave her with Ricky *forever*. He was stepping back to reassess and determine exactly how to get her.

To that end, he'd accepted the fact that he was not happy about this schism between them. No, let's be honest. To say he was "not happy" understated the matter entirely. He'd had something and he'd lost it and he wanted it back, even if "it" was only more of that evening on the beach, the feeling that he could stay in that moment forever, like a peasant caught in a fae dance, not caring if the rest of the world continued on without him. For now, *that* would be enough. To get back what they had.

He'd known it would take effort. He had lost Olivia before so he knew how to proceed, with care and caution. Yet, this time, none of that worked.

He brought her mochas, made exactly the way she liked them, and they'd sit barely touched on her desk. He'd offered to take her to the lessons required for her concealed carry permit, but she'd gone with Ricky instead. He'd convinced her to start driving her father's Maserati and then hinted at taking rides along the coast, teased that he could get her out of speeding tickets, but she'd only laughed. He would take her to lunch at her favorite restaurants, and they'd talk nothing but business. He'd make reservations at "their" steakhouse, but she was always too busy, seemed annoyed by the presumption of the reservations.

Olivia didn't seem to be actively blocking him. Simply oblivious.

No, simply disinterested.

He'd been about to make his most desperate play: suggest they visit the Carew house. It was her great-great-grandmother's home, and the site of most of Olivia's visions, and while that made him nervous, the house fascinated her as few things did. He would find some excuse and they'd go back and maybe there they'd recapture something they'd lost.

Then came the call tonight, and with it he'd seen another way. A mystery to be solved, Ricky was in danger, Olivia would rely on Gabriel to help her save him. They'd spend the night investigating this threat and, for the first time in months, they'd work together as

partners. Instead, she'd stayed in Ricky's apartment and sent Gabriel a text saying they could talk tomorrow. He read that text and he knew what it really said. That this break could not be repaired. He'd lost her trust, and he would not get it back this time.

He swirled the Scotch again. Gabriel did not drink. A conscious decision, made with full forethought and understanding. The understanding being that he came from a family prone to addiction, apparently a byproduct of human blood mingled with fae. He'd grown up with a mother who'd lost herself to those demons.

No, *lost* implied there'd been a fight. He'd seen a woman who gave herself over with glee, to the bottle and the needle, her young son a distraction to be suffered as little as possible.

So he did not drink. Never recalled even feeling the urge until the night after Olivia left, and he'd realized it wasn't strength that kept him from imbibing: it was the simple fact he'd never felt any need to. He didn't have pain to dull.

He went to bed shortly after that. Or, that is, he went to the couch, setting aside the untouched drink and stretching out to rest before he got to work, certain there would be no sleep that night. The next thing he knew, he was waking to his phone, and the moment he heard Liv's jaunty little ring tone, his heart rammed into his throat, as he thought, *I've done it again. She called, and I didn't answer—*

The phone stopped. He looked down and realized it hadn't been ringing at all. It was just a text message.

Call me.

She'd changed her mind. She hadn't been able to sleep and— His fingers paused on the keys as he looked to see dawn seeping through the darkness. Not night then. But it was early. Very early.

He hit her number. She answered on the second ring.

“That was fast,” she said. “Did you even go to bed?”

“I heard the text.”

“Ah, sorry. I was trying not to disturb you. I . . . uh, I’ve been doing some research. Not really turning up anything, but I thought . . . maybe we could talk? We didn’t get a chance last night and—”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. I know it’s Saturday. Do you plan to go by the office? It’s not urgent, so I’m not rushing you.”

“Come to the apartment. I’ll make breakfast.”

When she hesitated, he pushed on. “You’re going to want to speak to Rose about the fae in your vision, particularly with the connection to Ricky’s situation. There’s no sense going to the office only to leave again. We can talk here and then drive to Cainsville.”

Still she didn’t answer, and as the seconds ticked past, he waited for her to come up with an excuse.

“That makes sense,” she said finally. “Ricky can drive me over. What time?”

“As soon as you can get here.” He felt the compulsion to make an excuse for that, to say that he had a busy day, and therefore he had to get this interruption over with. A few months ago, that’s exactly what he would have done so she didn’t think he was eager to see her. Now he held his tongue and let the words hang there.

“Give me thirty,” she said, and signed off.

There. Thirty minutes. He only had to wait thirty more minutes.