

# Hope

It took a half-dozen tries to get the key-card light to work—long enough that Hope was tempted to practice her electronic lock-picking skills. When the light finally did turn green, she was leaning against the door, handle down, and it flew open under her weight, sending her stumbling inside. She listened for Karl's laugh and when it didn't come, felt a twinge of disappointment.

She shouldn't have been surprised. She'd told him she'd probably have to work late, so she didn't expect him back. Still, her disappointment smacked of dependence. Karl wasn't the kind of guy she should count on.

Hope went to toss her purse on the bed, but threw her laptop case instead. Too much on her mind, fretting about how to help Robyn, worrying about her relationship with Karl, fighting the nagging feeling that the two weren't unrelated. The more she watched her friend spiral downhill, the more anxious she got about where she was heading with Karl.

She kicked off her pumps and squeezed the carpet between her toes, luxuriating in the feel of it, inhaling the scent of . . . flowers?

There, on the desk, was a bouquet of yellow and purple irises. Hope read the tag. From her mother, hoping her first week of work was going well. It wasn't exactly a new job--she'd been at True News for four years, and this was her second L.A. work exchange.

She hadn't planned to return. Los Angeles wasn't her kind of city, really. But the chance for a six-week stint came right as Hope had been trying to schedule vacation time to visit Robyn, and it seemed like the perfect solution.

When Hope was sixteen, her private school had been running a joint fundraiser with Robyn's public school, and they'd been assigned to the same committee. Afterward they'd stayed in touch, gradually becoming friends. Then, in Hope's senior year, when the visions and voices started, she'd had a breakdown and spent her prom night in a mental ward. Robyn had been the only friend who hadn't slipped away as if Hope's problems might be contagious.

When Hope decided to come to L.A., she'd expected Karl would take the opportunity to do a "work exchange" of his own in Europe. Instead, he'd joined her. As good as that felt, she couldn't shake the fear she was getting too used to having him join her on business trips, and that the day he didn't want to come along, she'd be devastated.

"You're home early. You should have called."

She spun as Karl stepped inside. He'd changed since meeting her for lunch, trading designer chinos and a brilliant blue polo for a dark suit that looked like it came from a department store, well below Karl's usual standards. Not that it mattered. Karl could make Goodwill castoffs look good. But the lowbrow attire was camouflage—Karl's way of blending into a crowd. The moment he stepped into the room, though, the tie and jacket were off, cast onto the chair like a hair shirt.

"Good hunting?" Hope asked.

"You forgot to lock the deadbolt and chain."

He kissed the top of her head, cushioning the rebuke. She could feel the chaos waves of worry rolling off him. When Karl settled in a new city, he couldn't relax until he'd cleared out

any other werewolves. Kill Karl Marsten, and a werewolf would instantly seal his reputation, guaranteeing for years to come that others would clear out of his way.

Hope knew that having her there made it worse. She was an easy way to get to him. So if he wanted her triple-locking the doors and taking a taxi to work until he'd finished scouting, she understood. The same way he understood the quirks and issues of a chaos half-demon girlfriend.

As he took off his shoes, she told him about Robyn's call and Portia Kane's "invitation."

"And, apparently, Portia insists I bring my 'hot boyfriend.' "

Karl snorted as he put his shoes aside. Not that he doubted Portia found him attractive. Hope knew his ego was too healthy for that. What he objected to was being called anything as common as "hot."

"Give it some thought while I grab a shower," she said. "If you want to get more scouting done instead, that's fine."

"If you're out, I'd rather stay close. I know you wanted to spend time alone with Robyn, though . . ."

"Not much use if Portia's there." Hope started unbuttoning her blouse. "In fact, it'd probably be better if you did come, keep Portia occupied, so she doesn't spend the night ordering Rob around."

"Using me as a distraction. I should be insulted."

"You aren't."

"True." He reclined on the bed, arms folded behind his head as he watched her undress.

"She was wearing a lovely diamond bracelet the other day. At least ten carats. Platinum setting . . ."

"Don't you dare."

“If I’m expected to spend my evening charming a silly little girl, I think I’m entitled to compensation.”

“Oh, you’ll get compensation.”

He plucked the hem of her skirt as she passed to the bathroom.

“It’s a big job. I think I need an advance.”

“And I need a shower.”

“The two don’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

She paused, as if thinking it over, then lunged, shirt breaking from his grasp as she sprinted for the bathroom. She got the door closed just before he thumped against it, then she quickly fastened the lock. That would slow him down . . . for about ten seconds.

She smiled and tugged off her skirt.