

Prologue: The Watcher

A lone figure stood outside the maximum-security prison, a cheap duffel bag at his feet, his hands pushed deep into his pockets. With each passing car, he'd straighten, only to deflate again when it continued on.

Signs along the road warned against picking up hitchhikers. An escaped convict, though, would stand a little farther from the prison gates. This man had been released. His sentence complete, freedom granted, meager belongings in that crumpled bag, now all he needed was someone to pick him up and take him home. And no one was coming.

Arianell moved closer, weed trimmer screeching as she . . . Well, she had no idea what she was doing with it. From the name of the device, one would presume she was supposed to be trimming weeds. There weren't any here, and this was where she needed to be, so she waved the device around and cut down grass instead.

The released prisoner glanced her way only briefly. Her stolen maintenance uniform swam around her thin frame, pooling over the outsized work boots. She'd set her fae glamour to gray-haired and wrinkled, and while the man by the roadside may have spent twenty-plus woman-free years in prison, she still wasn't worthy of a second glance. He'd looked. He'd dismissed. He'd already forgotten. Conveniently.

She made her way closer, approaching from the rear as he faced the road. She'd gotten only a glimpse of his face, but she knew her target. Blond hair, worn a little long for his age. A slight build and oversized jacket that hid the physique of a man who'd spent two decades visiting the prison gym.

She approached with care. This human had fae blood, and if she set off his internal alarms, he could handle her in this old lady form. While the justice system had now declared him innocent of eight deaths, they'd missed one. The murder he'd actually committed.

Todd Larsen knew how to take care of himself. And so she had to proceed with extreme

caution.

When tires rumbled, Todd's head jerked up. Then he realized the sound came from inside the prison lot, and his shoulders slumped.

Arianell's eyes narrowed as she watched.

Such a pity, Todd. Your daughter might have fought to get you free, but when those gates finally opened, she's nowhere to be seen. I'm sure she'll show up . . . eventually. After her manicure, perhaps. You're alone out here, Todd, and that means you're vulnerable. Alone and—

A red Maserati peeled from the prison, windows down, a man's laugh ringing out. It'd barely cleared the gates before it veered to the curb.

The driver's door opened, and two knee-high boots appeared, followed by a young woman in sunglasses, her ash blond hair swinging. She leaned back in and dangled the car keys.

"Come on," she said. "You drive."

The passenger door opened. A man climbed out. He was older than the girl, with dark blond hair not unlike the man standing at the gates. He was about the same size, too, perhaps slightly wider in the shoulders, slightly taller.

He laughed as he shook his head. "My license expired a very long time ago, Liv."

"So?" She waved the keys. "You know you wanna."

"Sure, but do you know what I *don't* want? To get arrested fifty feet outside the prison gates."

The man standing by the gate grumbled and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets as he turned away from the scene. He glanced at Arianell, and she got her first good look at his face . . . at least a decade younger than she expected.

"What are you staring at?" he snapped.

“Not much,” she murmured and then said, under her breath. “Not Todd Larsen.”

Todd Larsen was the guy standing by the Maserati, the man joking and laughing with his daughter. Olivia, Liv, Eden, Matilda . . . whatever name the young woman went by these days.

So she had come to pick Todd up. That didn't mean she'd keep a careful watch over him. And when she didn't, Arianell would be there.

She watched the two climb back into the car, Olivia in the driver's seat. Then she stalked away to return the stolen clothes before the groundskeeper regained consciousness.

One: Olivia

“Steak,” I said to Todd as I sped through the streets of Chicago. “That’s what you asked for, and that’s what you’re getting.”

“Uh, I joked that steak would be my death row meal if Illinois brought back the death penalty.”

“Well, that’s off the table forever now. No last meal. Just a first one, for which you are having steak at the best restaurant in town.”

“Not Ponderosa, then?”

I laughed. “I’m not sure those are still around.”

“You used to love Ponderosa. You weren’t old enough for steak, but you went nuts for the potato and ice-cream bar. I’m not sure which you liked more.”

I smiled over at him. My father. Finally here, finally free. He’d gone to prison, along with my mother, when I was two-and-a-half. They’d been convicted of killing eight people. Murderers that my mother had killed in a fae deal to fix the severe spina bifida that had crippled me. We still hoped to get my mother free, but for now, I had my father.

“Eyes on the road, Liv,” he said. “I may not have driven in twenty-three years, but I know that part is important.”

“Yes, sir.”

“As for lunch, we don’t have to—”

“Yep, we totally do. We are celebrating.”

“Am I dressed okay? How fancy is this place?”

“You are. That’s why I brought clothes for you. It’s lunch. Business casual is fine. There’s a sports jacket in the back if you want it.”

When he didn’t reply, I gripped the wheel tighter. My stomach buzzed and flipped, half with giddy excitement and half with abject terror. My father was free, finally free, and it fell

on me to make sure everything went perfectly.

“*Smoothly*,” Gabriel had corrected last night when I confessed my fears. “*The goal is smoothly, not perfectly. Even then there will be bumps—*”

I silenced Gabriel’s warnings and turned to my father, ready to say we could skip lunch if he wanted. He was gazing out the window, and when he turned, he smiled.

“Looks a little different out there,” he said.

I swallowed. “I know it might be . . . unsettling. It’s been so long.”

My entire life. He had spent almost my entire lifetime in a prison cell. Everything he remembered came before my time. My world was not his.

He smiled again, that easy, reassuring smile. “I’ve had access to television, Liv. TV, movies, books, even that thing they call the Internet.” His eyes glittered, teasing now. “I haven’t stepped out of a time machine. Or even a bomb shelter.” He leaned back in his seat. “I do remember seeing these old Maseratis in Chicago, though. They were antiques even then. The kind of car my friends and I drooled over.”

“And you can drive this one as soon as you have your license,” I said. “I’ve researched the procedure.” I’d researched *every* procedure, every way to get Todd’s life back on track. “You’ll need to be retested, but we’ll work on that. Then you’ll have your license and a very nice car to go with it. My dad . . . I mean, my—”

“Your dad,” Todd said firmly. “Arthur Jones raised you and did an awesome job, and I’m happy to share the title with him.”

I nodded. “What I was saying was that he left me all his cars. They’re just sitting in our old garage, gathering dust. Lots of antiques. Lots of sports cars. You can take your pick.”

When Todd said nothing, I glanced over. “They’re mine,” I said firmly. “He would want them driven.”

“What about the Jetta?” he asked. “That’s the one you were driving before the Maserati,

isn't it?"

"The housekeeper's old car, yes. It's running—again—after Gabriel disabled it to force me to take this one."

Todd chuckled. "Did he finally admit to it?"

"Never. But you don't need to take that one. There's—"

"I'll learn on that. I had a VW. An old bug. I'd like the Jetta."

His voice—quiet but firm—told me not to argue, and I didn't.

I pulled up in front of the steak house and climbed out.

"Valet parking?" Todd said with a low whistle. "I did that exactly once, when I proposed to your mom. I had no idea how it worked, so I stood around waiting for the guy to bring my key back. Then I realized I'd left the engagement ring box in the car. It's a miracle she said yes."

A miracle? That's not what I'd call marrying a woman whose crimes sent you to prison for half your life. All she had to do was confess, and he'd have been free. Todd never wanted that, though. If Pamela confessed, she'd lose her chance at freedom, and she'd been in there for doing something he couldn't. He'd set my cure in motion, taking the life of Gregory Kirkman—a serial killer—and that had horrified him enough that he hadn't been able to go through with the rest. So Pamela had. I got my cure. He got a life sentence.

Todd didn't see it that way. He'd loved Pamela. Still cared about her. She was my mother, and she'd done what she thought was right, and if there'd been any anger, he'd long since gotten over it. He wanted her free, even if he never talked about reuniting.

Before the valet took the car, Todd grabbed the sports coat from the back. He put it on, tugging and fussing like a man who had only worn them to weddings and funerals even before his incarceration. Todd grew up in a working-class family, finished high school, became a carpenter, married my mother at twenty, with me appearing a year later. He'd

gotten exactly what he wanted from life and had considered himself unbelievably lucky to have it all so young.

“Tie?” he asked as he fastened his top button.

I reached over and undid the button. “Nope. Leave it like that, and come on. We have reservations, and I am starving.”

He held the door for me. As I walked in, I looked around and made a face. This wasn’t quite the atmosphere I’d hoped for. Gabriel and I usually came for dinner, and even if we stopped by earlier, it’d be a late lunch, after the crowds had left, the restaurant elegant and subdued. Today it was lunch hour midweek, and the place sounded like a stock exchange floor, with guys in suits doing business at top volume, waving their steak knives for emphasis.

I followed the maître d’ through that gauntlet of knives. Most saw me coming and pulled in their weapons. A few looked me over, their gazes starting at my boots and not rising above my neckline.

The maître d’ stopped mid-dining room, and pulled out a chair for me.

“I requested the fireplace room,” I said. The corner table.”

“I am afraid—” he began.

“I reserved it a month ago.”

My voice never rose. There was no edge to it, no snap. My adoptive parents had been bringing me to fancy restaurants since I was four. They had money, status and position, and I’d been raised a socialite. I knew how to deal with situations like this, calmly but firmly. Yet Todd shifted his weight, uncomfortable, as he murmured, “This is fine, Liv.”

“Is there anyplace more private?” I asked.

The maître d’ looked around the packed restaurant.

I nodded curtly and accepted the proffered chair. As we sat, the maître d’ offered a

complimentary glass of house wine. I shook my head but thanked him, my adoptive mother's training taking over. It was also her hand in my upbringing that made me refuse, and I don't appreciate that part, the ingrained snobbery that says you don't drink house wine and certainly not because it's free.

Todd pulled out his chair and sat awkwardly, his body tense, gaze flitting about. I'd wanted to treat him to a special first meal, and now I realized I'd brought him somewhere he wouldn't have been comfortable even before he went to prison. Yet another reminder of the gulf between us. A reminder to him that this was the world his daughter grew up in and inhabited effortlessly. And the worst of it? I'd picked the steak house because I didn't want anything *too* fancy.

Gabriel tried to warn me. He'd broached the subject with none of his usual blunt honesty. He knew how important this meal was, and so he'd tap-danced around the subject, as best Gabriel could tap-dance.

"Perhaps dinner out isn't what your father will want right away, Olivia. I've found an excellent steak house that will cater lunch to the condo. We can certainly go out later in the week if he—"

No, no, and nope. I wasn't hiding my father away from the world the moment he stepped back into it. He'd been acquitted, and we were celebrating.

"Please tell me inflation has been worse than I imagined," Todd said as he perused the menu. "Some of these steaks cost more than my old mortgage payments."

He smiled when he said it, but my gut twisted.

"They sound delicious, though," he hurried to say.

"This isn't how I usually eat," I said, "but when it comes to steak, I do indulge . . . and try not to think about how much I paid. First course, though, is drinks. Wine, cocktails, beer . . ."

“I don’t think this is much of a beer joint.”

I nodded to the table beside us where four young men sat with beer glasses.

“Microbrews.”

Todd’s brows knitted.

“Small breweries, overpriced beer, very trendy.” I paused. “Some of it is quite good. Tell me your usual brew, and I’ll find a match.”

“Miller Draft?”

I took out my phone and searched. “Miller Genuine Draft? It’s a pale lager, right?”

He chuckled. “Not your kind of beer?”

I didn’t tell him that, as popular as his brew had been in the eighties, it’d largely been discontinued. I scanned the drink menu and picked one that seemed appropriate. The server appeared, and I ordered that for Todd and a red wine for myself. I also got appetizers. By the time they arrived, we’d relaxed into conversation, Todd asking me what sorts of cases I was working on. I’m an investigator for Gabriel, who—as one of Chicago’s most notorious defense attorneys—always has interesting cases. I was regaling Todd with a recent escapade, when a man approached. With my attention on Todd, I only saw a suit take up position beside the table. I presumed it was a server, and so I finished my sentence before looking up to see a florid-faced man in his forties, his gaze fixed on my father.

“Todd Larsen,” the man said, and there was a moment where Todd’s brows furrowed, just a fraction, as if wondering whether he knew this man. Then he realized the man knew *him* . . . and why.

“Yes,” Todd said carefully.

The man planted his hands on the table. “I didn’t know this establishment served serial killers.”

I resisted the urge to rise and said evenly, “Todd has been acquitted of all charges. He

spent twenty-three years in prison for crimes he didn't commit."

The man's gaze traveled over me. "Huh. You're not wasting any time making up for those years, are you, Todd? Barely out of jail, and you're already buying yourself a steak dinner and a whore."

Todd's chair squealed back. Then he checked himself and pushed up slowly. "This is my daughter, though I'm sure you knew that. We're trying to enjoy—"

The man spat in Todd's beer. "Enjoy *that*, you murdering son of a bitch."

Todd picked up the glass. The man flinched. Then his face reddened as he realized he'd recoiled. Todd held the glass out to a passing server and said, "I'll need a fresh beer. There's something in this glass."

The woman had been hurrying past, not realizing what was happening. She stopped, her perfunctory server smile growing more genuine as she saw Todd.

"Absolutely, sir," she said. "I'm very sorry about that." She took the glass. "What were you drinking?"

"The blood of his victims," the red-faced man said. "That's what you did, wasn't it, Todd?" He turned to the server. "This guy you're making eyes at is a serial killer. He butchered girls like you. Raped their corpses. Drank their blood. Cut off their skin and ate it."

The restaurant fell silent, the server's face turning as white as her shirt. Before I could interject, a rumbling voice cut through the silence. "Could you repeat that? I'd like to be sure I have your exact words for when Mr. Larsen sues you for defamation."

I saw the top of Gabriel's head first, his wavy black hair moving above the knot of gathering onlookers. They parted for him. People always did. Gabriel was six foot four and built like a linebacker.

He walked over, expressionless, his unnaturally pale blue eyes chill but not cold. His gaze flicked to the red-faced man, who backed up.

“Don’t go,” Gabriel said. “You had something to say. Please repeat it.”

The man didn’t answer.

Gabriel continued. “My client was indeed wrongfully convicted of multiple murders. The death of four men and four women, murders that did *not* involve sexual assault or the drinking of blood or . . .” He fluttered his hand. “Whatever other lurid fantasies you concocted. I suggest you see a therapist about those.”

A titter ran through the crowd. Gabriel walked over and kissed the side of my head. The public display of affection caught me off guard. Performance art, like the threat to sue. He discreetly squeezed my arm, and *that* was genuine, reassurance and support.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “I was delayed in court.” He looked at our table for two and chuckled again, more theater from a man who rarely even smiled in public. “And I see you’d given up on me. It seems unlikely we’ll get another table. I’ll dine elsewhere.” A pause. “Unless you’d both care to join me?”

Gabriel was *not* late. He hadn’t been coming to lunch with us. I’d asked whether he wanted to, but he’d demurred, saying this meal should be for Todd and me. I realized now that only meant he wasn’t going to sit with us, not that he wouldn’t be close by, making sure everything went as I hoped, leaping in when it didn’t . . . as he’d expected.

Now he was offering an escape hatch. He knew that I, personally, wouldn’t have let this guy spoil my lunch. Two years ago, Todd and Pamela had come back into my life, after I’d long forgotten them, forgotten I’d even been adopted. They’d returned in spectacular fashion, with a reporter outing me as the socialite daughter of serial killers. Then I went to work for the infamous Gabriel Walsh while dating a biker, and, *Oh, wait, now she’s with the lawyer.* I’d done my time as a media bright-and-shiny. That meant this was not the first time—or the dozenth—that some asshole interrupted a meal to tell me what he really thought. I could be having the worst meal ever, the food barely edible, and I’d glue my ass to that chair and

refuse to satisfy a tormentor by walking out.

But this was about Todd. Todd wasn't me, and he wasn't Gabriel, and he wasn't Pamela. He did not feel the need to grit his teeth and enjoy this meal in spite of himself.

"Sorry," I said as I rose. "They didn't have the table I reserved, and I thought you weren't able to join us. But since you are . . ."

I took his arm, and his lips twitched at that, as surprised as I'd been at his kiss of welcome. He nodded to Todd, telling him we'd follow him out. As we approached the front door, Gabriel cleared his throat.

"I'm parked around back," he said, and I glanced at the door, knowing what he really meant. Sure enough, two guys hovered at the entrance, cell phones in hand.

"Damn, that was fast," I murmured. "Okay, out the back, but I need to pay—"

"Done." He motioned toward the rear hall. "I left my credit card number in case you decided to cut the meal short."

As we walked into the rear hall, a young guy appeared from the kitchen, bag in hand. Gabriel took it with only a nod of acknowledgment, leaving me to say thanks.

"Lunch to go?" I said.

He nodded. "Again, in case . . ." He cleared his throat. "In case it was required."

We stepped out a door clearly marked No Exit, which led to a tiny parking lot where Gabriel had double-parked his Jag.

"My car's in the valet lot," I said.

"I know. However, your vehicle is not exactly unobtrusive. Take mine."

I nodded. The Jag opened as I tugged the handle.

He tucked the takeout into the back. "I need to run an errand, but I'll be home as soon as I can. I'm taking the afternoon off."

I squeezed his arm. "Thank you."

“You’re very welcome.”

As we drove through the city, Todd said, “When I was your age, I’d have died for a ride in that sports car of yours. Maybe I’m just showing my age, but this?” He put the seat back, eyes closing as he sank into the leather of Gabriel’s Jag. “*This* is my new idea of a dream car.” He peeked over at the speedometer. “I see it doesn’t have any problem with power, either.”

I smiled. “This can outrun my Maserati with a much smoother ride and better handling. The advantage of modern automotive technology.”

“It looks new, too.”

“About eighteen months old. It’s a replacement for one I wrecked.”

His brows lifted.

“We went down an embankment,” I said. “*Rolled* down.”

His gaze shot to the speedometer again.

“No,” I said, “I wasn’t driving too fast or taking a corner too sharp. Someone tried to kill us. It happens.”

“I . . . see.”

“It hasn’t happened in a while, but make sure you wear your seatbelt just in case. And this model is awesome for rollovers. Lots of air bags. It’s not a problem. Kind of fun. Inconvenient, though, replacing the car. Well, inconvenient for Gabriel.”

He chuckled and shook his head.

My hands tightened on the wheel as I said, as lightly as possible, “So lunch was a bust.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. I didn’t expect that, and I should have.”

“You wanted to give me a special first meal. Now I have it.” He hooked his thumb at the

takeout bag. “And I won’t need to wear a suit coat to eat it.”

He smiled, but I felt the unintended prick of those words. I’d miscalculated. Badly.

“Do you want to go someplace else?” I said. “Not to eat, but maybe shopping? I have clothing and necessities for you at the house, but I’m sure there are other things—”

“What you have will be fine. I’ll probably stay in for a few days and acclimatize.”

“We can visit in town. Gabriel’s aunt, Rose, would love to see you. Others, too. We can visit, or they can come by. Maybe I’ll throw a dinner party.”

He spoke with care. “I would love that in a few days, Liv, but for now, I just need a little time.”

I understood what he was saying, but my heart still sank. He was finally out of prison, and now what did he want? Another set of four walls.

“Although,” he said, “there is one place I’d like to go when you have time.”

“Yes?” I said, a little too eagerly.

“I’d love to just go for a walk. A forest hike would be great, but even a stroll in the countryside would do. I’ve missed that.”

“There’s a good trail between here and Cainsville,” I said. “We could go for a hike now. Or later, if you’d prefer.”

“If it’s on the way, now would be great.”