

Chapter One

The poppies were a bad sign. A death omen. It doesn't get much worse than that.

We hadn't planted them. When a gardener suggested it once, my mother had said, "They make opium from poppies," in whispered horror, as if her society friends might jump to the conclusion we were running an opium den in our basement. I'd wanted to laugh and tell her they used a different subspecies for drugs. I hadn't. Deep in my gut, I had not wanted poppies in our garden.

A silly superstition. Or so it seemed. But when I see omens and portents, they mean something.

It'd been three weeks since I'd left my family home, fleeing ahead of the media frenzy that erupted when I'd learned my real parents were notorious serial killers. While I worked on building a new life, I'd decided to come back to the empty house and grab a few things. I'd tossed my suitcases in the borrowed Buick and headed out back for a swim. I was walking back toward the front of the house, raking my fingers through my wet hair, when I noticed a splash of red in the rock garden.

Poppies.

I reached down and rubbed a silky red petal. It felt real enough. I took out my phone, snapped a picture, and checked the result. Yep, I still saw poppies. Which meant they existed outside my head. Always a good sign.

Except for the part about poppies being a *bad* sign.

I shook it off, turned the corner, and—

There was someone sitting in my driver's seat.

I flashed to the poppies. A killer waiting to ambush me? Three weeks ago this would have been laughable. That was before I discovered the truth about my past.

Still, I couldn't imagine an assassin waiting, in plain view, in my car. Nor would anyone sneak onto the estate to steal a fifteen-year-old Buick when a half-dozen antique sports cars were garaged around back.

The most likely explanation these days? A reporter getting creative.

I continued forward, circling around the car. I'd left the driver's window down. A woman sat behind the wheel. The roof cast her face into deep shadow and all I could see were sunglasses and blond hair. Ash-blond, like my own. It even looked like my current cut—a few inches long, tousled-curly.

“Hey,” I said as I walked closer.

The woman didn't respond. I grabbed the handle, yanked open the door, and—

She fell out. Topped, as I jumped back with a yelp, thinking even as I did that I was making a fool of myself, that someone was snapping a picture of this very juvenile prank—

She had no eyes.

The woman hung out of the car, wig falling off, sunglasses too. Beneath the sunglasses were blood-crusting pits.

I staggered back, my own eyes shutting fast.

I was hallucinating. I'd seen this twice before, first on a dead man and then on a woman in the hospital. Both times, it was nothing more than a hallucination, an omen with some meaning I couldn't comprehend.

When I looked again, she'd be fine. I did, and—

Her eyes were still gone. Gouged out. Dried blood smeared down one cheek.

I'm not hallucinating. This time, I'm not hallucinating.

I bent to touch her neck. The skin was cold.

There's a dead woman in my car. A dead woman dressed to look like me.

I raced to the house, fumbling with the lock. The door opened. I swung in, hit the security code, then slammed and locked it. I reset the alarms, fished my gun and cell from my bag, and made a call.

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I paced the hall waiting for the sound of a car in the drive. As I passed the front room, I caught a movement through the drawn sheers. I nudged one aside and peeked out to see a dark shape by the gardens. A big black dog—exactly like one I'd seen early this morning, fifty miles away in Cainsville.

The hounds will come to Cainsville and when they do, you'll wish you'd made a very different choice today.

That's what Edgar Chandler said yesterday, before the police took him away, arrested for his involvement in two murders that had been pinned on my birth parents. Only a few people knew I'd rented an apartment in Cainsville, and he wasn't one of them. After the media had swarmed, I'd taken refuge in that sleepy little village in the middle of nowhere.

A sleepy little village with disappearing gargoyles, vicious ravens and, as of this morning, gigantic black hounds.

A sleepy little village where no one seemed to find it the least bit strange that I could read omens and see portents.

I rubbed my arms. I didn't want to see a connection between Chandler and Cainsville. I loved my new town. I loved the safety of it, the community of it, the way it had welcomed me and made me feel like I belonged.

I peeked out again. The dog was still there, and it was exactly as I remembered from this morning—a massive beast, over three feet tall, with shaggy black fur.

There was no way the dog could have followed me fifty miles. Yet what were the chances of seeing another just like it?

I took out my phone. As the camera clicked, the dog looked straight at me. Then it loped off across the lawn and disappeared through the trees.

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A few minutes later, I caught the roar of a familiar engine and ran outside as a black Jag screeched to a stop. The door flew open. A man jumped out, ducking to avoid hitting his head.

Gabriel Walsh. Roughly thirty years old—I've never asked his age. At least six foot four—I've never measured him, either. A linebacker's build, with wavy black hair, strong features, dark shades, and a custom-tailored suit, despite the fact it was Memorial Day and he wasn't supposed to be working. He was, of course. Gabriel was always working.

When I first met my mother's former appeal lawyer, I'd mistaken him for hired muscle. A thug in an expensive suit. Three weeks later, I still thought the analogy wasn't a bad one.

He *did* have a reputation for ripping people apart, though usually only on witness stands. *Usually.*

Gabriel didn't even look at my car—or the corpse spilling out of it. His gaze shot straight to me, lips tightening as he bore down. *Limped* down, I should say. He'd been shot in the leg yesterday. And no, I didn't do it, as tempting as that could be sometimes.

"Where's your cane?" I called.

"I told you—"

"—to stay in the house. I only came out when I saw you drive up."

A grunt. A quick once-over. Then, "Are you all right?" his voice tinged with reluctance, as if he really hated to ask. *Ah, Gabriel.*

"I'm fine," I said. "And no, I didn't call the police."

"Good."

His shades swung toward the Buick. He started for it. If I'd been anyone else, he would have ordered me to stay back. Not because he wouldn't want to upset a client—such considerations aren't given space in Gabriel's busy brain. He'd insist because otherwise that client might get in his way or do something stupid, like leave fingerprints. As of yesterday, though, I wasn't just a client. He'd hired me as an investigative assistant, which damned well better mean I could be trusted near a potential crime scene.

I did hang back a few paces. Steeling myself for the sight. I didn't want to flinch in front of him.

He reached the driver's side. Stopped. Frowned. Lifted his shades. Lowered them. Looked at me.

“Did you . . .?” He trailed off and shook his head. “Of course not.”

I rounded the car to where he stood by the open driver's door. The body . . .

The body was gone.